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Primaries and Caucuses

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Introduction

The 2024 election will be an important one for voters across the United States as citizens will cast their ballots to choose who will serve as America’s next president. While many are anticipating a rematch between incumbent President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, a long road stands between now, the debate stage, and the ballot box. Before voters cast their ballots in the general election they must first select who will earn the nomination to be on that ballot when the time arrives. While Article II, Section I of the United States Constitution details the procedures for electing the president, it does not provide an answer to how we nominate the individuals we elect for president. Under our current two-party system, nominating presidential candidates is determined by primaries, caucuses, delegates, and ultimately Convention votes.

Question #1: What are primaries and caucuses?

Primaries and caucuses are state elections that determine the presidential nominee for each national political party. While both may serve as voting processes, they are distinctly different, and every state has a different way of holding primaries and caucuses.

Before explaining the many differences between them, it is important to note that primaries and caucuses have the same goal: to determine how many delegates each presidential candidate is awarded. Once every state holds its primaries and/or caucuses, delegates submit their ballots. The candidate who earns a majority of delegate votes becomes the presumptive presidential nominee for their party.

Primaries are elections to select which candidates will earn a political party’s presidential nomination to appear on the general election ballot. Primaries work the same as any other election: voters go to their designated polling place on election day for their state and cast their vote. However, who is eligible to vote in a party varies from state-to-state. There are six different types of primaries: closed, partially closed, partially open, open to affiliated voters, open, and top-two. In a closed primary, voters must be registered party members to vote in a primary and they can only vote for a candidate running for their political party. In a partially closed system, state law permits political parties to choose whether or not to allow voters not registered with their party to participate in the primary. The partially open system permits voters to cross party lines; however, they must declare their ballot choice and their ballot choice may be seen as a form of registration for the political party in which they vote. The open-to-unaffiliated voter system allows voters not affiliated with a political party in any primary they choose but does not allow affiliated voters to cross party lines. Open primaries allow the greatest flexibility as they
do not ask voters to choose a political party when voting for a primary candidate. Ohio is a partially open primary state, meaning voters do not need to be affiliated with a political party before going to the polls, but will be asked to select which party they want to vote for and will subsequently be considered a registered member of the party primary in which they cast their ballot (NCSL).

Caucuses are run differently than primaries. Caucuses, generally, are run by state political parties and can be run at the state, district, or local levels. Caucuses are meetings where members of political parties or subgroups nominate election candidates, discuss policies, and coordinate member actions. At party caucuses, the goal of candidates is to secure support from registered voters attending the caucus through speeches and discussions. Based upon this series of communications, caucus attendees will try to influence the support of their elected delegates for a particular candidate. The decision-making process differs across caucuses, but their emphasis remains on speeches and conversations influencing voter perceptions of candidates while primaries offer a quick, easy, private voting process. Caucuses can become a lengthy process as voters hear speeches and hold discussions to decide on a candidate. Generally caucus attendees will form groups based on the candidate they support or raise their hands to nominate their preferred candidate. Caucus voters are not technically the ones nominating candidates, but their decisions influence how their delegates will vote at the next round of party conventions. Caucuses can be closed, open, semi-open, or semi-closed, referring to whether political parties allow unaffiliated voters or cross-party voters to participate in their caucus. Iowa, Nevada, North Dakota, Wyoming, Guam, Virgin Islands, and American Samoa all run caucuses instead of primaries.

Question #2: What are delegates? Who are they and how are they selected?

Delegates are the individuals who represent their state at their political party’s respective presidential nominating conference. Delegates nominate candidates on several criteria, typically reaching their decision based on candidate viability, political expectations, and how that candidate may be able to fulfill the desires of voters within their state or territory. All fifty US states, Washington, D.C., and several US territories will feature delegates in both the Republican and Democratic parties. The Democratic Party will see 3,900 delegates on their convention’s first ballot, and up to 4,600 delegates should a subsequent vote be required. The Republican Party will have 2,429 voting delegates at their convention.

