ELECTIONS

THE TERMS

- nominations
- general elections
- closed primary
- open primary
- blanket primary
- plurality
- runoff primary
- super-delegates
- federal matching funds
- Super Tuesday
- front-loading
- Federal Election Commission
- brokered conventions
- electoral college
- winner-take-all system
- mandate

The federal government holds elections every two years. Each election gives voters the chance to select a new representative in the House of Representatives. Every other election allows them to vote for president. Each of a state's two seats in the Senate is contested every six years; as a result, state voters select a senator in two out of every three federal elections.

To cut expenses and to encourage voter turnout, states hold their elections at the same time as federal elections. Thus, voters choose not only federal officials at election time, but also state legislators, judges, the governor, and local officials. They may also be asked to vote on referenda and state bond issues.

Thus, many officeholders are chosen and many issues decided during each election. When the AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam asks about elections, however, it nearly always focuses on the presidential election. This chapter will do the same.

There is one exception to this rule. The AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam always asks at least one question about the **incumbent** advantage. Be sure you know the following two facts, as they will almost certainly be tested on the AP exam: 1) representatives who run for reelection win approximately 90 percent of the time; and 2) while incumbent senators have a tremendous electoral advantage, House incumbents have an even greater advantage. Senators must run statewide, and they almost always face a serious challenger. On the other hand, House members run in their home districts, where constituents are often overwhelmingly of one party due to **gerrymandering** (partisan redrawing of congressional district borders). In such races, victory in the primary election virtually guarantees victory in the general election. In fact, each year a number of House incumbents run for reelection unopposed.

THE ELECTION CYCLE

Elections consist of two phases: **nominations**, during which the parties choose their candidates for the general elections, and **general elections**, during which voters decide who will hold elective office.

The majority of states (39) use primary elections to select presidential nominees. All states use some form of primary election to select legislative and state nominees. These elections are usually held between early February and late spring of an election year, with the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary enjoying the coveted "first-in-the-nation" position. Each state sets its own rules for these elections, and there is considerable variation in primary procedures from state to state. There are several types of primaries.

- **Closed primary.** This is the most common type. In a closed primary, voting is restricted to registered members of a political party. Voters may vote only for candidates running for the nomination of their declared party. Democrats choose among the candidates for the Democratic nomination, while Republicans choose among Republican hopefuls.
- **Open primary.** In open primaries, voters may vote only in one party's primary, but they may vote in whichever party primary they choose. Voters select the party primary in which they wish to participate in the privacy of the voting booth. Critics argue that open primaries allow voters to sabotage their opponents' primaries by crossing party lines to vote for the candidate *least* likely to win the general election. This is likely to happen only when there are no close contests in one party, however.
- **Blanket primary.** Blanket primaries use the same procedure as the general elections. In blanket primaries, voters may vote for one candidate per office of either party. Only Alaska and Washington state use this primary system.

In primary voting for legislators and state officials, the candidate who receives a **plurality** (greatest number of votes, but not more than half the total votes cast) or majority (more than half) in each primary is declared the winner. Some states require the winner to receive a minimum percentage of the vote, however. If no candidate receives the required share of votes, a **runoff primary** is held between the top two. Runoffs occur most often when many challengers vie for an open office, especially when none of them are well known.

In primary elections for the presidency, voters also choose delegates pledged to a particular presidential candidate. Winning delegates attend their party's national convention. Some states select presidential convention delegates at **state caucuses and conventions.** This process begins with local meetings of party members, who select representatives to send to statewide party meetings. Compared with primaries, the state caucus and convention process usually attracts fewer participants. Those who participate tend to be more politically active and better informed than typical voters.

The Democratic Party uses a third method to choose some delegates to its national convention. It grants automatic delegate status to many elected party leaders, including congresspersons and important state leaders. These **super-delegates** generally support the front-runner. Critics complain that the super-delegates dilute the importance of the primary elections by making it easier for the party elite to control the nominating process. The Republican Party does not have super-delegates. To promote diversity within the delegate pool, the **McGovern-Fraser Commission** was created in 1968. It recommended that delegates be represented by the proportion of their population in each state.

