

# Material 5: The Election of the U.S. President

## M1 Historical Background

Article II, Sections 1 and 2 of the U.S. Constitution set the following regulations for the election of the U.S. president:

*„Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress [...]. The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons [...]. The Person having the greatest Number of Votes shall be the President, if such Number be a Majority of the whole Number of Electors appointed“.*

The question how the executive representative of the newly founded "United States of America" was to be designated in the future was one of the main items discussed at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia. An election by Congress or by the governors of the individual states as well as the direct vote by the American people was at issue among the 55 delegates. In the end, there was a compromise solution: each individual state was to determine a specific number of electors who, as a committee, elected the president and the vice president for a four-year term.

## M2 The eight stages to the U.S. presidency

### ★ Stage 1: Requirements



minimum age: 35 years  
residence: for 14 years in the USA  
U.S.-citizen: by birth

### ★ Stage 8: The Swearing-in of the President



On January 20, at noon, the new president takes his oath on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington and begins his 4-year term.

### ★ Stage 2: The Primary Race



Within the parties, several candidates stand for the position of the presidential nominee. They compete for the approval of the party members.



### ★ Stage 7: The Vote in the Electoral College



In December after the election, the electors of the Electoral College give their votes according to the election results in their home states. But there is no duty to do so.

### ★ Stage 3: The Parties' Primaries



In each state, the party members vote for the presidential nominee in primaries or caucuses.



### ★ Stage 6: The Presidential Election



On Election Day voters decide for a president and a vice president. The vote is transferred to the electors that each state sends out to the "Electoral College".

### ★ Stage 4: The National Conventions



The parties officially crown the primary winners as their presidential nominees.



### ★ Stage 5: The Presidential Race



Both candidates compete for the approval of the population in the individual states.

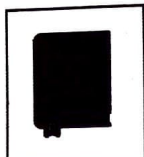




### M3 The long road to the White House

For a candidate for the office of the U.S. president, the hot phase of the campaign starts just over a year before Election Day. The official announcement of their candidacy fires the starting gun for a long, hard road into the highest office of the United States of America.

#### Stage 1: Requirements for candidates



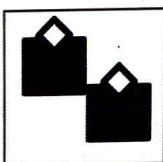
Those who want to enter the race for the White House first have to fulfil the constitutional requirements for the office of the U.S. president. They include a minimum age of 35 years, evidence of the permanent residence in the USA for the past 14 years, as well as U.S. citizenship by birth. In terms of the 22nd amendment of the U.S. Constitution, he or she who has already completed an entire legislature as president cannot stand for re-election.

#### Stage 2: The Primary race

The USA is shaped by a two-party system, with the Republican Party on one side, and the Democratic Party on the other side. Since 1853, the U.S. president has continuously come from one of these political camps. Generally, a number of contenders in both parties are running for the presidency. A long-drawn-out primary race within the parties that each candidate, with one exception, has to face, decides who is actually nominated in the end: if a sitting president has served only one term and is striving for a second term, he is, as a rule, automatically his party's candidate.



#### Stage 3: The parties' primaries



Both, Democrats and Republicans, determine their presidential nominee in primary elections that take place between January and June in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and in some U.S. external territories. Each party holds its own primary election.

There is a general distinction between two forms how a state performs its primary election: either as a caucus or as a primary. A caucus is a meeting at the local level where citizens of a town or a district gather and have extensive debates on a party's candidates. At the end of the discussion, there is the recommendation of one of the candidates. The results of all local caucuses in a state are then summarized and represent its primary election result. The primary, by contrast, is a classical polling in which the citizens can vote on a candidate in secret. There are also differences as for the groups of people entitled to vote in a primary. In the so-called "closed primaries", only those citizens who have registered for a party are allowed to vote. In the so-called "open primaries", however, all citizens are allowed to vote – even if they are not sympathetic to the respective party. In the 2016 presidential election, the Democratic Party held caucuses in fourteen states, seven of which were open or half-open. The Republican Party held twelve primaries in the form of caucuses, ten of which were closed.

For the primaries, both main parties assign a specific number of delegates to each state. The number is determined by the state's population. In 2016, California sent 548 delegates in the Democratic primaries and 172 in the Republican primaries. By comparison, Wisconsin sent 96 delegates for the Democrats and 42 for the Republicans. A state's delegates are allocated to the respective candidates in accordance with the primary results. The Democrats do this on a percentage basis in accordance with the share of the vote. The Republicans, however, adopt the "winner takes all" principle in some states, e.g. Florida and Ohio, meaning the candidate who wins the primary gets all the state's delegate votes. In the end, the point for all candidates in the primary phase is to collect as many delegates as possible.



#### Stage 4: The National Conventions



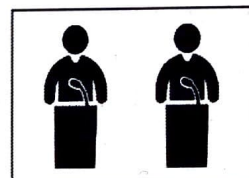
The National Conventions of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party usually take place in the late summer of an election year when the primary phase has finished. For the occasion, those delegates of a party whose votes the candidates had to ensure during the primaries, get together from all states. Their main task is to elect the candidate who is to enter the race for the White House for their party.

