Presidential Election 2020

A Guide for Young People

by Peter Orvetti

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How to Use This Guide

This guide is intended to explain to young people presidential elections work. While it was written for young people, it could be useful for anyone who is trying to understand the American political process. Many people feel American politics are very divisive right now. The goal of this guide isn't to take a position. It's to educate students about how the process is intended to work. Some controversial issues that may influence elections are mentioned, but no positions are taken. It's up to parents and teachers to foster conversation around those issues.

Important terms and vocabulary words are highlighted in bold. If you're trying to understand American elections better, knowing this vocabulary is key. If you're teaching this guide to younger students, you could assign these words as definitions or simply check for understanding. These terms are all defined in the course of the text.

At the end of each section, there are a few questions that can serve as aids to discussion. Talk them through, ask a student to respond in writing, or just read them over. It's up to you. Most of these don't have one right or wrong answer, but instead ask for your opinions or thoughts, sometimes on issues of greater controversy than this guide covers. It's up to you how much to discuss these. Some of the questions may ask about your local races or issues. You should go consult trustworthy local sources to learn more about those.

About the author

Peter Orvetti is a writer and intelligence analyst living in Washington, D.C. He was the moderator of the Web White and Blue online presidential debate in 2000, and ran the Webby Award-nominated political news site Orvetti.com from 1997 through 2002. He wrote the first edition of this book for the 2016 election in 2015.

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Running for president... in 2019?

If you've seen the television news recently, you may have noticed that a lot of people are running for president. But isn't the election a year away? And aren't there just two candidates for president? And why are the people who are running spending so much time in Iowa and New Hampshire?

By the time people vote on Tuesday, November 3, 2020, there will be only two or maybe three big candidates. But it is a long process to get to that point, and most candidates start planning years in advance. Candidates for 2020 started announcing their candidacies as far back as 2017!

John Delaney, a former U.S. representative from Maryland, declared his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination in July 2017, more than three years before the election.

What have you already heard about the presidential election? Are there candidates you already support or are interested in?

Do you think it's good or bad that the US's presidential elections are so drawn out?

Why are so many people running for president?

According to the Constitution, anyone who is at least 35 years old and meets certain citizenship requirements can be president. To be an official candidate, all you have to do is fill out a form.

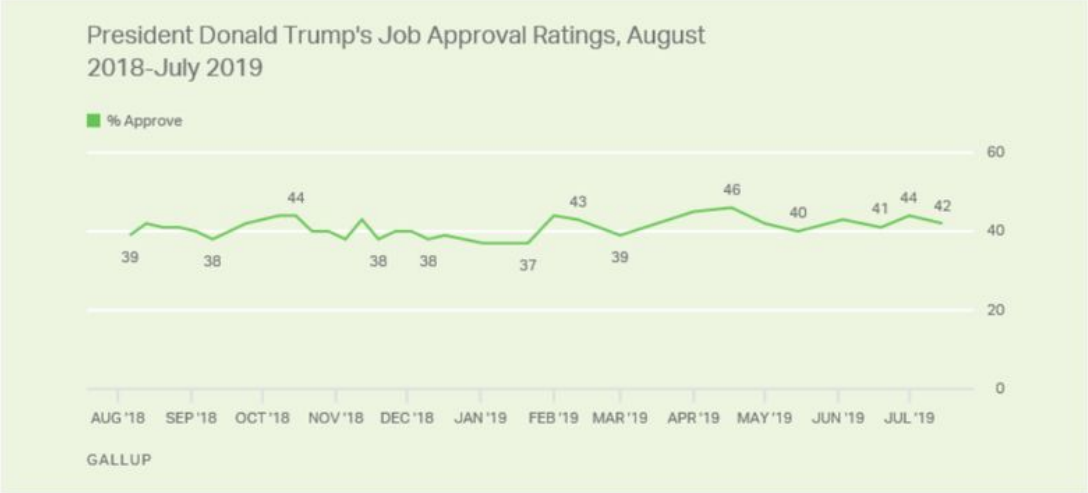
But it takes more than that to get attention, and to get votes. Most presidential candidates have held some high political office, serving in the **U.S. Senate**, the **U.S. House of Representatives**, as a state **governor**, or in the **Cabinet**. (The Cabinet is the group of top advisers to the president, who run federal government departments like the State Department and the Treasury Department.) In fact, President Donald Trump is the only person to have ever been elected president without first serving in one of these jobs, other than wartime military leaders like Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower.

