

Political Parties, Primaries, Electors, and the Electoral College

What is a political party?

It is a group of individuals with like ideas and motivations formed to select candidates for political office to further those ideas and motivations.

This question may seem silly. It is important to remember that many people in a party feel that since the party represents their ideas and ideals, only people who belong to the party should vote in caucuses or primaries. They are generally opposed to any voter who is not a party member interfering with the selection of their candidate.

The two major parties in the United States are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. They have great latitude about choosing delegates to their convention, based on state law. That's right. Each party in each state may (and do) have varying rules on how they structure their primary elections.

Party Primaries or Party Caucus?

Democrats and Republicans select candidates for President at national conventions. Delegates selected to attend the convention vote on presidential candidates. They are chosen through either primary or caucus votes as determined by local or state law. The methods of selecting convention delegates can vary by state and by year.

The Caucus Method to determine delegates

In states that hold caucuses, any registered member of a particular party can attend. These meetings are held at the precinct level, the smallest election district. After discussion and debate about potential presidential candidates, attendees cast open votes for the candidate of their choice. The caucus method is not as popular now, as only 13 states and two U.S. Territories use it.

The Primary Method to determine delegates

Registered voters can vote for a candidate or a delegate pledged to a specific presidential candidate by secret ballot, similar to general election voting.

Depending on state law, there are several kinds of primaries to select the presidential nominee:

Closed Primary: A voter can vote only if that voter is a party member. That is, Democrats vote only in the Democratic primary and Republicans vote only in the Republican primary.

Nonaligned candidates do not get to vote.

Semi-Closed: Nonaligned voters may participate in either primary, but members of political parties must vote in the primary of their party.

Semi-Open: Any voter can participate, and the voter must declare to election officials the party primary in which they wish to vote.

Open Primary: A voter can vote in either primary regardless of party affiliation, but in only one primary per election.

Tennessee uses the semi-open or hybrid method.

Not confused enough? Look at how different states list candidate or delegate names on the ballots. During primary elections, each state chooses how to list the candidate or delegate names on the ballot. Some list just the presidential candidates' names (a presidential preference primary). Others list the numerous delegates who support a particular candidate and who want to go to the convention. The candidates' names are nonexistent or hard to find on the ballot.

The Democratic party always uses a proportional method for awarding delegates. The Republican party allows each state to choose its method of awarding delegates.

As in a caucus, the delegates voice support for a particular candidate or remain uncommitted.

Now we are off to the convention

Remember, delegates to the convention ARE NOT the same thing as electors in the Electoral College. Delegates to the national convention nominate candidates for president and vice-president; adopt a national party platform; adopt the rules that govern the party for the next four years; and rally the faithful. They can now vote for their preferred presidential candidate at convention – about time!

Oops! Not so quick. They vote only for delegates who they hope, in turn, will vote for our preferred candidate. Depending on party rules in each state, your selected delegates may bolt for another candidate.

Is anybody getting tired of voting for other folks to vote for you? We have not started yet.

This leads us to that non-degreed institution - the Electoral College.

Each party in each state chooses its own slate of presidential electors (not delegates). The chosen electors are usually elected officials or party leaders. They will be part of the Electoral College after the general election.

For all states, the election of the electors (the President/Vice President, wink, wink) is by popular vote in the general election. The number of electors allowed in each state is the sum of their representatives and their senators. Three electors are also chosen for the District of Columbia. The Electoral College currently has 538 electors. All states are guaranteed at least 3 electors, regardless of their actual populations.

The current methods of electoral college voting are:

Winner take all method: The winner of the popular vote in a state will take all electoral votes for that state. Forty-eight states use this method.

Congressional district method: The winning candidate in each congressional district of a state will get one electoral vote. The majority winner, statewide, will get two votes. Maine and Nebraska are the only states that use this method.

After the election, electors meet in their home states and cast ballots. The candidate(s) with the majority of votes is elected. Even though the electors pledge to vote for their party's candidate, there is no federal law binding these electors to their pledge. Fortunately, rogue electors have been few in our country's history.

Finally, the election is then certified by Congress, meeting in joint session in January.