U.S. Elections

Primary Elections

U.S. Department of State
Bureau of International Information Programs

What types of elections are held in the United States?

In a **general election**, voters make their final choice among candidates for federal, state and local offices. Candidates in the general election are nominated by their political parties or run as independents (not affiliated with a major political party). Voters also can write in the name of a candidate they support.

General elections are run by the states, but the date for the general election is set by federal law as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

Measures such as proposed legislation (referendums), bond issues (borrowing money for public projects) and other government actions also may be placed on the ballot. Each state has its own rules about what measures can be placed on the ballot.

What is a Primary?

A **primary election** is a contest in which a political party selects its candidates to run in the general election. The outcome is determined by the registered voters who cast their ballots at their local polling places.

For the presidential nomination only, voters select delegates to cast their ballots for a candidate at the party's national convention. For all other primary races, voters vote directly for a candidate.

A voter marks her ballot during an "off-year" election in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2011. States can hold elections any year to fill local and state offices and for other reasons usually determined by a state's constitution.

Some primaries, called closed, are restricted to voters who have registered their political party affiliations. In other words, only registered Republicans will be allowed to vote in some primaries to select the Republican candidate for president. Open primaries allow any registered voter to cast a ballot regardless of party affiliation.

Like the general election, primaries are conducted by the states. Unlike general elections, states set the schedule for primaries.

Top: Primary elections across the country will decide the Republican Party's 2012 nominee for president. From left: former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum; businessman Herman Cain; Texas Representative Ron Paul; former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney; Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann; former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty; former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman; and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. President Obama (right) almost is assured the Democratic nomination, but his name appears on primary ballots, along with names of independent and write-in candidates.

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What is a caucus?

A **caucus** is a local meeting at which registered members of a political party in a city, town or county gather to express support for a candidate. The combined recommendations of a political party's state caucuses determine its nominees for statewide or national offices.

Caucuses, unlike conventions, involve many separate meetings held at the same time at multiple locations.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties have their own rules governing caucuses. Those rules vary from state to state.

Top: Voters in early primary elections, even in small states, can influence the thinking of voters in later primaries or in the general election. Row 2, left: As part of a continuing tradition, residents of Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, wait for the stroke of midnight to be the first voters in the nation's first 2008 presidential primary. Right: A voter enters a polling station during Ohio's 2008 primary, held in March, a month when several states hold their primaries.

Tabulator Rick Erwin tallies votes in tiny Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, slightly past midnight on Tuesday, January 8, 2008. The town's voters, along with those in neighboring Hart's Location, gave early-morning victories to Barack Obama and John McCain.

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ROW 2 AND BOTTOM RIGHT, ©AP IMAGES