Presidents are limited to **two full terms in office**. (This is due to a change made to the Constitution in 1951; before that, there was no limit, though only one president, Franklin Roosevelt, was elected more than twice.) Because Trump was first elected in 2016, he is able to run for a second term in 2020. If he wins, he will not be able to run for a third term in 2024.

A current holder of an office is called the **incumbent**. Incumbent presidents who want to run again usually easily win the **nomination** (official backing) of their party. But when an incumbent is somewhat unpopular with the public, they often face a **challenger**. In recent years, Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush all faced primary challengers. They won their party's nominations, but lost in the November election. Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama faced no serious challengers, and got re-elected.

Trump is being challenged by Mark Sanford, a former governor and U.S. representative from South Carolina; Joe Walsh, a former U.S. representative from Illinois; and William Weld, a former governor of Massachusetts.

Things are much more crowded on the other side! Trump is fairly unpopular with the public, so a lot of Democrats feel he can be defeated. There is also no clear Democratic front-runner. A **front-runner** is a candidate who has an advantage in the campaign for various reasons such as prominence, campaign funding, or public support.



President Donald Trump's job approval – the percentage of poll respondents saying he is doing a good job – has been low compared to past presidents, which has led many Democrats to think he can be defeated in 2020.

More than 20 Democrats have entered the race, and a few have already dropped out after failing to attract support. As of the beginning of September 2019, the Democratic candidates are:

- Joe Biden, vice president of the United States, 2009-2017; U.S. senator from Delaware, 1973-2009
- Michael Bennet, U.S. senator from Colorado, 2009-present
- Cory Booker, U.S. senator from New Jersey, 2013-present
- Steve Bullock, governor of Montana, 2013-present
- Pete Buttigieg, mayor of South Bend, Indiana, 2012-present
- Julián Castro, U.S. secretary of Housing and Urban Development, 2014-2017
- Bill de Blasio, mayor of New York, New York, 2014-present
- John Delaney, U.S. representative from Maryland, 2013-2019
- Tulsi Gabbard, U.S. representative from Hawaii, 2013-present
- Kamala Harris, U.S. senator from California, 2017-present

- Amy Klobuchar, U.S. senator from Minnesota, 2007-present
- Wayne Messam, mayor of Miramar, Florida, 2015-present
- Beto O'Rourke, U.S. representative from Texas, 2013-2019
- Tim Ryan, U.S. representative from Ohio, 2003-present
- Bernie Sanders, U.S. senator from Vermont, 2007-present; U.S. representative from Vermont, 1991-2007
- Joseph Sestak, U.S. representative from Pennsylvania, 2007-2011
- Tom Steyer, financier and activist
- Elizabeth Warren, U.S. senator from Massachusetts, 2013-present
- Marianne Williamson, author and activist
- Andrew Yang, entrepreneur and founder of Venture for America

Is there a candidate that you support or are more interested in learning about?

Why do you think there are lots of candidates some years and only a few other years?

The two big parties

A **political party** is an organization that chooses candidates to run for office and tries to get them elected. There are many political parties in the United States, but there are two big ones: the **Democrats** and the **Republicans**.