The National Conventions mainly take on a symbolic character and are rather a big show event than a party conference. At that time, it is already clear who has made the running. He or she who received more than 50% of delegate votes in the primaries is "crowned" the party's presidential nominee by the National Convention. Unexpected surprises are rare since the delegates – with the exception of some "superdelegates" – are tied to the voters' decision in their respective states. By then, hopeless candidates with few votes have already withdrawn their candidacy and given their delegates their endorsement for another candidate.

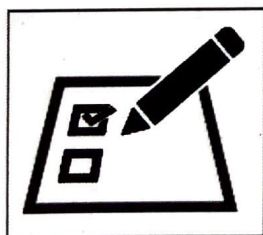
Therefore, the National Conventions are more of a "Coronation Mass" where the parties demonstratively gather behind their presidential nominee and leave the internal rivalries of the primary phase behind.

#### Stage 5: The presidential campaign

For both parties' candidates, the main battle for the presidency starts immediately after the National Conventions. Until Election Day at the beginning of November, they are touring the country again and compete for the citizens' votes. They are focussing on the heavily populated states, like California, Texas or Florida. The so-called "swing states", like Ohio or Iowa, where Democrats and Republicans traditionally run a very close race, are very important, too. Here, one campaign appearance follows the other. Less populous states or the parties' traditional strongholds, however, are only seldom visited by the presidential nominees, or even not at all.



#### Stage 6: The presidential election



In the USA, presidential elections traditionally take place on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Similar to the primaries, they are held in an indirect voting system. Each of the fifty U.S. states is attributed a fixed number of presidential electors. This number corresponds with the state's number of delegates in Congress. California is the U.S. state that has the largest number of electors (55). Small U.S. states like Vermont or Wyoming, however, only get three votes. Altogether, 538 delegate votes are assigned on Election Day.

On Election Day, citizens place a tick next to the name of a presidential and a vice presidential candidate on their ballot paper. But indeed, their voting decides about the political camp to which the electoral votes of their home state goes. If, for example, the Democratic candidate can achieve a better result in California than his Republican opponent, he manages to secure all the 55 electoral votes there. What matters here: in all U.S. states, with the exception of Maine and Nebraska, there is the "winner takes all" principle, meaning the candidate who in the end has received at least one vote more than his opponent gets all the state's electoral votes.

The candidate who receives 270 or more electoral votes on Election Day is the winner of the presidential election. Until he will be sworn in on the steps of Capitol Hill in January of the following year, he is called the "president-elect".



### Stage 7: The vote in the Electoral College



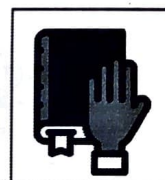
After the presidential election it is clear to which political camp the electoral votes in each state went. Until the middle of December, the party organizations of the individual states can present a list with the persons who shall act as electors. They are mostly rightful party officials, whose loyalty remains undoubted.

All 538 electors together form the so-called Electoral College. On the Monday after the second Wednesday in December, the Electoral College comes together for the actual election of the U.S. president. For this purpose, the Electoral College does not come together as a whole, but the electors arrive in the capitals of their home states and each casts their vote for the president and the vice president. Their ballots are sealed and sent to the Senate in Washington where they are counted on January 3rd.

In 26 out of 50 states, the electors are bound by law to vote in accordance with the will of the electorate. In 24 states, they are theoretically legally free to also vote against the will of the electorate – but that very seldom does occur in practice. Electors who vote against the will of the electorate are called “faithless electors”. Never in the history of the United States has a candidate been elected president by a “faithless elector”.

### Stage 8: The swearing-in ceremony (inauguration) of the new U.S. president

On January 20th after the presidential election, the swearing-in ceremony of the new U.S. president - which is also called “inauguration” - takes place at the steps of Capitol Hill in Washington. The new incumbent usually starts the day with a church service in the morning. After that, the sitting president welcomes his successor in the White House for a short talk and they traditionally share breakfast before they set out for the U.S. Capitol together. There, the new vice president is the first to take his oath of office in front of the assembled congressmen and –women and hundreds of thousands of spectators. At 12 o'clock local time, the new president takes the oath with the following words: „I, [name of the president], do solemnly swear I, that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” The oath is mostly confirmed by the religious addition “So help me God!”. The oath-taking is followed by a short inaugural address which the new president uses to announce the key note of his presidency. After that, there is the leave-taking of the former president and a banquet on Capitol Hill. The inauguration is completed by a huge parade leading the new U.S. president from Capitol Hill through Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House where he will reside for at least the following four years.



#### Links:

- **Presidential Election Process**  
Link: <https://www.usa.gov/election>  
Source: Official web portal of the United States federal government (USA.gov).
- **How the U.S. president is elected**  
Link: <http://www.cbc.ca/news2/interactives/us-election-explained/>  
Source: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)
- **United States presidential election**  
Link: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_presidential\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election)  
Source: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
- **Everything you need to know about how the presidential primary works**  
Link: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/12/everything-you-need-to-know-about-how-the-presidential-primary-works/?utm\\_term=.e88619bbd690](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/12/everything-you-need-to-know-about-how-the-presidential-primary-works/?utm_term=.e88619bbd690)  
Source: The Washington Post