

Political Campaigns



Modern political campaigns are long and require an organized strategy with significant resources. Candidates for federal office, especially the presidency, hire an army of professional consultants to provide expertise in many areas including travel, communications, advertising, voter outreach through media, fundraising, and budgeting. Campaigns also have to hire legal experts to comply with the rules of the Federal Election Commission. The FEC’s guidebook for congressional campaigns is 212 pages long!

Unlike other countries, there is no set “season” for campaigning in America. Presidential campaigns begin well before the primary elections, which are held in spring, and last for more than a year and a half. The short two-year term for the House of Representatives means that as soon as someone is elected they have to start their reelection campaign. This means that voters become tired of endless campaigns and pressure from fundraising events.

To be elected, candidates must pack their schedules and coordinate their travel. Campaign rallies are meant to energize voters and big donors love grandiose fundraising events. Campaigns require a huge amount of both time and energy, and as campaigns last for a long time, they are exhausting for both the candidates and the voters.

Political parties play a key role in national, state, and local election campaigns. There are several phases to an election campaign:

First, candidates decide to run, often with the help of party leaders and activists.

Second, parties choose a nominee to represent their party during the election.

Finally, parties support their nominees during the election campaign.



The Nomination Process

Political parties play a major role in both congressional and presidential elections. Both types of races include a nomination process, primaries, caucuses, and party conventions, with specific rules governing each.

At the beginning of a congressional or presidential campaign, potential candidates from the same party compete for the party's **nomination – the formal process through which parties choose their candidates for political office**. Each candidate forms an exploratory committee, which competes for media coverage and allows a potential candidate to test the waters by travelling around the state or country, conducting public opinion polls, making outreach phone calls, all to attract potential voters. If they have enough momentum and believe that they can win their party's nomination then they have to file the necessary paperwork and announce their official candidacy. [Remember, incumbents have an advantage in earning their party's nomination].

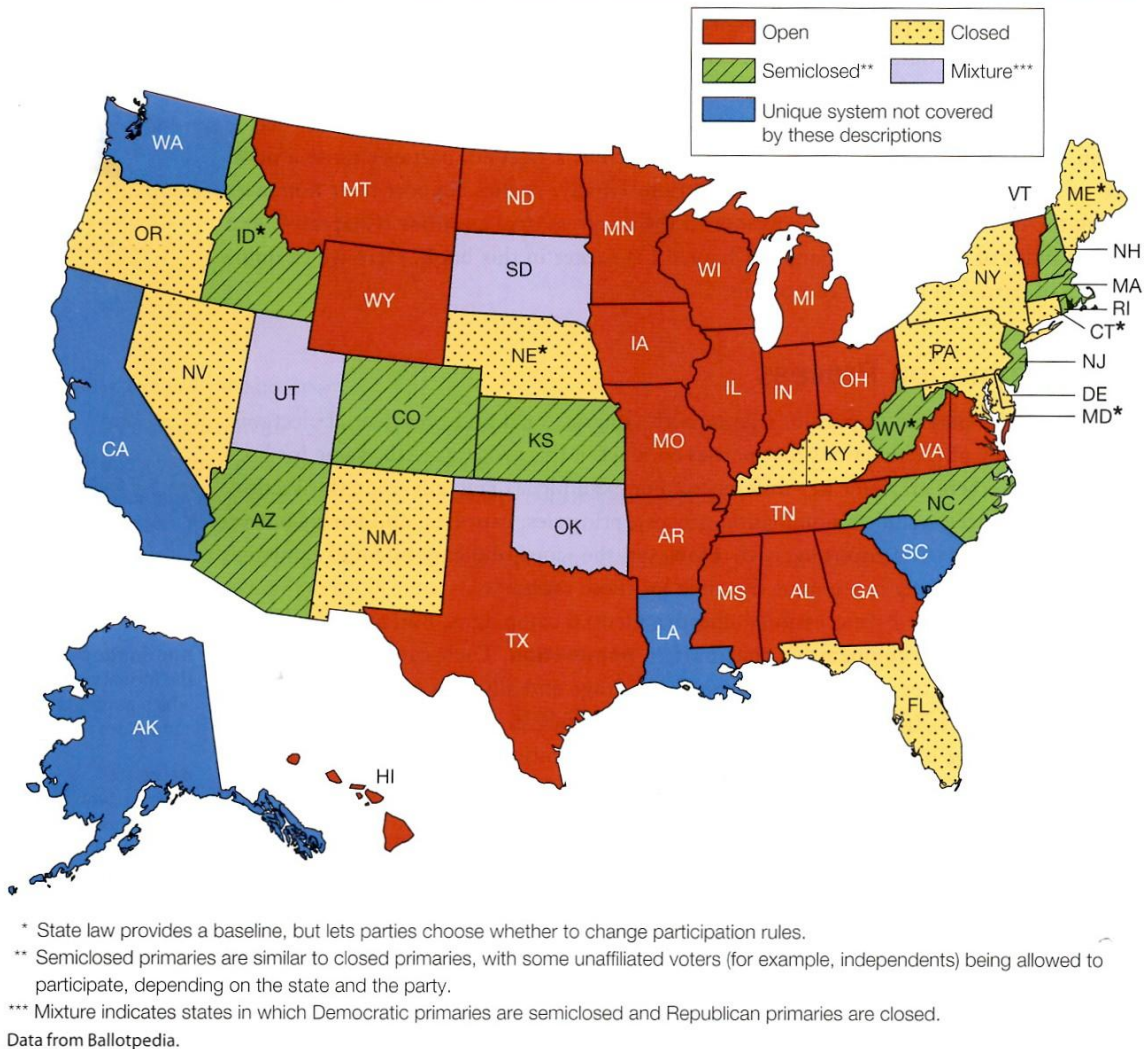
Candidates will then seek the support of **party delegates – people who act as the voters' representative at a convention to select the party's nominee**. State and federal laws set many of the rules governing the nomination process, but most of the details about how things work are hammered out by the parties.

