

## **VOTING 101**

So, how does a nation, state or local group of people put an individual into a government office seat in one of the three branches of government? They hold an election. There are differences between federal, state and local elections and their respective branches of government. For our purposes, we'll unpack how a presidential election works in the United States.

The presidential election process follows a typical cycle every four years:

- Spring of the year before an election – Candidates announce their intentions to run.
- Summer of the year before an election through spring of the election year – Primary and Caucus debates take place.
- January to June of election year – States and parties hold primaries and caucuses.
- July to early September – Parties hold nominating conventions to choose their candidates.
- September and October – Candidates participate in presidential debates.
- The First Tuesday in November – Election Day.
- December – Electors cast their votes in the Electoral College.
- Early January of the next calendar year – Congress counts the electoral votes.
- January 20 – Inauguration Day.

The election process begins with primary elections and caucuses. Generally, primaries use secret ballots for voting, and party members vote on which candidate they want to represent their party. Caucuses are local gatherings of voters who vote at the end of the meeting for a particular candidate. Then, the process moves to nominating conventions, during which political parties each select a nominee to unite behind. During a political party convention, each presidential nominee also announces a vice presidential running mate.

The nominated candidates then campaign across the country, holding rallies and town halls to explain their views and plans to voters to try and win potential support. They may also participate in debates with candidates from other parties. Advertising also plays a huge role in the presidential campaign, as candidates try to win voters to their side.

During the general election, Americans go to their polling place to cast their vote for president. But the tally of those votes—the popular vote—does not determine the winner. (In other U.S. elections, candidates are elected directly by popular vote.) Instead, presidential elections use the Electoral College. To win the election, a candidate must receive a majority of electoral votes. Each state gets as many electors as it has members of Congress (House and Senate). Including Washington, D.C.'s three electors, there are currently 538 electors in all. Each state's political parties choose their own slate of potential electors. Who is chosen to be an elector, how, and when varies by state. The process of using electors comes from the Constitution and was a compromise between a popular

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vote by citizens and a vote in Congress. It's a legacy of those fears Madison and others expressed about democracy - it's designed to be a check on the wild impulses of "the people."

After you cast your ballot for president, your vote goes to a statewide tally. In 48 states and Washington, D.C., the winner gets all the electoral votes for that state. Maine and Nebraska assign their electors using a proportional system. A candidate needs the vote of at least 270 electors—more than half of all electors—to win the presidential election. If no candidate receives a majority, the House of Representatives chooses the President and the Senate chooses the Vice President.

In most cases, a projected winner is announced on election night in November after you vote. But the actual Electoral College vote takes place in mid-December when the electors meet in their states. Currently, any structural changes to the presidential election process would take a constitutional amendment.

However, the United States' presidential election system of voting is not the only democratic voting system. It is just one of four main voting systems that are used in various places around the world. These systems are:

- **Plurality voting** is the system most commonly used for legislative elections in the United States. It is the one most people think of when they think of the word "voting." In this system, voters are given one vote and they may cast it for their preferred candidate. Whichever candidate gets the most votes wins – even if they do not achieve more than 50% of the votes.
- **At-Large Voting** is a system where voters can vote for candidates to fill any and all vacant positions in a representative body, even those outside their individual districts. Today, at-large voting is used primarily in local elections. Typically, an entire town or city, which may be made up of several districts, lists all district seats and the candidates for those seats on every ballot, and every voter, regardless of district location, votes for all open positions. This allows every person to vote on each position within an entire governing body.
- **Instant-Runoff Voting** is also known as "IRV," or the "alternative vote." In this system, a voter ranks all candidates in terms of preference. If there are three candidates, the voter will rank them 1 (for their favorite) to 3 (for their least favorite). When votes are counted, if a single candidate wins more than 50% of the first-choice votes, that candidate wins. If no candidate wins more than 50%, the system goes into an "instant runoff" where the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and any voter who ranked that candidate as their first choice has their second-choice vote counted. This process continues until one candidate has more than half of the votes.
- **Cumulative Voting** is where a voter can split their vote (or votes) instead of just electing one person. There are a few ways this occurs. One way is instead of voting for one person, voters receive a select number of votes which they may divvy up between

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candidates as they choose. For example, if a voter has three votes, the voter could give one candidate three votes, or they could give one candidate two votes and a second candidate one vote, or they could give three candidates one vote each. The other option is where a voter still receives one vote but may divvy up that vote's percentage between candidates. For instance, they could give one candidate their full vote, or two candidates 50% of their vote, or one candidate 60% of their vote and the other candidate 40%. In both ways, the winner of the election is whichever candidate receives the most votes.