



ZOOM IN ON THE USA

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WHO WILL BE AMERICA'S 44TH PRESIDENT?



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The 2008 elections are almost here. Voting for the next president of the United States will be held across the U.S. on Tuesday, November 4, 2008. This will be a historic election for many reasons. Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic Party nominee for president, is the first African-American to be nominated by a major political party. He is running against Senator John McCain, the nominee of the Republican Party, who at 72 is the oldest candidate for president in American history. Each candidate has now chosen a running mate. Barack Obama has chosen Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, and John McCain has chosen Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. If John McCain wins the election, Sarah Palin will be the first female vice-president of the United States.

Both John McCain and Barack Obama have compelling personal histories, which is why there is so much interest around the world in this election. McCain was a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War.



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His plane was shot down and he spent five years in a North Vietnamese prison camp, where he was tortured. He still suffers physically from this ordeal and is praised for his heroism by both Democrats and Republicans. Barack Obama was born in the state of Hawaii. His father was a student from Kenya and his mother was from Kansas. Raised by his mother, Obama grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia before studying at Columbia University and then Harvard Law School.

The U.S. election system is very different from the parliamentary systems that predominate in Europe. For example, did you know that the presidential campaigns started in February of 2007? Or how about the fact that a simple majority win doesn't guarantee a candidate will win the presidency? Or that the presidential campaigns will likely spend \$1 billion by November 4? For more on these and other topics, please enjoy this special election issue of *Zoom in on the USA*.



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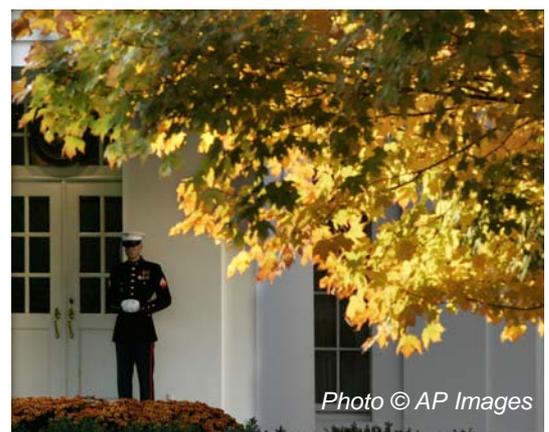


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SOME FACTS & RULES ABOUT THE U.S. ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Electoral College

The Electoral College was established in Article II of the U.S. Constitution. It is a group of representatives (electors) who represent U.S. citizens in electing the president. When U.S. citizens vote in presidential elections every four years on November 4, they are actually choosing the candidate for whom the electors in their state are supposed to vote for later. The number of electors in each state corresponds to the number of U.S. congressmen and senators from that state. The more populous the state, the more representatives in the U.S. Congress that state has. However, the number of senators is always two for each state. The least populous states such as Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming each have three electors. The District of Columbia, which does not have the status of a state, has also been given the right to have three electors. The state with the biggest population in the U.S., California, has no less than 55 electors. The next in line is Texas with 34 representatives. All in all, there are 538 electoral votes to be cast for the president. In order to win a presidential candidate must receive the majority of electoral votes, i.e. 270.

States Are “Winner-Take-All”

Although the citizens do not vote directly for the president and vice-president, their names appear on the ballot forms together with the name of the party that nominates them. And so in the 2008 elections the Republican and Democratic candidates: McCain - Palin and Obama - Biden, respectively, will appear on the election ballots in all states. Additionally, there can be candidates from other parties and independent candidates for president and vice-president. Once Americans have voted on November 4, the electors (who are all members of the winning candidate's party) are supposed to, at least theoretically, vote for the candidate who won in that state. There is no legal obligation to do so and there are no consequences for an elector who does not vote for the winning candidate. However, electors are usually strong supporters of their political party and they do vote for their party's candidate. This "winner take all" allocation of electors is followed in 48 states and the District of Columbia but not in the states of Maine and Nebraska, where the allocation of votes reflects more the actual division of votes.