Most states hold **primary elections – an election in which a state's voters choose delegates who support a presidential candidate for nomination of an election by a plurality vote to select a party's nominee for a seat in Congress**.

In congressional primaries, the candidate with the most votes in a given state becomes the party's candidate. Some states hold **open primaries – a primary election in which all eligible voters may vote, regardless of their party affiliation**. Others hold **closed primaries – a primary election in which only those voters who have registered as a member of that political party may vote**.

Open primaries encourage undecided and independent voters to participate but they also allow for the possibility that some voters will cast their ballot to sabotage a candidate from the opposing party if they see that candidate as a threat to their own preferred candidate. Critics of open primaries believe that only voters registered with a party should have a say in the party's nominee. Closed primaries produce candidates who are in line with that particular party's voters.

Presidential Primary and Caucus Systems by State, as of 2024



Some states hold **caucuses** – a process through which a state’s eligible voters meet to select delegates to represent their preferences in the nomination process. They differ from primaries because the voting is done in public rather than by a secret ballot. Caucuses are organized by voting precincts within cities and towns. They may meet at a public building, or on a small scale, such as a school or a large private home. At a typical precinct caucus meeting, supporters from various campaigns give speeches about why they back their candidate. Then, participants break into groups, depending on which candidate they support, or they indicate that they are still undecided. Before any delegates can be elected, a group has to meet a certain threshold number of votes. Groups then try to persuade other groups to join them to increase their size.

Because caucuses have complex rules and regulations, they tend to draw fewer people than primaries. For example, In February 2024, just over 110,000 voters turned out for the Iowa Republican caucus; this was just a little below 15% of the registered Republicans in the state. In the 2024 primary election, only 23% of the registered voters cast a ballot.

If a state holds a primary the state government has to finance it. In return, political parties must abide by all of the state laws that govern the process, such as the date of the primary and who can participate. Holding a caucus gives political parties more flexibility and more power over the nomination process.

Primaries vs Caucuses

Comparison Chart

Primaries	Caucuses
Primaries are run by state governments.	Caucuses are run by political parties.
Voting happens through secret ballots.	Voting usually happens via a head count or show of hands.
Voting happens in all states.	Held at select locations at a district, county, or precinct level.
Almost all 50 states hold presidential primaries.	Only nine states and three Union territories hold caucuses.