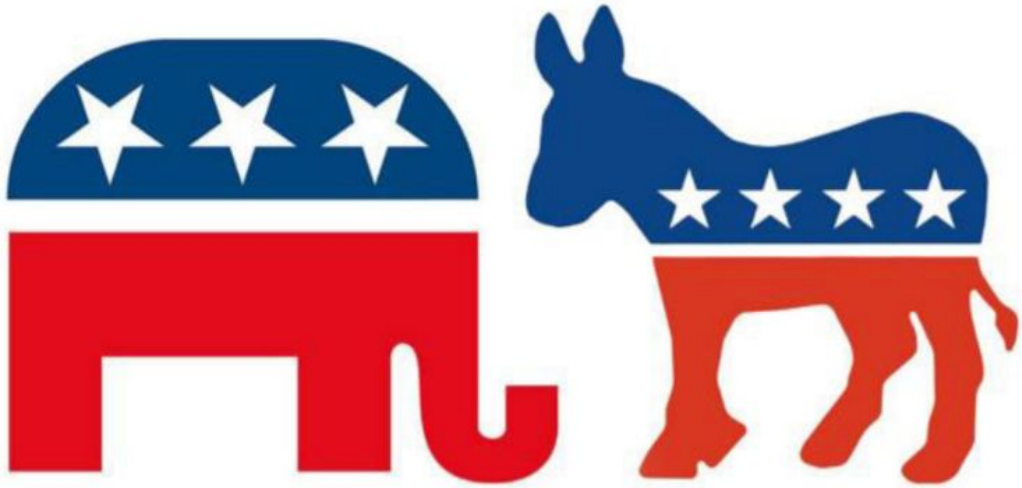
There is a wide range of opinion within each of the parties, but Democrats tend to be more liberal and Republicans more conservative.

Liberals generally believe the government should do more. They support government spending on things like education, health care, aid to the poor, and the arts. Liberals also believe taxes should be high enough to pay for these things.

Conservatives generally believe the government should do less. They want taxes to be lower, and say people could then use their own money to pay for the things they need or want. Some conservatives do support government programs, but think they should be provided by state and local governments, not the national government.

The parties also differ in other ways. Democrats tend to believe abortion should be legal, while most Republicans think it should not be, or should at least be strictly limited. Republicans generally back more restrictions on immigration from other countries, while Democrats tend to support more open immigration rules. Most Democrats support restrictions on gun ownership, while Republicans are more likely to oppose them.

(Liberals are sometimes called the **Left** and Republicans the **Right**, nicknames based on where groups sat in the French Assembly in the 1790s. The Republican Party is also sometimes called the **"GOP"** — "Grand Old Party" — from a party nickname from the 1800s. The Democrats have no similar nickname.)



The elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party and the donkey is the symbol of the Democratic Party. These animals were first used to represent the parties in political cartoons in the 1800s that were criticizing the parties, but both have since adopted them as official symbols.

President Trump is a Republican. Other recent Republican presidents include George H.W. Bush and his son George W. Bush. The most recent Democratic president was Barack Obama. Other recent Democratic presidents include Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.

What are the issues that you care about? Are they represented by a party? If so, which one?

Is one party more popular in your community or among your friends or family? Why do you think that is?

Why do people run for president?

This one seems easy: People run for president because they want to be president.

That's true, but people run for other reasons as well. Some of the Democrats on that long list of names above know that they are very unlikely to win their party's nomination. So why do they do it?

Some candidates do want to be president… someday. Presidential candidates get a lot of attention, so they are running this time so people will get to know them and maybe they will have a better chance in 2024 or even 2028. They may also hope to make a good enough impression that they will get selected to run for vice president. (Joe Biden ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008 and did poorly, but Barack Obama chose him to be his vice presidential candidate that year.)

Some run to bring attention to an issue they care about that they feel is not getting enough attention. As a presidential candidate, they get to appear in debates and get to do a lot of interviews with TV, Internet, and newspaper reporters — opportunities they might not have otherwise.

And some run just to improve their careers and make money! Over the past 20 years or so, political networks on cable TV and on the radio have offered high-paying jobs to former candidates.

Would you ever want to be president?

What are good motivations to run for president?

Why do they start so early?

It takes a long time to get that list down from more than 20 candidates to just two. And it takes a lot of money. In 1996, the total spending on the presidential campaign was about $425 million. In 2016, the total was close to $8 billion!

