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Electing the US President[1]

The campaign for the US Presidency is well under way. The winner will be an American-born citizen, aged at least 35 years. The popular vote is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November—2 November in 2004.

A Presidential term is four years.

The Electoral College

Despite this popular vote, the result is decided by the Electoral College, not directly by the people. The electoral process is thus a major example of an *indirect* election.

Each state is given a number of Electoral College votes equal to its number of Senators (2) and Representatives (which in turn depends on population). Thus California has 55 Electoral College votes, while Vermont has 3. The District of Columbia (DC) also has 3.

With a Congress of 535 (100 of whom are Senators), plus the 3 DC votes, the Electoral College has numbered 538 since 1961; a majority of votes (270) is needed to gain election.

Every ten years a national census is held, a consequence of which is the reapportioning of House of Representatives numbers. This process flows on to affect the state numbers in the Electoral College and means that population shifts will slowly alter the electoral significance of particular states or regions. As the number of Electoral College votes is constant, an increase in one state's votes must necessarily cause a drop in another's—though each is guaranteed a minimum of 3 votes. Since 1976 California's vote has grown from 45 to 55, and New York's has dropped from 41 to 31.

Whichever candidate wins the most popular votes in a state wins all the Electoral College vote for that state—it has been called a 'winner-take-all' system.[2] For example, in 2000 Al Gore (Democrat–D), led George W. Bush (Republican–R) by just 0.2 per cent of the 2.59 million votes cast in Wisconsin, but won all of the state's 11 Electoral College votes.

In four elections (J. Q. Adams 1824, Hayes 1876, Harrison 1888, Bush 2000) the Electoral College has chosen a President who trailed his major opponent in the popular vote.

If no candidate gains 270 votes, the election is decided by the House of Representatives, with all representatives of a state voting as a unit, and each state having 1 vote. This occurred after the 1800 (Jefferson) and 1824 elections.

There have been many critics of this system, described by the American Bar Association as 'archaic, undemocratic, complex, ambiguous, indirect, and dangerous'.[3] Efforts to alter the system, most recently by Presidents Nixon (R) and Carter (D), have never succeeded.

An Electoral Marathon

The marathon that is the US Presidential election lasts for approximately two years. There are various clearly identified stages in the process: pre-convention, convention and campaign.

Primaries and Caucuses

The Democrat and Republican parties formally choose their Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates at national conventions (see below). Every state has a certain number of delegates to each convention. In 2004 these delegates will be chosen in state-run caucuses and primary elections held between January and June.

A state caucus is a multi-stage, internal party process that takes many weeks to conduct, but which encourages grassroots party participation. The number of delegates chosen by this method is declining as more states switch to primaries.

Primaries are public ballots of registered party supporters to determine who will be the party's candidate. They have become the preferred method of delegate selection in many states. In 2004 there will be primaries in 38 states, six fewer than in 2000. New Hampshire's primary is traditionally the first to be held—27 January in 2004.

'Frontloading'

Primaries and caucuses were once spread out across the first half of an election year. Their scheduling has altered greatly in recent years as states have attempted to make their primaries politically more significant. Many primaries and caucuses are now squeezed into a very few days early in the calendar, a process popularly referred to as 'frontloading'.

The frontloading push has continued with 16 states holding Democrat primaries or caucuses in February, including five primaries and two caucuses on 3 February alone. It is quite likely that the February primaries will determine the outcome of the nominating contests for the Democrats, even earlier than in 2000, when the Republican nomination was known by early March, four months before the party's convention.

The Conventions

The national conventions were once important decision-making bodies, for they actually determined the nominees. The 1976 Republican nomination was uncertain until President Ford won narrowly from Ronald Reagan at the convention.

Reform of delegate selection rules since 1972 has seen a rapid change in the conventions' function. Their primary role has shifted from candidate selection to public relations. Television has been significant in making them not much more than 'tightly scripted made-for-TV spectacles'.[4]

The presentation of attractive Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates, the drafting of a vote-winning platform and the energising of party activists for the campaign proper are now the main functions of the conventions. The modern party convention, has been described as 'the ultimate campaign rally'.[5]

The 2004 Democratic National Convention, will be held in Boston, 26–7 July.

The 2004 Republican National Convention, will be held in New York, 30 August–2 September.

The Campaign

After the conventions, the campaign usually enters a summer lull until Labor Day, the first Monday in September. Traditionally, this is when the campaign enters full gear for the hectic period up to the day of voting.

Although the focus is on the Democrat and Republican candidates, there is always a plethora of other candidates. In 2000 there were 16 minor party and independent candidates. Occasionally, as with George Wallace (1968), Ross Perot (1992, 1996) or Ralph Nader (2000) a third party candidate can be a factor, but this is unusual.

The need to win Electoral College votes means that candidates concentrate very much on the major cities and largest states, particularly if their voting intentions are unclear. In fact, a candidate could win office by winning the popular vote in just the eleven largest states.

No candidate today would pledge to visit each of the fifty states as Richard Nixon (R) did in 1960. Apart from the programming difficulty, it would be seen as an inefficient use of time. Rather more typical would be Ronald Reagan's (R) relative neglect of the South, which was considered solid for him in 1984, so as to focus his efforts upon the North-East region.

Since the days of the Kennedy (D) versus Nixon (R) contest in 1960, a major aspect of the campaign period has come to be the televised debate, an opportunity to engage in person-to-person argument in front of a national audience.

In modern elections, much of the candidates' time is taken up with poll-driven activity. The parties use polls to help them make three major decisions: where to compete, the issues to emphasise and which candidate strengths to stress.

Television has also produced a greater emphasis upon negative campaigning. The successful attacks in 1988 by George Bush (R) upon the 'liberal' values of Michael Dukakis (D), is perhaps the best-known example of recent times.

The Count

The Electoral College votes are registered on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December (13 December 2004). The ballots are opened and counted by the Congress on 6 January (or the next day if this falls on a Sunday).

The Inauguration

The winner of the election is inaugurated as President on 20 January following the election.

Endnotes

1. This Research Note is an update of a Research Note, Scott Bennett, 'Electing the US President', Department of the Parliamentary Library, *Research Note no. 13*, 1999–2000.
2. Technically, Maine and Nebraska are exceptions, http://www.fec.gov.
3. G. Edwards, M. Wattenberg and R. Lineberry, *Government in America*, New York, 7th ed. 1996, p. 258.
4. 'Conventions', Democracy in Action, http://www.gwu.edu/~action/chrnconv.html, p. 2.
5. *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, Washington, 3rd ed 1994, p. 13.

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