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Why Supporters of the Electoral College Think It is a Good System

- Candidates must build a popular base that is geographically broader and more diverse in voter interests. For example, the current system prevents a candidate from winning the presidency by simply winning in heavily populated urban areas.
- It maintains the idea that the United States is a federal coalition of component states. The collective opinion of a small state has greater influence than the numerically-equivalent portion of a very populous state.
- Minority groups can provide the critical vote in allocating a state's electors, thereby causing candidates to pay greater attention to their issues.
- It perpetuates the two-party system, which is more stable than the multi-party systems found in other countries.
- It isolates the impact of potential election fraud or other problems to the state where it occurs.
- It neutralizes poor turnout caused by weather or other such events in a state.

About the Ballot

On November 4, Americans vote not only for national offices, i.e. representatives who will then choose the president but for senators and congressmen as well as representatives for state offices, such as state senators, representatives for district attorneys, members of state boards of education and for county offices i.e. county clerks, county treasurer, registrar of deeds, sheriffs, and for township offices such as trustee, treasurer, etc. There can also be referendum questions on the ballot if a state wants to decide an important issue by asking the opinion of its citizens.

(from instructions on a Kansas ballot form:)

“To vote for presidential electors for candidates for president and vice-president, darken the oval at the left of the names of the candidates. To vote for presidential electors to be selected by candidates for president and vice-president whose names are not printed on the ballot, write the person's name in the appropriate blank spaces and darken the oval at the left of the names of the candidates.”



MORE FACTS & RULES ABOUT U.S. ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Show me the money! How do American politicians pay for their campaigns?

American political parties and candidates, unlike in most of Europe, get money for their campaigns from donations and not from the government. These donations come from wealthy people, from large companies, and, lately, from ordinary people via the Internet. In this election, both John McCain and Barack Obama have used the Internet to raise money. Through June, according to the *New York Times*, Obama raised \$135 million from donors giving \$200 or less, mostly through the Internet. Obama had over 50,000 Internet donations. Obama's main competitor in the Democratic Party, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, raised \$65 million over the Internet. Even with Internet fundraising increasing, companies and wealthy donors are the biggest sources of money. Individual donors may donate a maximum of \$2,300 to a candidate during the general election campaign.

The influence that money has on politics in the U.S. is controversial. Many Americans think that donating to a politician can cause corruption, with the politician returning the favor by supporting laws that help their donors. Other Americans feel that it is better to have private donors support politicians than to have the government pay for campaigns from taxes. A website, www.opensecrets.org, fights against corruption by posting information about donations to candidates and to groups which buy advertisements on certain issues, such as tax policy or health care. The group hopes that publicity will reduce corruption.

Americans spend a lot of money on political campaigns - in 2004, all election activity of candidates and national conventions cost more than \$1 billion, and this year's elections will cost even more. However, almost everything is more expensive in America - Americans spent \$5 billion on the Halloween holiday in 2007. So while elections are expensive, they are also important, and in general money well spent.

Electoral Map & Swing States

The electoral map of the United States is all red and blue and ... purple. Red represents the states that traditionally vote for the Republican candidate, blue is for states that vote for Democrats, while purple denotes a

state that does not clearly support either party and is thus a "battleground" for both. Candidates spend a great deal of time and money advertising in "purple" states because they may determine the outcome of the elections. On the list of the swing states in 2008 are Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Virginia & Wisconsin.

Voting Machines

Throughout American history, voting methods have changed to meet new demands and challenges. Early elections were conducted by voice, raising a hand or by placing a simple paper ballot in a box. Mechanical ballot counting machines were introduced in the late 1800s and early 1900s as the U.S. voting population rapidly grew through immigration and women gaining the right to vote. In the 1970s new computerized voting machines were introduced that read punch card ballots to determine a voter's choice. These machines allowed election results to be quickly and efficiently determined shortly after polling stations closed.

In the 2000 U.S. Presidential Elections, Texas Governor and Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush won the state of Florida and its 25 electoral votes (see electoral college article), and thereby the presidency, by about 500 votes from nearly 6 million cast. This razor-thin margin of victory in Florida, just 0.009%, required a recount of the ballots. Vice-President and Democratic presidential candidate Albert Gore argued that some ballots confused voters, resulting in some voters voting for the wrong candidate, while other ballots were not properly read by the voting machines. After five weeks of legal dispute, including a ruling by the US Supreme Court, Bush was declared president.