To get all that money, people who want to run for president spend a lot of time trying to persuade people, especially wealthy people, to become **donors** to their campaigns. They make phone calls and hold special events where they try to convince them to give. (There are also groups not officially connected with the candidates who raise and spend money to support candidates they like.)

They also try to get support from **party activists**. These are people who are members of their party who are very active in campaigning and in trying to get people to join the party and support its candidates. Sometimes they hold office themselves, but a lot of them are just committed to the party's ideas.

If someone who is considering running for the Democratic or Republican nomination cannot win over donors and party activists, they may decide not to run. If they do, they will get a bunch of supporters together and announce their candidacy.

With so many people running, the next step is to get attention. The candidates will do lots of interviews with television, radio, newspaper, and Internet reporters, and start running advertisements on TV, radio, and online. They will use the Internet to try to attract more supporters and get people to volunteer for their campaigns.

They will also try to get **endorsements**. An endorsement is a public announcement from an influential person that they support a candidate. Endorsements often come from other elected officials, but they can also come from celebrities, professional athletes, religious leaders, and other people who many voters look up to.

Also, each party's candidates will appear in a series of **debates**, where journalists or sometimes members of the audience get to ask them all questions. These early debates are not meant to persuade average voters to support the candidates. Instead, they are trying to win over more party activists, because these are the people who will decide who gets to be the party candidate.

There have already been several debates among the Democratic candidates in 2019, and because there are so many people running, the Democratic National Committee — the official leadership of the party — has set rules for who gets to participate. Many of the candidates have spent a lot of time in 2019 trying to meet these qualifications in order to get enough attention to continue their campaigns.

What do you think of how much it costs to become president?

What are some groups in your community that might endorse a candidate? Would their endorsement make a difference to voters?

The big issues in 2020

During those debates, and as they campaign, candidates will address the biggest issues that voters and members of their parties care about. There are three basic types of issues in national campaigns.

Economic issues deal with money. These are issues like how high **taxes** should be, and how much the government should **spend**. They are also issues like how many people have **jobs** and how much the jobs pay. One economic issue that is particularly of concern to Democrats is **income inequality** — the fact that wealth is rising more quickly among the very rich than among the rest of the country.

Social issues are those that affect Americans' personal lives. Some of them are whether **abortion** and **gay marriage** should be legal, how much the government should regulate **gun ownership**, what our policy on **immigration** from other countries to the U.S. should be, how much **environmental regulation** the government should enact, and what sort of **security** measures are appropriate to protect people while still respecting their rights.

Foreign policy deals with questions of how the U.S. interacts with other countries. Big topics in foreign policy right now include what the U.S. should do about efforts to build nuclear weapons by **North Korea**, what to do about conflict in the **Middle East**, and our relationships with other powerful nations like **China** and **Russia**.

One big issue that crosses between both economics and foreign policy is **trade**. Republicans have traditionally supported few restrictions on trade between the U.S. and other countries, but President Trump ran on a different stance in 2016. He believes the U.S. should protect U.S. businesses through **tariffs** — taxes on foreign products that make them cost more in the U.S., putting them at a disadvantage — and by penalizing U.S. businesses that move jobs or operations abroad.

Trump himself is a big "issue" in the election. When an incumbent president is running again, a lot of the focus is on the job that president has done and on whether voters want to "re-hire" the president for another four years.

What do you think are the biggest issues in this election?

What do you think of trade? Should businesses in the US be protected by tariffs? Or should trade be more open between different countries?

The identity issue

Every president and vice president of the United States has been male and Christian, and all but one — President Barack Obama — has been white.

Only one woman has been nominated by a major party for president — Hillary Clinton in 2016. Each party has nominated a woman for vice president once — Democrat Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and Republican Sarah Palin in 2008 — but neither was elected. The only non-Christian candidate on a major party ticket was Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential nominee in 2000, who is Jewish.