General elections for federal office are held on the first Tuesday of November. Elections in which the president is being chosen are called **presidential elections.** Those that occur between presidential elections are called **midterm elections.**

First Steps Toward Nomination

Nearly all elected officials first receive the endorsement, or nomination, of one of the two major parties. Nominees usually have extensive backgrounds in government. Some presidential candidates are current or former members of the Senate. Many have served as governors. Gubernatorial experience allows candidates to claim executive abilities, because governors serve many of the same government functions in their states as the president does in the federal government. Governors also have the advantage of being able to run as Washington outsiders, as opposed to Senators, who usually have extensive federal experience (and whose voting records are often used against them). At a time when public distrust of Washington is high, outsider status can be a significant benefit. **Bill Clinton** and **George W. Bush** successfully exploited this factor in their presidential campaigns. And, although he was a Senator, Barack Obama found success by campaigning as an outsider in 2008, as well.

On occasion, the major parties will pursue a candidate with little or no government experience. Such candidates are invariably popular and well-respected figures, often from the military. **Dwight Eisenhower** was such a candidate.

A presidential run is an all-consuming endeavor that must begin up to two years before the first primary. As a result, most candidates devote themselves to the effort full-time. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both left their governorships before running for the presidency; Bob Dole retired from the Senate in 1996 to commit himself more fully to his campaign. Others have remained in office and run successful campaigns. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are two candidates who remained governors while successfully seeking their party's nomination. Presidents running for reelection and vice presidents seeking the presidency benefit from the prestige of their offices.

Those considering a run for the presidency must first seek support among the party organizations. They must especially seek the aid of influential donors to the party because elections are extremely expensive. Candidates spend much of the early stages of the nomination process meeting with potential donors, establishing PACs to raise funds (more about fund-raising below), and campaigning for the endorsements of important political groups and leaders. This entire process is often referred to as testing the waters. Many campaigns fail at this stage, long before the public is ever aware of them, due to lack of interest among the political elite.

In the year before the first primaries, potential candidates attempt to increase their public profile. They schedule public appearances and attempt to attract media coverage by taking stands on current issues and discussing the goals of their projected presidencies. Candidates are particularly vulnerable to the media during this period. Since the public knows little about most potential candidates, negative reports or media spin can quickly scuttle a campaign (see Howard Dean in 2004). As primary season begins, candidates try to raise as much money as possible, and to garner as many votes in the primaries as possible, in an effort to win the nomination. Candidates who can't raise their own money and don't get enough votes are quickly forced out of the race. The candidates also begin to assemble campaign personnel—advisors, political consultants, public relations experts, speechwriters, fund-raisers, lawyers, and office administrators—who will help manage the campaign.

Recently, very wealthy candidates have attempted to run for the presidency without needing, or using, federal matching funds. Ross Perot in 1992 and Steve Forbes in 1996 used their own money to campaign, but both campaigns failed. Ross Perot's 1992 campaign spent more money than the Democrat and Republican candidates combined.

Financing Campaigns

A successful presidential campaign requires much more than an appealing candidate. It needs a huge supporting staff, jets and buses, and the resources to hire consultants, pollsters, and advertising agencies. It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the most important skills a candidate can possess is the ability to raise money.

Presidential candidates who meet certain prerequisites may receive federal funding. Primary candidates who receive more than 10 percent of the vote in an election may apply for **federal matching funds.** These funds essentially double all campaign contributions of $250 and less by matching them. To receive matching funds, candidates must agree to obey federal spending limits: In 2008, the limit was $42.05 million for the primary elections and $84.1 for the general election. Any candidate who receives less than 10 percent of the vote in two consecutive primaries loses his eligibility for matching funds until he wins more than 10 percent of the vote in another primary.

The federal government funds the general election campaigns of the two major presidential candidates, provided those candidates agree not to accept and spend other donations (an exception is made for up to $50,000 of the candidate's own money). 2004 was the first election in which both major party nominees declined public matching funds during the primaries. Independents do not receive federal funding for their campaigns. (In 2008, John McCain accepted matching funds. Barack Obama did not.)

