ELECTING THE PRESIDENT

The U.S. presidential election is the biggest event in American politics. It's an exciting and complicated process that begins immediately after the preceding election and doesn't end until the voters have their say.

What happens during this extended campaign is a quest not just for votes but also for political contributions, favorable media coverage, Internet attention, endorsements, and all the other makings of a winning candidacy for the highest elected office in America. Key events along the way include the primaries and caucuses, the party conventions, and the debates – not to mention all the speeches, polls, and focus groups, plus the barrage of radio and television commercials imploring you to vote this way or that.

FAQ:

How do I register to vote?

Visit the voter registration tool at: **www.VOTE411.org**

What are the requirements to be eligible to vote?

You must be: 1) A citizen of the United States. 2) A resident of the state and 18 years old by the general election.

How do I know if I'm registered?

Within a few weeks after you send in or hand in your registration application, you should get a registration card or notice in the mail telling you that you are now officially a registered voter and where to vote. Hold on to that notice.

I am registered, but I've recently moved. Does this affect my registration?

Yes. If you are registered and have moved within your current election community, contact your local election office to update your registration and determine where you should vote. If you moved outside of your old community, you will have to reregister in your new area before the registration deadline in your state.

Are there other ways to vote besides going to the polls?

All states are required to have an absentee ballot (vote by mail) program to allow citizens who will be away from home on Election Day or who cannot go to the polls to vote. Some states also have early voting programs.

What should I bring with me to the polls?

To be safe, bring your drivers' license or another photo ID. In some places, a current utility bill, paycheck, or other document that includes your name and street address may also work. You can also bring notes, a sample ballot you've marked up, or any other information.

ACTIVITY

ELECTION VOCABULARY BOARD

Find election words in the newspaper on an ongoing basis. When you first find a word, write your own vocabulary definition of the word. If you don't know the meaning of the word, use context clues in the story to help determine the meaning. Look up your word in the dictionary to determine if your definition is accurate. Place your definition or the dictionary definition on the board in alphabetical order for the class to refer to during the election campaign.

Frequently Used Political Terms:

AGENDA – (n.) a set of policies or issues to be addressed or pursued

BIAS – (n.) a preference or inclination, especially one that inhibits unprejudiced judgment

CANNED RESPONSE – (n.) a predetermined response to a question

CAUCUS – (n.) a gathering of members of a political party to nominate candidates for their party's presidential bid

CONVENTION – (n.) an assembly of voting representatives from each state to nominate candidates and adopt the party's platform and rules

DELEGATE – (n.) a person designated to represent his or her state at the Democratic and Republican national conventions

DEMOCRACY – (n.) a form of government in which the ultimate power comes from the people and is exercised directly by the people or by agents elected to represent them in free elections

ELECTABILITY – (n.) the likelihood of a candidate getting elected

ELECTORAL COLLEGE – (n.) the body of 538 electors, chosen at the state level by the people's vote for president, that formally elects the president and vice president; most states have a "winner-take-all" system for awarding electors, except for Maine and Nebraska, which use a proportional system

ELECTORAL VOTE – (n.) the vote cast by each elector in the Electoral College in a presidential election; 270 votes are required to win

FIRST AMENDMENT – (n.) an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that prohibits Congress from interfering with the freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and petition; it was approved in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights, which contains the first 10 amendments to the Constitution

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY – (n.) one of the five freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the right of individuals to come together to share, promote and defend common interests

FREEDOM OF PETITION – (n.) one of the five freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the right to complain to or ask for assistance from the government

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS – (n.) one of the five freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; it grants the right to report about and publish news without government control or censorship

FREEDOM OF SPEECH – (n.) one of the five freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; the right to express oneself and one's opinions without fear of reprisal

INCUMBENT – (n.) the person currently holding an elective office

NOMINEE – (n.) a person nominated to run for elective office

PAC – (n.) short for political action committee; an organization centered around an issue and formed by corporations, labor unions or associations to raise money for political activity; the money can be directly donated to a candidate's campaign or spent independently

PLATFORM – (n.) an official declaration of the principles or policies of a political party or candidate

POPULAR VOTE – (n.) the votes of qualified U.S. voters in a presidential election, as opposed to the votes cast in the Electoral College; also refers to the total number of individual votes a candidate receives

PRIMARY – (n.) an election in which qualified voters directly nominate or express a preference for a particular candidate for their party's presidential bid

REPUBLIC – (n.) a nation with a government in which the supreme power resides with the citizens and is exercised by elected officials and representatives responsible to the people and governing according to law

SLOGAN – (n.) the distinctive motto of a party, candidate or other group

SUPER PAC – (n.) a political action committee that is allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money to advocate for or against a political candidate; the money cannot be directly donated to a candidate

THIRD PARTY – (n.) a political party other than the two prevailing parties; typically formed as a dissenting group of one or both of the two major parties

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POLITICAL PARTIES

Early History: How the Political Parties Came to Be

The U.S. Constitution has nothing to say about political parties. In fact, the Constitution's framers were resolutely opposed to the formation of political parties in this country. Based on their knowledge of the way things worked in Britain, the framers believed that parties created unnecessary and counterproductive divisions within a nation. They thought that candidates should be judged on their personal merits and their stands on the issues, not their party affiliations.

