



The authors of the Constitution piled compromise upon compromise in designing the selection process for the president of the United States. To assuage those who worried about the ascension of populist demagogues, they made the process indirect: states select delegates to an **Electoral College**, which in turn selects the president. Each state possesses a number of electors equal to its number of representatives in the House plus its number of senators, reproducing the compromise involving representation in Congress. If the Electoral College cannot reach a majority vote for any candidate, the House of Representatives chooses the president, with each state voting as a single unit. The House has not chosen the president since 1824.

Nearly every state chooses to allocate all of its electoral votes to the candidate who wins the state – even they win by a narrow margin.¹ Because of this winner-take-all system, a candidate who wins the most votes nationwide may lose the Electoral College vote. This happened in 2000 and 2016.

To get to the general election, candidates must secure a political party **presidential nomination**, which requires running in a series of state-by-state primary and caucus contests in the first half of the election year.² In these state-level contests, candidates who get more votes receive a larger number of **delegates** to a party's summer **nominating convention**. Delegates are people, usually pledged to support one candidate or another, who travel to the location of the party's convention, witness days of hoopla

and speech-making, and cast their ballots, formally selecting the nominee.

State party activists, in conjunction with state legislatures, decide what kind of delegate selection contest to hold. A **primary** is a formal election in which voters go to the polls (or vote absentee), just as in any other election.

A **caucus** is a less formal event, run by the political party, in which voters gather in many simultaneous precinct-level meetings, usually on a Tuesday night. There, they may spend hours debating issues and divvying up into groups supporting rival candidates. Because caucuses require more time and effort, participation rates in caucuses are much lower than in primaries.³

The earliest primary and caucus contests take on greater importance because a humiliating early defeat may force a candidate out of the race. Conversely, doing well in one of the early states may produce **momentum** – a greater chance of more victories in later states.⁴ For decades, the first contests in the presidential primary period have been the **Iowa caucus** and the **New Hampshire primary**. The order of other states and the rules surrounding delegate selection change from year to year, depending on state laws and internal political party negotiations.⁵

Prior to the start of the primary season, candidates engage in what many call the **invisible primary**, competing with one another for endorsements, funding, and other resources necessary to wage an effective campaign.⁶

¹ The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska.

² Independent candidates are possible, but because state ballot rules vary, it is difficult and time consuming to get onto the ballot in all states without a party nomination.

³ The Pew Research Center estimates that 2016 voter turnout in primaries nationwide was 28.5% of eligible voters. The U.S. Elections Project, led by Michael McDonald, estimates average 2016 caucus turnout as about 9.1% of eligible voters. See <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/10/turnout-was-high-in-the-2016-primary->

[season-but-just-short-of-2008-record/](http://www.electproject.org/2016P/) and <http://www.electproject.org/2016P/>.

⁴ The classic political science account of momentum is Larry Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁵ See Elaine Kamarck, *Primary Politics, 3rd Edition* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

⁶ Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).