Despite attempts at campaign finance reform, the trend toward high levels of election spending has continued through the 1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the 2004 election, George W. Bush raised a whopping $272.5 million and John Kerry raised $250.3 million, making it the most expensive presidential race in history. Both candidates refused matching funds to avoid all spending limits. Future candidates may raise even more now that corporations and unions can donate directly and without limit.

There is currently no public financing of congressional campaigns, and there are no spending limits for congressional candidates. There are, however, limits on the amounts that individuals and political committees may donate to candidates. These limits, established by the **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA)** and enforced by the **Federal Election Commission,** are as follows:

	To a Candidate	To a National Party	To a Political Committee	Total per 2 Calendar Years
Individual may give	$2,300	$28,500	$5,000	$108,200
PAC may give	$5,000	$15,000	$5,000	no limit
Non-PAC committee may give[1]	$2,300	$28,500	$5,000	$108,200

Many Americans believe that the current campaign finance system has a corrupting effect on government. Efforts to change the system, however, run into several obstacles. The Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) that mandatory spending limits on campaigns violate candidates' First Amendment rights to free expression. Furthermore, the system currently benefits incumbents, in that the incumbent's job description is basically the stuff of reelections: meetings, events, talking to voters, photo-ops, and so on. Accordingly, legislators are reluctant to make changes because changes would make their reelection more difficult. The permissible donations listed in the above table all will change if campaign finance reform is enacted.

[1] Political committees that do not meet legal requirements of a PAC (e.g., donations from at least 50 contributors).

Primary Season

By January 1 of election year, candidates are campaigning widely among the public. From this point on, candidates participate in debates, campaign from state to state delivering their "stump speeches" (so called because campaigning is often referred to as "stumping"), and choreograph media events—in an effort to draw positive media coverage of their campaigns.

The earliest primaries (New Hampshire's is a prime example) provide a great boost to the campaigns of whoever wins, increasing the candidate's media exposure and making all-important fund-raising chores easier. Major financial contributors usually desert the campaigns of the losers in early primaries. Furthermore, candidates who receive less than 10 percent of the vote in two successive primaries lose their eligibility for crucial federal matching funds. As a result, those who fare poorly in early primaries usually have to drop out of the race long before the majority of delegates have been selected.

Because early primaries have grown increasingly important in recent years, many states have pushed forward the date of their primary elections. Many southern states even hold their primaries all on the same day in early March (called **Super Tuesday**). Large states such as New York and California have moved forward their primaries in hopes of having a greater influence on which candidates win the nominations. Political analysts refer to this strategy as **front-loading**, and the result has been to place increased pressure on candidates to succeed early. Critics argue that it unnecessarily forces voters to choose early in the election process, before they have gotten a chance to know the candidates well.

Primary elections and state caucuses continue into late spring. In most recent elections, however, the party nominee has been decided long before the last elections. John McCain's nomination in 2008 is an example of that very phenomenon.

National Conventions

After the primary season has ended, both parties hold national conventions to confirm their nominee. When no candidate has received the pledge of a majority of convention delegates, conventions decide who the nominee will be; such conventions are called **brokered conventions**. The parties have designed their primary systems to prevent brokered conventions, which can divide the party and cost it the election.

One of the main purposes of a national convention, in fact, is to **unify the party.** Primary elections can damage each party, as candidates attack each other and thereby expose rifts within the party membership. Another main purpose of conventions is to make a show of party unity for political gain. Both parties' conventions are nationally televised and are widely covered by the news media. Not surprisingly, most of what occurs on the convention stage is choreographed to appeal to the party faithful and undecided voters watching at home.

That does not mean that conventions are placid affairs, however. Conventions are the site of many political negotiations, as different factions of the party attempt to win concessions in return for their full support during the general election. There are often intense battles over the party platform, a statement of purpose and party goals, which, ironically, has little concrete significance. The conventions also offer some political drama, as nominees sometimes wait until the convention to announce their choice of running mates.