In theory, anybody can be a delegate, but they are usually party insiders or long-time supporters. Delegates are divided further into categories based on how they can vote. Most broadly, Democratic delegates are categorized as pledged or unpledged, and Republican delegates are categorized as bound or unbound. Pledged and bound delegates are sworn to cast their ballot at the convention for the winning candidate of their state or district primary. Those same pledged and bound delegates are split between at-large delegates representing the entire state and district delegates representing particular legislative districts within their state or territory. Unpledged or unbound delegates can cast their ballot freely from the results of their primaries and caucuses. Unpledged delegates include Democratic governors, US Senators,
members of the House of Representatives, Democratic National Committee chairs, and former Democratic presidents. Unpledged delegates can also be referred to as “Superdelegates” or “Automatic delegates”, making up around sixteen percent of the Democratic party vote and hold great influence on nomination voting, especially early in races. Rule changes have barred Superdelegates from casting a vote on the first ballot, but should a candidate fail to reach a majority on the first ballot and a successive vote be required, all Democratic party delegates become unpledged and a pool of 771 unpledged delegates left off of the first ballot are permitted to vote until a nominee reaches a majority. Unbound Republican delegates will come from Guam, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota. The party rules stipulate that unbound delegates "are free to vote for any candidate, regardless of the caucus or primary results" in their state.

**Question #3: Which candidates have been awarded the most delegates heading into the 2024 election? What primaries and caucuses remain?**

So far, only the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primaries have occurred. The Iowa Republican caucus was a decisive event, with former president Donald Trump winning 51 percent of the vote, and being awarded 20 out of the 40 delegates for Iowa. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis came in second with 21 percent of the vote with 9 delegates, and former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley came in third with 19 percent of the vote with 8 delegates. Vivek Ramaswamy, who dropped out of the presidential race a few hours after the results of the caucus were announced, was awarded three delegates. The Iowa Democratic caucus’s result will not be announced for another month however: after the chaos of the 2020 Democratic Iowa Caucus, the Democratic party of Iowa opted to run their caucus as mail-in ballots only, and will be accepting votes until Tuesday, March 5, which also happens to be Super Tuesday.

The only other primary or caucus that has been held is New Hampshire. The only two remaining candidates were Donald Trump and Nikki Haley, as Ron DeSantis dropped out of the presidential race ahead of the New Hampshire primary. Donald Trump won 54 percent of the vote, gaining 13 delegates, and Nikki Haley won 43 percent of the vote and the remaining 9 of the 22 New Hampshire’s total Republican delegates. The results of the New Hampshire Democratic caucus spoke volumes to the ongoing narrative of an expected Biden and Trump rematch. Due to the state’s Democratic party rules, President Joe Biden did not appear on the ballot for the primary. Despite this, he still won 63 percent of the votes via write-in ballots. President Biden bolstered his write-in win with a convincing victory in the February 3rd South Carolina primary, accumulating approximately 96 percent of the counted vote and securing all 55 of the state’s total delegates. The Iowa Democratic caucus has not ended yet, and the amount of delegates in the New Hampshire Democratic primary is still being contested.

As of February 3, the next primary and caucus to be held will be in Nevada, with the Democratic primary being held on February 6 and the Republican caucus being held on February 8. While there are a few states and territories set to hold their primaries and caucuses in February, and every state has the prerogative to choose the date they hold their primaries, 15 states and one territory are all holding their primaries on one date: Super Tuesday. Super Tuesday is one of the
most important dates of the presidential race, as it is the day the most delegates are awarded. Nearly 36 percent of Republican delegates are awarded on the landmark date. 2024’s Super Tuesday is set for March 5th.

The Ohio primary for both political parties is on March 19. The voter registration deadline in Ohio is 30 days before any election. Therefore, Ohio voters must be registered by February 20.

Conclusion

Learning the electoral process is important in helping voters understand how their vote works and why it matters. While the delegate vote is what ultimately determines who is on the ballot in November, each citizen’s voice is heard in the general election results. The process has become much more democratic over the years. The path to the presidency depends on the primary and caucus systems to yield party nominees. This process varies considerably from state-to-state, which has motivated both political parties to make changes to the process in efforts to produce candidates that are most reflective of their parties and have strong chances to win in the general election.