



## U.S. Elections Frequently Asked Questions

### Primary and General Elections

#### **What types of elections are there?**

There are three basic types -- primary, general and local. In addition, "special elections" can be called which are limited to one specific purpose, e.g. filling a vacancy.

#### **What is a primary election?**

A primary election is a nominating election in which a candidate is chosen by a political party. A primary election can be either open or closed. If a primary election is closed, only those who are members of the respective party may vote. An open is closed, only those who are members of the respective party may vote. An open primary is one in which any eligible voter, regardless of party affiliation, may vote.

#### **What is a general election?**

A general election is an election held to choose among candidates nominated in a primary (or by convention or caucus) for federal, state and local office. The purpose of a general election is to make a final choice among the various candidates who have been nominated by parties or who are running as independent or write-in candidates. In addition, where nonpartisan races have not been decided in the primary, the runoffs are held at the general election. Statewide measures also can be placed on the November ballot.

#### **When is a general election held?**

It is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November in even-numbered years.

#### **Can anyone run for office? What is necessary to become a candidate?**

Each elected office has different requirements.

To run for president of the United States the candidate must:

- Be a natural-born citizen of the United State
- Be at least 35 years of age, and
- Be a resident of the United States for at least 14 years.

U.S. Constitution, Article 2, section 2, paragraph 5

U.S. State candidates must:

- Be at least 30 years of age
- Be a U.S. citizen for nine years, and
- Be a resident of the state where elected.

U.S. Constitution, Article 1, section 3, paragraph 3

U.S. House of Representatives candidates must:

- Be at least 25 years of age
- Be a U.S. citizen for seven years, and
- Be a resident of the state where elected.

State and locally elected officials are subject to the requirements of their jurisdictions.

### **Why are federal elections held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November?**

The Tuesday after the first Monday in November was initially established by federal law in 1845 for the appointment of presidential electors in every fourth year. In 1875, lawmakers established this day for electing representatives in every even numbered year. In 1914, it also became the day for electing U.S. senators.

#### *Why early November?*

For much of U.S. history, America was a predominantly agrarian society. Lawmakers therefore took into account that November was perhaps the most convenient month for farmers and rural workers to be able to travel to the polls. The fall harvest was over, ( spring was planting time and summer was taken up with working the fields and tending the crops) but in the majority of the nation the weather was still mild enough to permit travel over unimproved roads.

#### *Why Tuesday?*

Since most residents of rural America had to travel a significant distance to the county seat in order to vote, Monday was not considered reasonable since many people would need to begin travel on Sunday. This would, of course, have conflicted with church services and Sunday worship.

#### *Why the first Tuesday after the first Monday?*

Lawmakers wanted to prevent election day from falling on the first of November for two reasons. First, November 1<sup>st</sup> is All Saints Day, a Holy Day of Obligation for Roman Catholics. Second, most merchants were in the habit of doing their books from the preceding month on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Apparently, Congress was worried that the economic success or failure of the previous month might prove an undue influence on the vote!

### **Why do so few Americans vote?**

Several factors seem to influence voter turnout. Many observers believe that current registration laws hinder voter turnout. Demographic composition of the electorate, long of

periods of political or economic stability, predictable outcomes in many races, and lack of some candidates' appeal are other factors determining voter turnout. Turnout tends to be higher in general elections than in primary elections. Although seriously discussed, compulsory voting has never been enacted into law in the United State. Regard for the vote as a right and privilege rather a duty might have its foundation in the Constitutional establishment of a group of "electors" who were designated within the stated for the single, specific purpose of choosing a president. (U.S. Constitution, Article 2, section 1.) Although the franchise now extends to almost every citizen 18 years or older, in the beginning of the Republic, the right to vote was limited to adult males who either owned property or paid taxes.



## Electoral College

**Can you please explain the difference between the popular vote and the Electoral College vote?**

The Electoral College system gives each estate the same number of electoral votes as it has members of Congress. The District of Columbia also gets three electoral votes. There are a total of 538 votes, and a candidate must get 270 to win. All but two states have a winner- take- all system, in which the candidate who gets the most popular votes in the state gets all that state's electoral votes. In most states, electors are chosen at district and state party conventions. The electors of the party of the winning candidate are the ones who vote in the Electoral College. The electors usually gather in their state capitals in December to cast their votes. The electoral votes are then sent to Washington, where they are counted before a joint session of Congress in January. Legislation is introduced in Congress periodically to drop the Electoral College and pick a president based on popular vote. The legislation usually doesn't get very far.

**Has any president been elected without a majority of the popular vote?**

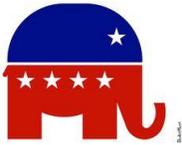
There have been 17 presidential elections in which the winner did not receive a majority of the popular vote cast. The first of these was John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824 and the most recent was George W. Bush in 2000. The electoral college system generally gives all of a state's electoral votes to the winner in that state, no matter how slim the margin. Thus it has happened that candidates have been elected even though they received fewer popular votes than their opponents. Both Rutherford B. Hayes, in 1876, and Benjamin Harrison, in 1888, were elected in this manner. In the case of Hayes, a special electoral commission was called in 1877 to decide the contested returns. John Quincy Adams also received fewer popular votes than his opponent, Andrew Jackson, in the election of 1824, but his election was decided by the House of Representatives because Jackson failed to win a majority of Electoral College votes.

## Miscellaneous FAQs

**Why does the president swear on a Bible for inauguration if there is a separation between church and state in the U.S.?**

When presidents and other federal officials take their oaths of office, they often place their hand on a Bible and conclude their oaths with the words “so help me God”. However, the Constitution of the United States, Article 2, section 1, paragraph 8, reads “ I do solemnly swear ( or affirm ) that I will faithfully execute the duties of the Office of President...” The “(or affirm)” was inserted in this section to allow presidents to avoid swearing oaths to God as a condition of taking office. Elected representatives shall be bound by oath or affirmation, to support the Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.

### **What are the symbols of the Republicans and Democrats?**



The elephant represents the Republican Party and the donkey represents the Democratic Party. Both images were created by political cartoonist Thomas Nast for the publication Harper’s Weekly in 1874. Nast created a marauding elephant to represent the “Republican vote”. The symbol was quickly embraced by Republicans as their party’s own.

Speaking of the Democrats in the Minnesota Legislature, Ignatius Donnelly remarked, “The Democratic Party is like a mule—without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity.



### **Do labor unions and other organizations tell people how to vote? What does it mean when a union or newspaper “endorses” a candidate?**

Voting in U.S. elections is conducted by secret ballot, and a voter’s choice is private. Historically, especially in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, labor unions wielded a strong political influence over their members. Since the Vietnam War era, however, differences between union leaders and members have become more common. The “endorsement” of a candidate by a union means the union publicly supports the candidate and approves the candidate’s stand on issues. While unions encourage members to join that support, it would be unlawful to coerce a member to vote against his or her own judgment.