Many Democrats think this needs to change, and believe who their candidate is and what her or his background is may be just as important — or more important — than where that candidate stands on every issue. Some think a male candidate cannot really understand the challenges facing women, or that a white candidate cannot understand the struggles of a non-white American.

There are six women running for the Democratic presidential nomination, and candidates who are African-American, Asian-American, and Latino. The field includes Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish, and Tulsi Gabbard, who is Hindu. Pete Buttigieg is the first openly gay major presidential candidate. Some (but not all) of them are making these points of personal identity central themes in their campaigns.

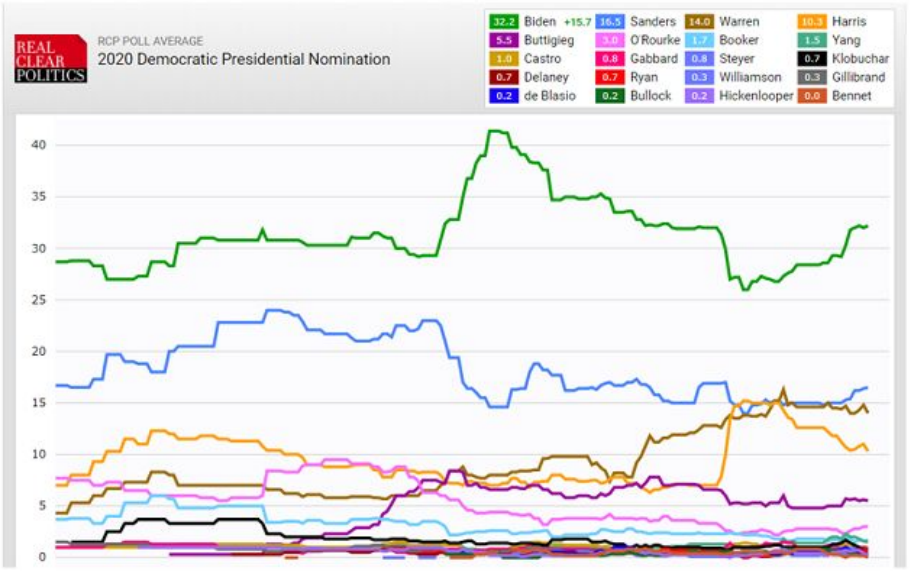
Do you think a candidate's gender, race, and background can help them be a better leader?

Do you think about a candidate's identity and background when you decide who to support?

The media and the "horse race"

The **media** — journalists and commentators for television, radio, the Internet, and newspapers — is often criticized for ignoring the issues when covering elections.

The media does cover the issues, but does not always do so very well. Part of the reason why is because the issues are complex and it can take a long time to explain them, and explain where the candidates stand. Newspapers and Internet publications do a better job of this than TV, because they have the space to do so. Television reports, on the other hand, are usually much briefer.



Polls on the Democratic presidential race have shown former Vice President Joe Biden with the lead, and Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Kamala Harris also drawing significant support.

Television journalists are also interested in stories that look good on the screen and that can be told in a simple and entertaining way. Stories about a candidate wearing a silly hat at a campaign event or accidentally saying something dumb are easier to cover — and are sometimes more interesting to viewers — than a long report about a policy issue.

One way the media makes elections entertaining is to cover the campaign as if it were a sporting event. Rather than talking about what a candidate said in a speech, they may focus on whether the speech will "help" or "hurt" the candidate. They also spend a lot of time talking about who is "ahead" or "behind" — and they use **polls** to do so.

A poll is a survey of a relatively small number of people — usually less than a thousand — that can give some idea of what millions of people think. Pollsters ask these people questions about the candidates and the issues. They also ask them for their demographic background — their age and gender, where they live, how much money they make, how many children they have, whether or not they went to college, and similar questions.

By using this **demographic information**, pollsters can put the polling data through mathematical formulas to offer estimates of overall public opinion that are usually quite accurate.

