

5.8 Electing a President

**Explain how the different processes work in a U.S. presidential election.
Explain how the Electoral College impacts democratic participation.**

Institutional rules along with campaign norms go a long way in explaining American government and politics. The outcomes of federal elections are greatly impacted by process. **The impact of federal policies on campaigning and electoral rules continues to be contested.** With representative democracy as the standard, many political scientists wonder if our current electoral process delivers the best results. To win an election here, candidates must navigate through a maze of rules, regulations and practices many of which are rooted in traditions rather than best practice. Nevertheless, many would argue today that the process of federal elections has grown increasingly democratic. This too is contested.

The federal election process has two important stages.

The first stage of any electoral process is winning a political party's nomination. Party candidates used to be selected by the party bosses in small caucuses. Party caucuses were nothing more and nothing less than conversations between small groups of empowered citizens. Benefits were doled out by and for party loyalists. This was called a spoils system. Everyday citizens were left out of the process. Early elites were fearful of common passions. The average person was not trusted to make important party decisions. It did not take long for this to change.

As suffrage rights expanded voters demanded more and more power in voicing their candidate preferences. This first manifested itself in political party conventions. These conventions were held so that many more citizens could participate in the nominating process. In time, these conventions grew inadequate. Today the modern nominating process is characterized by primary elections. A primary election is like any other election. Primary ballots, however, do not choose winners but candidates. Primary elections invite all eligible voters to participate in helping political parties choose their candidates. Most states hold closed primaries. Closed primaries stipulate that only registered party members can participate. In open primaries any registered voter can participate. Because most states hold closed primaries, and more and more Americans see themselves as independent, turnout tends to be quite low [as low as 25% in many states]. Nevertheless this first stage in any electoral process is of utmost importance. In the first stage political parties nominate their candidates.

The process of nominating presidential candidates tends to be frontloaded. This means that the earliest primaries often carry the most significance. The first primary has traditionally been held in New Hampshire. Because it is the first primary it often establishes important momentum. Iowa, however, can still claim an important role. Iowa is one of the few states that still hold a nominating caucus. Remember a Party caucus is nothing more and nothing less than a conversation between small groups of like-minded citizens. Turnouts are much lower in a caucus. Traditionally the Iowa

caucus is held just prior to the New Hampshire primary. Because it is the first showcasing of the candidates it garners tremendous media coverage. The Iowa caucus often can boast that it catapulted the frontrunner.

After months and months of state caucuses and primaries, the major political parties still hold quadrennial national conventions to crown their presidential candidates. Though the primary elections make the conventions somewhat moot the parties continue to put on these political pageants. Free media coverage, given by the major news outlets, often provides an expected bounce to each respective candidate. The conventions also allow for the major candidates to showcase their message, announce their vice-presidential choice and begin branding their image.

These party conventions were originally held to expand the input of the common man's voice. So, it still is today. However, certain party rules have been implemented to assuage the fickle nature of public opinion. Both parties have what is called "Super Delegates." These Super Delegates made up of party leaders and elected officials, cast votes at the conventions. These Super Delegates can correct fatal mistakes that perhaps were made by primary voters. They are around to insulate from the possibility of radical candidates, unable to win in a general election, from being chosen by the party rank and file.

Primary and caucus elections ultimately choose delegates to a party's national conventions. It is those delegates who cast the final tally that makes the nomination official. Though primary election results make the national convention anti-climactic, these assemblies provide an important display of both the party platform and its prized candidate. Slick images and choreographed speeches at the national convention kick-off the general election campaign. Due to falling TV ratings, the lack of any newsworthy events and the staged nature of modern party conventions many foresee a day when these quadrennial cattle-shows will come to an end.

The second stage of any campaign is winning the general election. General election campaigns begin immediately following a political party's national convention. In the end the general election determines who will fill the government office at stake. Primaries and caucuses pick candidates. General elections pick political winners.

