

Electing the President: *A Guide to the Election Process*

Produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters



Thank you for joining our Wednesday series about the presidential election, produced in partnership with the League of Women Voters through November 5. Last spring's chapters are posted online at lwvwa.org and will help students of all ages to understand the people, parties and issues regarding our election process.

Week Two: Selecting the Nominee

The Primaries and Caucuses

It used to be that a political party's nominee for president was selected by influential party members at the national convention, generally after a lot of wheeling and dealing. Realizing that this was not a very democratic way to choose a presidential candidate, the parties have, over the last half century, opened up the process to voters.

Primary elections and caucuses are the two main ways in which voters can play a part in choosing the major parties' nominees. Primary elections are run by state and local governments and caucuses are run by the political parties. In some states, only caucuses are held. In other states, only primaries are held. In Washington, voters may take part in both a primary and a caucus.

The series of primaries and caucuses – starting early in an election year and continuing throughout the spring and early summer — is a very important step in the complex process of electing the next President.

A **presidential primary** differs from other types of elections. Although voters may see the candidate's name on the ballot, they are actually voting for delegates who will represent the candidate at the party's national convention. In most states, only voters registered with a party may vote in that primary, (known as a closed primary). Some states hold a semi-closed primary in which voters unaffiliated with a party (independents) may choose a party primary in which to vote. In an open primary, any voter may vote in any party's primary. Occasionally, a primary will serve merely as a presidential preference contest because the party is not committed to using the results to select delegates.

Nearly all states have a binding primary in which the results legally bind some or all of the delegates to vote for a particular candidate at the national convention, or until the candidate releases the delegates. A handful of states practice a non-binding primary, in which delegates may express a commitment to a candidate but are not legally bound to vote for that candidate.

Some states use caucuses to begin the process of selecting the delegates who will represent one or another candidate at the national convention. A caucus is a meeting of political party members on the precinct level, the smallest election district. Thousands of caucuses occur at the same time and date throughout a state.

Even though the nominating process has been opened up over the years, political parties still have a fundamental right, upheld by the courts, to choose how party delegates (and, consequently, party candidates) are selected. For example, in Washington in 2008, the state Republican Party used a closed primary to apportion 51 percent of its delegates and caucus results to allocate 49 percent. The state Democratic Party did not allocate delegates based on the results of the primary. Delegates were mostly chosen through the caucus system, with a few delegate positions reserved for party officials and elected officials.

Often less than 25 percent of eligible voters participate in the primaries while less than 10 percent caucus. These voters tend to be more partisan than general election voters. That means that Republican primary voters tend to be more conservative, and Democratic voters more liberal. To win over these voters during the primary campaign, candidates often speak about issues that are more partisan and ideological.

The Conventions: What's Going on Behind the Hoop-la?

The national party conventions mark the official turning point in the presidential campaign from the primary season to the November general election. The convention allows the party to put aside any intra-party jockeying and squabbles that occurred during the primaries, unite behind its nominee, define itself for the voters and set the tone for the fall campaign.

The conventions, officially the top decision-making body of the parties, are the most important source of authority for a national party. The major items on the convention agenda are:

- Nominate candidates for president and vice president
- Adopt a national party platform
- Adopt the rules that govern the party for the next four years
- Rally the party faithful

The Delegates: Who Are All These People?

In 2008, the Republican convention seated about 2,500 delegates, and the Democratic convention about 4,300. Convention delegates were selected based on the results of the primaries and caucuses in their states, with most of the delegates coming to the convention pledged to support a specific candidate.

Also at the conventions were issue advocates — from environmentalists and farmers to labor union and business representatives — who attended in the hope that they could get the party to embrace their issues. Hordes of media representatives crowded the convention newsroom to bring stories to TV, radio, newspaper and Internet audiences across the nation.

Learn More:

The Democratic National Convention was held on August 25-28, 2008.

The Republican National Convention was held on September 1-4, 2008.

Search The Seattle Times online archives at seattletimes.com for articles and information about these two conventions. Pick one article about each and compare and contrast, noticing the tone, language and images used to tell the story. Note whether the article is from the editorial pages, which are designed to allow writers to express their opinions, or from the regular news sections of the paper, which are designed to be unbiased in their reporting.

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*The General
Election - Part 1*

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