

FAQ on Presidential Nomination Process

What is a primary?

It is an election by secret ballot in which voters choose a political party's candidate for office in an election. Primaries are held for most public offices, including the presidency. In a closed primary, voters must declare which party they support and can vote only in that party's primary. In an open primary, voters from any political party can participate. For the presidential race, some states have winner-take-all primaries. That means the candidate with the most votes claims all that state's delegates (see below). Other states award delegates by proportion. In a proportional primary, a candidate who won 20 percent of the vote would get 20 percent of that state's delegates.

What is a caucus?

Although most states hold primaries, caucuses are another way political parties nominate candidates for election. Caucuses are a series of meetings held across a state. At these meetings, party members discuss the candidates, and then openly vote for state delegates who represent the candidate they support. Those state delegates, in turn, choose delegates to attend the national convention, where they are expected to support the candidate whom they had pledged to support.

What is a delegate?

A delegate is a member of a political party who helps determine the party's presidential nominee. Delegates are usually longtime party members, and they vote on the nominee at the party's national convention (see below). Most of them are required to vote for a certain candidate. Their vote is determined by the result of primaries or caucuses in their home states. However, some delegates are unpledged. That means they can vote as they wish.

What happens at a political party's national convention?

Each major party holds a national convention after the primaries and caucuses. Republicans will choose their presidential candidate there, based on the results of the primaries and caucuses. They will also choose a vice presidential candidate. The Republican National Convention was held in August in Tampa, Florida. A week later, the Democratic National Convention was held in Charlotte, North Carolina.

What happens after the conventions?

The two major candidates launch their campaigns. Both sides make speeches, run ads, and take part in televised debates. The general election this year will be held on November 6.