Winning primary and general elections require more than just candidates. The modern campaign today involves an army of paid and volunteer staff. Presidential candidates rent office space in all fifty states. But most importantly use all forms of media to run ads. Consequently, the modern campaign requires vast sums of money.

Despite an apparent "anti-partisan realignment" modern democracy still holds on to its republican ideals. This means that political parties are still responsible for the selection of our candidates. The process for doing so looks remarkably old fashioned. It is for this reason that debates still rage over its legitimacy. Experts who study this process along with voters who participate continue to question the influence of anachronistic two-party systems, outrageously long campaigns, the obscene amounts of money required to win

both stages, caucus and primary rules and reliance upon old technologies. The impact of federal policies on campaigning and electoral rules continues to be contested. Though American voters have a greater role to play in this process the proverbial “smoke filled room” is still around, albeit a little bit bigger than what was once true.

The Electoral College is the indirect way “we the people” selects our president. An Electoral College was created to provide a filter between the direct votes of citizens and the selection of our chief executive.

As expressed in our Constitution the Electoral College reflects the Framers reluctance to put the office of president in the hands of a direct vote. Mirroring checks and balances the Electoral College allows the people to vote for electors who then cast their vote for a president. The electors, however, are not bound by the people’s votes. The electors serve as a filter supposedly protecting the nation from the whims of an irrational mob.

The Electoral College also reflects federalism. The electors in the Electoral College are selected state-by-state. The total number of electors in each state is allocated by the total number of votes each state has in Congress. Illinois, for example, has 18 representatives in the House and 2 in the Senate. Therefore, Illinois will receive 20 total electoral votes in the 2020 election. If you do the math that means there are 538 total electoral votes in the Electoral College [435 members in the House, 100 members in the Senate plus the District of Columbia is allotted 3 electors since the passage of the 23rd Amendment in 1961 for a total of 538].

To win in the Electoral College you must win a simple majority of the 538 electors. To win the presidential election you must win 270 or more electoral votes. If no one candidate wins a majority in the Electoral College the House of Representatives is constitutionally designated to choose the winner with each state delegation receiving one vote.

One curious rule governing the Electoral College is winner-take-all. The candidate who wins the most votes in any given state wins all of that state’s electoral votes. This winner-take-all rule affects campaign strategies. Most campaigns will spend most of their time focusing on those few battleground states like Ohio and Florida. This also affects the issues of a campaign. Candidates will focus on issues that resonate in the few battleground states. The winner-take-all rule makes it especially hard for third parties to win. Third parties may score votes but rarely enough to win a majority in any given state.

Why have we kept the Electoral College? Political science has observed over the years a number of functions of the Electoral College:

...It would provide an intermediary between the voters and the office of the presidency to ensure that the President would not be elected simply by the ‘extraordinary or violent movements’ of an election

campaign...The electors chosen on a state-by-state basis insulated them from the 'heat and ferments' that might sway them if they convened in one place for a vote...The electors would rarely reach a majority decision and turn the process over to the House of Representatives...The Electoral College was founded upon a kind of republican vision of virtual representation in which a number of residents [including women, children, aliens, non-property owners and, in part, slaves] would be included in a state's population tally for the allocation of electoral votes [and for that state's representation in the House of Representatives].

Certainly, tradition helps explain why we do not get rid of the Electoral College. But a more democratic process is never far from bubbling up to the service. Passing a constitutional amendment, however, is not easy. Whereas there are many who complain about the Electoral College there is no clear consensus on an alternative. Some small states think that the Electoral College benefits them. The battle ground states would hate to lose the attention the current system gives them. Finally, the Electoral College reinforces our two-party system. After all, most people do not understand the Electoral College. It is difficult to change something many do not know about.

The Electoral College's state-by-state, winner-take-all allocation of candidate votes versus the majority outcome of a national popular vote continues to reflect the tension of federalism and debate over whether the Electoral College facilitates or impedes democracy.