

The path to the US presidency

When does a president take office?

The newly elected president and vice president are always sworn into office on January 20 following the November election.



What function does the Electoral College play?

It is the electors who actually vote a president and vice president into office. The number of electoral votes each state has is equal to the total number of its Congress members: the higher the total number of representatives and senators from a state, the more electors there will be.

On the Monday following the second Wednesday in December, each elector casts one vote for a presidential candidate; the results are declared on January 6. In general, the presidential candidate who wins the majority of popular votes in a given state gets all of that state's electoral votes. The presidential candidate who wins the majority of the total electoral votes (270 out of 538) becomes president.



What happens during the general election?

Election day is the Tuesday following the first Monday in November. On this day, registered voters will cast their votes for their favorite presidential candidate. In fact, by filling out their ballots voters are taking part in an *indirect* process, as they are really selecting the members of the Electoral College, who are called electors. The voters expect that the chosen electors will vote for a certain candidate.



What is a national convention?

In July or August of the election year the Republican and Democratic Parties hold their national conventions. These conventions last four days and are filled with speeches and other forms of political publicity. During these conventions the presidential candidate for each party is officially announced. For each political party, the candidate who wins the majority of the delegate votes will become that party's presidential nominee. Often, the results of the primary and caucus elections make it clear before the conventions who the presidential nominees will be and the conventions are more an opportunity for the parties to make their policies and plans public. However, if the primaries and caucuses have been close, the Democratic Party has so-called superdelegates who could be the deciding factor at the national convention.

Around the first Monday in September (Labor Day), the presidential candidates start an intensified campaigning tour around the country that will continue until the general election in November.



What are primaries and caucuses?

These are nominating processes, most of which take place between January and June of the election year. Primaries and caucuses happen in a number of states on 'Super Tuesday', a Tuesday in February or March of the election year.

Primaries and caucuses differ from state to state in terms of the actual voting processes.

The two can be generally described as follows:

- Primaries are one-day statewide elections. In some cases, voters must have declared themselves members of a political party before they can vote.
- Caucuses are informal local meetings where party members choose delegates, who will then go through more selection processes at district and/or state party conventions.
- In both primaries and caucuses, voters are actually choosing delegates who will go on to the party's national convention and vote for a presidential candidate. Voters choose these delegates either directly, or indirectly by indicating their preference for a certain presidential candidate (in this case voters are still actually choosing delegates who they expect to vote for that certain candidate).

The number of delegates from each state is determined by a complicated system based on factors such as a state's population and its party support in past elections. The results of some primaries (as in New Hampshire) and caucuses (as in Iowa) are often important indicators of the presidential candidates' popularity.



Who can run for president?

Any US-born citizen of at least 35 years of age. This citizen must have been a resident of the USA for at least 14 years of his or her life. This citizen need not be a member of a political party by law; however, in the last 100 years every president has been either a Democrat or Republican. A president can serve for a maximum of two four-year terms.

Who can vote?

Any US citizen at least 18 years of age and registered to vote (voters sign up in a particular state to vote). Each state has its own voting laws and practices.

1 Understanding the flowchart

Use words from the flowchart on page 1 to fill in the first gap of each task. Then, for each second gap, find a heading from the flowchart which matches the topic of each task. Look at the examples.

1. "Hello, I'm Matt Williamson from the organization 'Get out the vote'. Our goal is to increase voter participation. Have you already registered to vote in your state?" Who can vote?
2. In every state the _____ for the general election are different which can lead to problems when the votes are counted. _____
3. If you are a citizen but not a _____ of the USA, you are not allowed to be a presidential candidate. _____
4. "This election is really important to me, so one day before the state _____ I became a member of the party so I could vote." _____
5. "They're predicting a very close race between the two Democratic _____. The primaries and caucuses are being divided evenly." _____
6. It seems to have been a fairly clean _____ so far by both sides, but as election day nears they may start playing dirty. _____
7. Has it ever happened that the electors _____ their votes for the candidate who lost the popular vote in their state? _____
8. Do you think we'll know who the _____ is before the convention starts?

2 The path to ...

Now make your own flowchart for one of these two political paths:

- The path to the presidency in Germany • The path to the chancellorship in Germany