Before long, however, early opposition gave way to the political and practical convenience of a party system. Parties enhanced cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of government and made it easier to coordinate policymaking among the different levels of government – from the federal level down to the states, counties, and towns. More importantly, parties allowed diverse groups of like-minded Americans from throughout the country to come together and have an influence on national policymaking and the election of the president.

The Life of the Parties: The Democrats and Republicans Take Center Stage

From the beginning, American politics has been dominated by two major parties. However, the constituencies and the names of these parties changed during the early years of the republic.

Many observers note that in recent years the Republican Party has become increasingly conservative. Although there is a range of opinion within the party, Republicans generally advocate a limited role for the federal government in solving society's ills. Republicans also tend to support lower taxes, cuts in a range of domestic programs from social welfare to environmental protection, and increases in spending for defense.

The Democrats have been identified since the 1930s as the more progressive party, due in large part to Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs, designed to alleviate problems caused by the Great Depression. The Democrats generally support a more active government role in protecting the environment, public education, and public health and in ensuring equal opportunity for all citizens.

The Democratic and Republican Parties have been the dominant political parties in the United States for more than a century, but for many years, a considerable number of Americans have called themselves independents. According to the respected Stanford/University of Michigan American National Election Studies poll in 2008, 11 percent of American's said they were independent and didn't prefer either major party. Another 17 percent said they were independent but leaning toward the Democrats, while 12 percent said they were independent but felt closer to the Republicans.

ACTIVITY

ISSUE COMPARISON

Choose a major issue that is in the newspaper. Briefly describe the issue. What do the Democratic and Republican candidates say about the issue? What does your newspaper editorial page write about the issue? What is your own opinion on the issue? Explain why?

A College Education: How Does the Electoral College Work?

The Electoral College was established by the founding fathers as a compromise between election of the president by Congress and election by popular vote. The people of the United States actually vote for electors who then vote for the President.

The Constitution authorizes each state to appoint a number of electors equal to the number of representatives (435) plus senators (100) that the state has in Congress. To this total of 535, the Twenty-Third Amendment added three for the District of Columbia-the same number of electors as the least populous state – bringing the total of the college to 538 members.

If one candidate for the office of President (and one candidate for the office of Vice-President) gets 270 electoral votes – a majority of the total numbers of 538 electors – a President has been elected.

The Constitution is silent on how a state is to choose its electors. In the early years, legislatures adopted several methods: appointment by legislature, election by the people on the statewide basis, or a combination of these methods. But by 1836, almost every state was using a popular vote system. On Election Day, when voters in each state go to the polls, each one casts a ballot for the slate of presidential electors who are pledged to support the candidate the voter prefers. These slates have been selected by political parties, through conventions, committees or primaries. In some states, only the names of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates appear on the ballot, masking the fact that voters are choosing electors rather than voting directly for the candidates. In the other states, both candidates and electors are identified.

To learn more about the Electoral College and the electoral vote in your state visit: www.electoral-vote.com.

Tabulating the Outcome: The Results Are In!

Before the advent of television, electronic voting machines, and computerized balloting, it could take days or even weeks for the nation to know whom it had elected president. But starting in the 1950s, and accelerating in later decades, this process changed. The national TV networks began coverage of election returns while the polls were still open and continued until the results were known, which generally didn't take very long.

Early projections of election results became a controversial public issue. Critics said that by predicting the outcome while Americans were still voting, the media were in effect discouraging people from voting.

As a result of these concerns, the major broadcast and cable networks decided to wait until a state's polls have closed before reporting election results for that state. But they still are able to project a winner of the presidential election before the polls close in all states across the country. The media emphatically point out that their First Amendment right to freedom of the press would be violated by any restrictions on their announcing election winners.

Thanks to computerized tabulation of ballots and a technique known as exit polling, now the winner is often announced just hours after the polls have closed.

Making it Official

Normally, by the morning after the election, the final results are in, and the entire country knows who the next president and vice president will be. But whether we have a normal election or a contested one, the outcome still has to be made official. In December, the members of the Electoral College travel to their state capitals to cast their official electoral votes, sign some necessary documents, and pose for pictures, before returning home. When Congress convenes in January, senators and representatives gather for a joint congressional session, and the official results are announced from all states.

At noon on the 20th of January following a presidential election, the term of the preceding president ends and that of the incoming president begins. At a formal inauguration ceremony, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court swears in the president and the vice president before members of Congress, government dignitaries, representatives of foreign governments, and important well-wishers, as well as a national television audience.

After an inaugural address and parade, the new president is on the job. The American people have made their choice and are looking to the new president to prove them right.

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