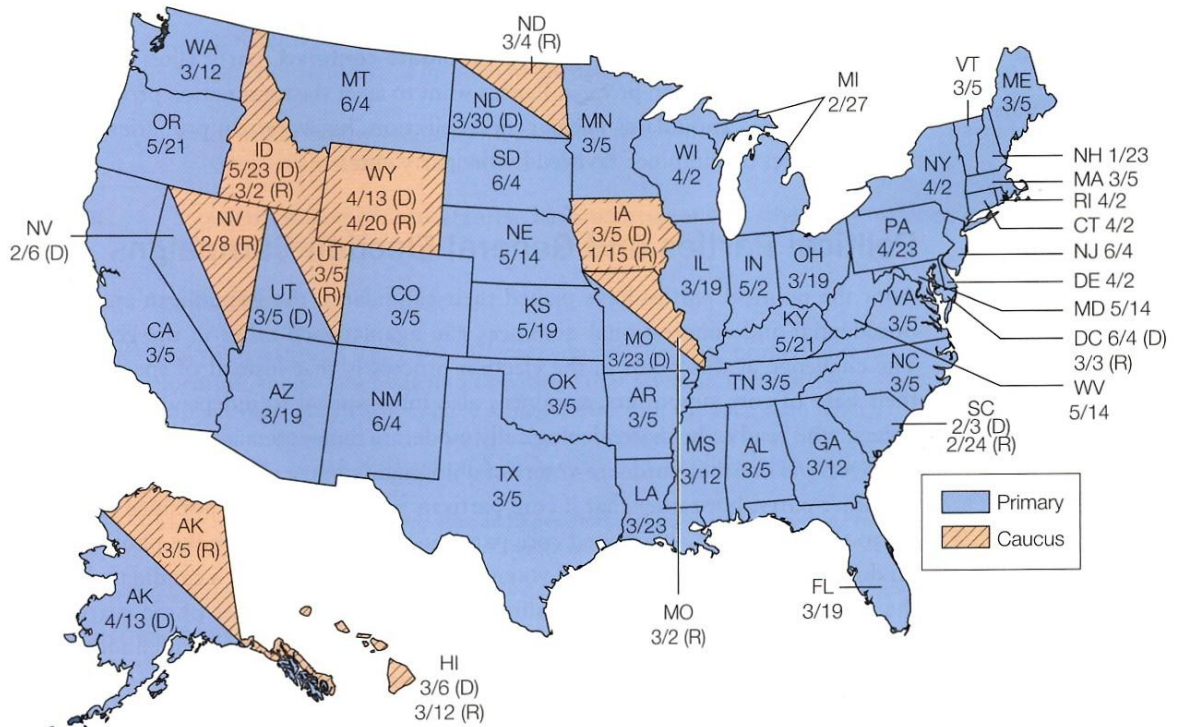
The two major political parties differ in how they award delegates, and the rules continue to change. The elite within the Democratic Party are given special representation.

Superdelegates are members of the Democratic Party who are usually elected officials or party activists. They can support any candidate that they choose, regardless of the outcome of the primary or caucus. In 2024, superdelegates made up about 16% of the total delegates.

The Republican Party allocates delegates according to rules set in each state. In 2024, the party had 2,325 pledged delegates and 104 unpledged delegates. Unlike delegates selected in primaries and caucuses, unpledged delegates are not pledged to vote for a particular candidate.

The schedule of primary elections and caucuses affects the outcome of the presidential nomination process. By tradition, Iowa holds the first caucus and then New Hampshire holds the first primary. While neither state has a large number of delegates, their early position gives them a high amount of attention. Neither state represents the demographics of the nation as both states are more rural than urban. However, holding early caucuses and primaries attracts all of the candidates and gives them media attention and large amounts of money.

Primary and Caucus Dates by State, 2024*



*For those states where format and dates for primaries/caucuses differ by party, D indicates Democratic Party and R indicates Republican Party.
 Note: Dates given as month/day.

Data from Federal Election Commission.

A win in an early state helps presidential candidates gain momentum. Issues that are important in certain states may become later policy of that candidate wins the party's nomination. National party leaders set a schedule for state primaries and caucuses and in past years have punished states that have jumped the line. Media coverage of early primaries and caucuses often focus on the "horse race" of who is winning, rather than the actual issues.

The final phase of the presidential nomination process is the **national convention – a meeting where delegates officially select their party’s nominee for the presidency**. It is usually held during the summer of the presidential election year. During the convention, delegates vote to select the party’s nominee, and committees of delegates write the party’s platform. National conventions are usually sources of high drama, with many rounds of voting of delegate voting required to select a nominee.

