



BASICSPLAINER: THE NEW HAMPSHIRE PRIMARY

Delegates to the Democratic and Republican National Conventions formally select the major party nominees during the summer before the election. Voters in the states choose these delegates, either through a caucus procedure or through a **primary**, an election in which presidential candidates' names on the ballot serve as proxies for their **pledged delegates**, or representatives, to the conventions.

New Hampshire has held the first primary in the nation since 1920, a time when most states did not hold such a contest. Since the 1970s, state law has cemented its status: the New Hampshire Secretary of State must schedule the primary for a date “7 days or more immediately preceding the date on which any other state shall hold a similar election.”¹ The Iowa Caucuses (which take place on February 3, 2020) occur prior to the New Hampshire primary (February 11) because New Hampshire officials do not deem a caucus to be a “similar election.”

Although New Hampshire, as a state with a small population, selects few pledged convention delegates (in 2020, only 24 out of a total of 3,979 on the Democratic side and 22 out of 2,552 on the Republican side),² its position at the start of the nomination season garners the state outsized attention. Candidates may increase their chances of doing well in later primaries if they win – or even perform better than expected – in New Hampshire. Conversely, those who do poorly may drop out of the race as their funding and media coverage wanes.³

Presidential hopefuls therefore devote a disproportionate amount of time and resources to the state. According to one campaign tracking website, Democratic candidates collectively spent a total of 355 days in New Hampshire in 2019, more than twice as many days as in the next primary state on the schedule, South Carolina.⁴ While there, they hold events at community centers, coffee houses, local theaters, and conference centers. Paid staff and volunteers knock on doors and build voter contact databases; well-funded candidates flood the airwaves with advertisements.

Voter turnout in the New Hampshire primary is high relative to other states. In 2016, 52.4 percent of eligible voters went to the polls in New Hampshire, versus 31 percent average turnout for all primaries.⁵ But critics note that New Hampshire is unrepresentative of the rest of the country. Most would not go so far as one campaign aide in the 1970s, who grumbled that “forty miles outside the city there’s nothing but trees and bears,”⁶ but the state is whiter, older, and wealthier than the U.S. as a whole.

Each New Hampshire voter may register to vote as a member of a party, or as an “**undeclared**” voter. The undeclared, making up over 42 percent of those registered, can vote in either primary election (but not both!). In some years, this has resulted in claims of strategic voting by Republican-leaning undeclared voters voting in the Democratic Party primary or vice versa.

¹ New Hampshire Election Laws, Chapter 653, Section 9, <https://sos.nh.gov/ElecLaws.aspx>.

² <https://www.thegreenpapers.com/P20/>.

³ Barbara Norrander, “Primary Elections,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 516-519.

⁴ https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_candidate_campaign_travel,_2020.

⁵ For states in which both parties held a primary on the same day. Calculated from data made available by the United States Elections Project, <http://www.electproject.org/2016P>.

⁶ Stuart Sprague, “The New Hampshire Primary,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14:1 (Winter, 1984), p. 127.