

US Politics and Government – Elections

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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Fixed-term election every four years.

In the event of the president's death, impeachment or retirement, the vice-president automatically becomes the president with immediate effect, and then the remainder of the president's term.

A federal law designated Election Day as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, thus, between 2 and 8 November.

Eligibility for a presidential candidate

- A natural-born US citizen.
- At least 35 years old.
- Resided in the USA for at least 14 years.
- Since 1951, not to have already served two terms.
- Extra-constitutional
 - Political experience (Eisenhower and Trump did not have).
 - Major-party endorsement.
 - Ability to raise funds.
 - Effective organisation.
 - Orator, telegenic.
 - Sound and relevant policies.

Stages in the presidential election process

- (1) The invisible primary = the period before the actual primary, when candidates declaring their intention to run, build their profile and recruit public support to increase their potential to be a party nominee. About 12-18 months before polling day.
 - Candidates' announcements.
 - Televised party debates.
 - Fundraising.
 - Increased name recognition, building a public profile.

- Opinion polls indicate the frontrunners.
- Endorsements by leading party figures = members of the Congress, state governors and former presidents.

(2) **Primaries (a vote) and caucuses (a meeting)** =

primaries are held in mid-to-large population states (California, New York, North Carolina, Alabama).

Caucuses = held in some small-to-mid population states, especially those which are large geographically but with small populations.

- Primaries can be open = any registered voter can vote in either party's primary; or closed = only registered supporters can vote in the party they are registered for.
- States decide on the timing of primaries and caucuses.
- **Super Tuesday** = a Tuesday in February or March when a number of states coincide their presidential primaries and caucuses to try and increase their influence.
- **Front loading** = when a state decides to schedule its primaries or caucuses earlier during the nomination process to try and increase their importance.
- Voter turnout in primaries tend to be low, approximately around 20-30% of eligible voters.
- Primaries can be also classified based on how the delegates are awarded = proportional primaries versus 'winner-take-all' primaries.
- **New Hampshire** normally holds the first presidential primary and is characterised by a relatively high turnout, 42% in 2020.
- Turnout is higher in primaries compared with caucuses.
- Factors affecting turnout = demographic (higher among educated, higher income and the elderly), type of primary (higher in open), competitiveness of the race (higher when competitive).

(3) **Choosing the vice-president** = chosen by the presidential candidate or by the incumbent president that is seeking re-election.

- The nomination needs to be confirmed by a majority vote of delegates at the national party convention.
- It used to be announced during the convention, now announced prior to the convention.
- The announcement can provide a boost to the presidential candidate in the polls.
- Candidates use different mechanisms to choose their candidate for the office: a balanced ticket (attracting support for different reasons, Biden-Harris),

potential for government (Bush-Cheney, Trump-Pence) or party unity (Kerry-Edwards).

- (4) **National Party Convention** = the party nominations for the president and vice-president are confirmed, policy platform is decided, and the campaign is taking off.
- Usually during July or August.
 - Usually lasts for 3-4 days.
 - The convention is attended by delegates, mostly chosen during the primaries and caucuses.
 - **Three formal functions** = choosing the presidential candidate (formal, as it was decided during the primaries), choosing the vice-president (formal, as it was announced earlier), and deciding the party platform (formal ratification of an earlier drafted document).
 - **Informal functions** = promoting party unity, boosting the campaign and recruiting public support.
 - **The key moment** = the presidential acceptance speech.
- (5) **General election campaign** = takes off right after the convention and lasts until early November.
- A **nine-week** campaign.
 - Mainly in the **media**.
 - Candidates make some **appearances in key states**.
 - **'October Surprise'** = candidates can be facing a significant event late in the campaign that destabilises their momentum and makes it harder for them to recover from the effects of the event. For example, Hilary Clinton and the investigation into the private emails, and Trump when he fell ill with Covid-19 and was also investigated for tax evasion.
 - **Campaign finance** = the raising of money and the expenditure to run the campaign and support the candidate.
 - **Soft money** = money donated to political parties instead of to candidate; to bypass limitation on fundraising. The party then can spend this money on some aspects of campaign activity.
 - **Hard money** = money given directly to a candidate as funds to support the campaign.
 - **PAC Political Action Committee** = raising a modest amount of money that is spent for electing or defeating a candidate. No more than \$5000 per candidate.
 - **Super PAC** = a political committee that makes independent expenditures without contribution to candidates. It can raise unlimited funds to support or oppose any candidate but not with the support of the official campaign.

Two main sets of legislation regarding campaign finance

1. Federal Action Campaign Act 1974 = limited the contributions that individuals, unions and corporations could provide. There are loopholes and it encourages the increase in 'soft money'.
 2. Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act BICRA 2002 = a range of restrictions on campaign finance. Aimed to reduce the 'soft money'.
- Televised debates = are being held in each election, usually 3 presidential and 1 vice-presidential.
- (6) Election day = fixed by federal law as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, between 2-8 November.
- More than 30 states allow early voting.
 - Voter turnout peaked at 67% in 1960 and decreased steadily to 51% in 1996.
 - Since 2000 turnout is varied and in 2020 peaked at 66.7%.
 - Usually difficult to defeat an incumbent president running for a second term.
- (7) Electoral college = 538 delegates from 50 states plus Washington DC officially decide the president. The successful candidate requires 270 electoral college votes = absolute majority.
- The electoral college is the institution established by the Founding Fathers to indirectly elect the president and the vice-president. The electors cast their ballots in their state capitals.
 - Each state is awarded a certain number of Electoral College Votes ECVs.
 - The ECVs is equal to the number of the state representatives in the Congress (2 senators plus the number of representatives).
 - The winner of the popular vote in each state wins all its electors, thus, 'winner-take-all' rule.
 - Two states, Maine and Nebraska, do not use the 'winner-take-all' rule.
 - Members of the Electoral College never meet together.
 - They meet on their state capitals on the Monday after that second Wednesday in December to cast their ballots for the president and the vice-president.
 - In 2020 the Supreme Court declared that the states can demand Electors to vote for the state's popular vote winner, thereby eliminating the problem known as rogue/faithless Elector = an elector that casts a ballot for a candidate other than the one who won the popular vote in their respective state.
 - The results are sent to the vice-president, who formally counts the votes and announces the Electoral College votes in Congress in early January.

- **Strengths** = maintains the will of small-population states and usually promotes a race between 2 candidates with the winner receiving more than 50% of the popular vote.
- **Weaknesses** = small-population states are overrepresented, the 'winner-take-all' rule can distort the result. It is possible for the loser of the popular vote to win the Electoral College vote; unfair to national third parties.

Possible reforms

Especially given that in 2000 and 2016 the loser of the popular vote won the election, calls were made to change the system so the president would be elected by popular vote.