The 2000 presidential election controversy raised fundamental questions about the American democratic process. Individual states, who are constitutionally charged with running elections, sought to improve their voting technology in order to prevent future election problems. Many states have begun using new electronic systems such as an "optical scan" system, which scan ballots to record votes, or a "direct recording electronic" (DRE) system, where voters register their choice on a computer touch screen.



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Click to listen:



ACTIVITY PAGE

Win a Prize!

September-October 2008 CONTEST

What is the maximum number of terms a U.S. president can serve?

Send the answer (with your home address) to: madridIRC@state.gov

Deadline: November 30

Win a Prize!

The answer in the Summer 2008 Contest was:

The 2004 summer Olympic Games were held in Athens

Thank you for participating

ZOOM

IN ON THE USA

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■ Exercise 1. Below you can see a list of U.S. presidents. Looking at the dates they were in the office, find those who served more than one term. Then, choose 10 presidents from the list and find at least one thing they are remembered for, e.g. *George Washington was the first president of the United States.* OR: *George Washington announced the Declaration of Neutrality which declared the U.S. a neutral nation in the conflict between Great Britain and France at the time of the French Revolution.*

1. Washington, George 1789-97
2. Adams, John 1797-1801
3. Jefferson, Thomas 1801-09
4. Madison, James 1809-17
5. Monroe, James 1817-25
6. Adams, John Quincy 1825-29
7. Jackson, Andrew 1829-37
8. Van Buren, Martin 1837-41
9. Harrison, William Henry 1841
10. Tyler, John 1841-45
11. Polk, James 1845-49
12. Taylor, Zachary 1849-50
13. Fillmore, Millard 1850-53
14. Pierce, Franklin 1853-57
15. Buchanan, James 1857-61
16. Lincoln, Abraham 1861-65
17. Johnson, Andrew 1865-69
18. Grant, Ulysses S. 1869-77
19. Hayes, Rutherford B. 1877-81
20. Garfield, James 1881
21. Arthur, Chester 1881-85
22. Cleveland, Grover 1885-89
23. Harrison, Benjamin 1889-93
24. Cleveland, Grover 1893-97
25. McKinley, William 1897-1901
26. Roosevelt, Theodore 1901-09
27. Taft, William H. 1909-13
28. Wilson, Woodrow 1913-21
29. Harding, Warren 1921-23
30. Coolidge, Calvin 1923-29
31. Hoover, Herbert 1929-33
32. Roosevelt, Franklin D. 1933-45
33. Truman, Harry 1945-53
34. Eisenhower, Dwight 1953-61
35. Kennedy, John F. 1961-63
36. Johnson, Lyndon 1963-69
37. Nixon, Richard 1969-74
38. Ford, Gerald 1974-77
39. Carter, Jimmy 1977-81
40. Reagan, Ronald 1981-89
41. Bush, George H.W. 1989-93
42. Clinton, William J. 1993-2001
43. Bush, George W. 2001-

■ Exercise 2. Comprehension:

Answer the following questions about the articles you have read and listened to in this issue of Zoom. Try not to refer to the text before giving your answer:

1. Which American president will be elected in 2008?
2. What are the two major political parties in the U.S.?
3. Has there ever been a female president or vice-president in the U.S.?
4. Why is the world interested in this election more than in any of the previous?
5. What is the Electoral College?
6. What is the relation between the number of senators and congressmen and the number of electors?
7. What is the smallest number of electors in any state?
8. How many electoral votes must a candidate have to become president?
9. What is the special voting form used in elections called?
10. Why is the issue of raising money for presidential campaigns from individual donors controversial?
11. Why is the information about donations to candidates publicized?
12. Which states decide about the outcome of the elections? Why?
13. Why were mechanical ballot counting machines introduced?
14. How many votes decided about the victory in Florida in 2000?

Glossary

(in the order of appearance)

compelling - evoking interest, attention
ordeal - a painful or horrific experience
predominate - be the strongest or main element; have control
perpetuate - make something (usually an undesirable situation) continue
ballot - the piece of paper used to record someone's vote
registrar - an official responsible for keeping official records
punch - device or machine for making holes in metal, paper, etc.
polling station - building where voting takes place
thereby - as a result of that