The greatest impact conventions can have on general election results is negative. In 1968, for example, rioting outside the Democratic convention in Chicago created a bad impression among voters, especially when contrasted with the unified display at the Republican convention in Miami weeks later. In 1992, ultraconservatives were able to control key elements of the Republican convention. The

image the convention created was one of an angry and activist party, which frightened voters and hurt President Bush's reelection campaign. Under normal circumstances, however, conventions usually help their candidates considerably. Polls taken immediately after conventions show the candidates' approval ratings up significantly. This rise in public approval is called a **post-convention bump**.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that national conventions have been altered dramatically in the last century. Until about mid-century, conventions and convention delegates actually selected and nominated the candidate. With the adoption of primary elections, conventions have been transformed into mere coronations with the nominees generally being determined before the convention begins (as with Obama and McCain in 2008).

The General Election and the Electoral College

The remaining candidates continue to campaign for the general election in much the same way as they campaigned during the primaries: holding rallies, participating in debates, running campaign advertisements, and pursuing positive media coverage. There are several key differences between the primaries and the general election. First, during the primaries, candidates run against members of their own party. Because primary candidates are often in general agreement about big-picture issues, their campaigns focus instead on the subtler differences between them. During the general elections, candidates often emphasize the general policy and philosophical differences between the two parties. Put simply, a candidate courts his or her political base during the primary season and then moves toward the center in the general election to win undecided votes in hopes of securing the majority.

Second, candidates planning their campaign strategies must consider the nature of the **electoral college**. This institution was created by the framers of the Constitution as a means of insulating the government from the whims of a less educated public. Critics feel the electoral college system is antiquated, but no one has yet successfully proposed an amendment to change it. Presidential elections therefore continue to be determined not by the final popular vote but rather by this institution. Each state is given a number of electors equal to the sum of its federal legislators (senators plus representatives). The winner of the presidential election in each state wins all of that state's electors[2] (which is why it is often referred to as a **winner-take-all system**).

The electoral college system places greater emphasis on election results in large states. Victory by a single vote in California wins a candidate all of that state's 54 electoral votes; a similar margin of victory in Vermont yields only three electoral votes. Despite the number of votes at stake in the large states, candidates will often devote the bulk of their time to "swing" states—areas in which polling indicates a close race. This is the reason that during the 2008 presidential election, states like Ohio, Michigan, and New Hampshire were inundated with political ads while large states whose voters generally go with one party, such as New York, California, and Texas, were relatively quiet. Finally, candidates consider each other's electoral strategies in planning their campaigns. In 1968, the Democratic Party relied on the support of its Southern base. Republican Richard Nixon realized that this support was weakening and campaigned aggressively in the region. Nixon's "Southern strategy" worked in enough Southern states to swing the election to the Republicans.

[2] The two exceptions are Maine and Nebraska, which give two electoral votes to the candidate who wins a plurality of the statewide vote, and one vote to the winner of each of the state's congressional districts. In 1996, Maine had four electoral votes, Nebraska had five.

progressive federal government. Several failures—on efforts to integrate homosexuals in the military and to establish nationalized health care—demonstrated that voter mandates are not always so clear. The voters' message has become more difficult to discern as **split-ticket voting**—voting for a presidential candidate of one party and legislators of the other—has grown more common.

SUMMARY

- Elections consist of two phases: nominations and the general election. Most nominations are made through party primaries. These can be open, closed, or "blanket."
- Candidates need the backing of the major parties along with a compelling back story before they can hope to make a strong campaign for national office.
- Campaign finance was restricted by a complicated web of regulations defined by the election laws of the 1970s along with the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, but new laws were passed in 2010.
- Before the general elections, the candidates need to win their party primaries, which often involves energizing the base. Later, candidates may have to repudiate some of the more radical statements they made to court primary voters in order to win more moderate voters in the general election.
- Nominating Conventions used to be where the party nominees were selected, but now they are symbolic coronations of the candidate who has already been selected though the primary process. Still, delegates assemble, cheer, and argue over the drafting of the party platform.
- Presidential candidates must win each state's electors, which is done by getting a plurality of all the voters in that state. This method causes candidates to spend most all their time in "swing" or "battleground" states and can also result in the winner of the popular vote losing the election (as was the case with Al Gore in the election of 2000).
- After all the voting is done, pollsters, the parties, and the media try their best to determine why the people voted the way they did. Exit polls and surveys are the tools used to decipher these factors.