At the national convention, most, but not all, delegates are pledged to vote for the candidate whom voters of their state chose. If no candidate receives the number of delegates required to win, more rounds of votes are held until someone wins. At times like these, there is a great deal of behind the scenes “bribery” and “convincing.” These events are known as “brokered” or “contested” conventions, the last contested conventions were in 1952, and since then the nominees have been determined before the convention starts.

Conventions have become more like pep rallies, designed to energize and mobilize voters. A key speaking spot at a national convention can be a stepping stone to future prominence. In 2004, Barack Obama, the senator from Illinois, gave the keynote address at the DNC which made him a rising star within the Democratic Party.



As campaigns have become more **candidate-centered – a campaign in which the public’s focus is on the characteristics of the candidate and not the party**, party elites are losing influence over the nomination process. Parties want to steer the nomination process toward the most “electable” candidate in the general election but voters in primaries and caucuses may not select the nominee favored by the party elites.

After the delegates have been chosen, the Republican and Democratic presidential and congressional nominees run against each other in the general election. Now the nominees must also appeal to the independent and undecided voters. Hopefully, a candidate may not be seen as too far right or left of their party to attract these key voters.



A Third Party is a minor political party in competition with the two major parties.

There is no law requiring a **two-party system (where two political parties dominate politics, winning almost all elections)** in the United States but with only a few exceptions, the two-party system has been dominant.

Many countries, including Mexico, have multiple-party systems, and some, including Russia and China, have a **single-party-dominant system**. Some countries, such as Austria and El Salvador, have **proportional representation systems – an election system for a legislature in which citizens vote for parties, rather than individuals, and parties are represented in the legislature according to the percentage of the vote that they receive**. For example, the party winning 10% of the nationwide vote would be awarded 10% of the seats in the national legislature.

There are a few reasons why the United States is a two-party system. In all states except Maine and Alaska, members of congress are chosen using a **single-member plurality system: an election system for choosing members of the legislature where the winner is the candidate who receives the most votes, even if the candidate does not receive a majority of the votes**. Also to be noted as stated before, the candidate who wins the popular vote in a state win all of that state’s electoral votes (except Maine and Nebraska).

The **winner-take-all system** means that the Democratic and Republic parties have an overwhelming advantage in elections. A candidate from one of the two parties almost always receives the most votes in a district or state. Those for the system say it creates stability and voters can continue to vote for the same party is doing well. Those opposed say many people live in areas dominated by one party and people do not have much of a voice.

Minor Parties in the Twenty-First Century

Although they almost never win public office, third parties may influence elections. Third-party candidates often focus on a single issue that they think the major parties are not addressing. Sometimes the two major parties incorporate third-party agendas into their platforms, undercutting the third party's chance of winning.

In presidential elections, the winner-take-all system makes it difficult for a third-party candidate to win the Electoral College because they rarely win a plurality of the votes within a state.

However, sometimes third-party candidates are able to win some votes in the Electoral College because they are popular within a specific region. In 1968, **George Wallace** ran for president as an independent candidate on a platform in favor of racial segregation. Wallace took nearly 14% of the vote, and because he was popular in the South, he won four southern states and was awarded their votes in the Electoral College. Twelve years later, **John Anderson**, an Illinois GOP congressman, ran for the National Unity Party, a moderate alternative to Democratic president Jimmy Carter and the more conservative Republican Ronald Reagan. Anderson received 6.6% of the vote but as his votes were dispersed around the nation and not in one particular state, he was not awarded any votes in the Electoral College.

Sometimes, third parties are built around a popular candidate. In 1992, billionaire **Ross Perot** ran as an independent on the **Reform Party** with a platform of cutting the federal budget deficit. He captured 19% of the vote but he did not win any Electoral votes. In 2000, consumer activist **Ralph Nader** ran for president under the liberal **Green Party** banner. He won 2.74% of the popular vote, pulling votes away from the Democratic nominee Al Gore. In 2024, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., announced his third party candidacy but his campaign never really gained any ground. Sometimes the third party creates a voter backlash as they would take away votes from the party most similar to the regular voter so people are discouraged from voting for third parties.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties work to discourage third-party candidates. They try to stop candidates from participating in television debates. To qualify for such a debate candidates must be supported by at least 15% of the respondents in five national public opinion polls. Local governments set requirements that a person can only run after receiving certain numbers of signatures, often hard to achieve for a third party candidate.

Although third parties face significant obstacles, a majority of Americans still believe that a third party is needed.