Polls can be useful to candidates to show them where their message is working and where it is not, and to help them decide what to do next. (These sorts of decisions are called **campaign strategy**.) And polls can also be useful in showing what voters are concerned about.

But the media will often use polls to "score" the "game" of the campaign. Critics of this approach call it **horse race coverage** because it is concerned with who is winning and losing rather than what the candidates are actually saying.

Do you think the media does a good job covering the election? What are the ways they can help and hurt a candidate?

Why are polls sometimes wrong?

January-February:

Iowa and New Hampshire

If you turn on TV this fall and see a presidential candidate shaking hands or speaking at a rally, there's a good chance he's in **Iowa** or she's in **New Hampshire**. How come?

The Democrats and Republicans select their nominees (their official candidates who will be on the ballot in November) through a series of small elections called caucuses and primaries. Each state has different rules on how they work, but they are basically a way for members of a party in the state to say who they think the party's presidential candidate should be.

A **primary** is a lot like a regular election. People go to polling places to vote, and are given a ballot or enter a voting booth and vote in private, then go home. A caucus is different. **Caucuses** are public meetings, usually held in the evening. Party activists and members gather, discuss the issues and the candidates, and then vote publicly.

The very first vote for the party nominations that counts will be held in **Iowa on February 3** when the state parties have their caucuses. The next vote, and the first primary, will be held in **New Hampshire on February 11**.

Why these two states? Because they've always gone first.

Until the early 1900s, professional political insiders selected the candidates. They often did so in a corrupt way, hoping the candidates would later reward them with jobs or by supporting their business activities. This gave these insiders a lot of power over the candidates once they were elected.

People wanted this to change, so they started organizing primaries where individual party members could have a say. New Hampshire was one of the very first states to start holding primaries. It wasn't until the 1970s that pretty much every state had a primary or caucus — but New Hampshire was one of the first, so it gets to go first.

The reason Iowa gets so much attention is a little stranger. The state had been holding presidential caucuses for a while, but because of the unusual caucus process — and because reporters were so used to focusing on New Hampshire — it never got much attention.

That changed in 1976. That year, there were more than a dozen candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. One of them was Jimmy Carter, who had served just one term as governor of Georgia. Most people, even party activists, had never heard of him, and expected the party to choose a better-known candidate.

Carter decided to focus his campaign on Iowa, where he won even though he was not expected to. (Such a win is called an **upset victory**.) He got a lot of attention from that win, and won the nomination and the presidency. Because of that, other candidates started to focus on Iowa in subsequent elections.

Donald Trump won the Republican primary in New Hampshire in 2016 and later won the Republican presidential nomination. Senator Bernie Sanders won the Democratic primary, but was defeated for the nomination by Hillary Clinton.

Officially, caucuses and primaries select **delegates**, people who will attend the national party conventions in the summer to vote on who the candidate should be. And Iowa and New Hampshire do not select that many delegates. But since they come first, the candidates who do well there get a lot of attention. This can give them what is called a **bounce** — an increase in recognition, polls, support, and donations — as well as **momentum** as the campaign moves ahead to other states.

Some people think it is unfair that Iowa and New Hampshire always get to go first. They only have a combined population of about 4.5 million people — only a bit more than one percent of the total U.S. population. And about 91% of the people who live in the two states are white, compared to 61% nationwide. For these reasons, critics say the states are not representative of the country as a whole.

Those who defend Iowa and New Hampshire going first say that in small states, candidates have to actually spend time with voters and cannot just run lots of TV ads and appear on stage at big rallies. Candidates campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire actually sit down with voters for long conversations.

Still, other states would love to have some of the prominence that Iowa and New Hampshire do, so they have tried to plan their caucuses and primaries earlier and earlier in the year. What usually happens is that Iowa and New Hampshire just move theirs earlier as well. So most states will hold their primaries and caucuses in the early spring, even though the election will still be months away.

Do you think it's a good idea to let two smaller states go first in choosing the candidates? What other systems could we use?

Do you think primaries or caucuses work better? Which does your state use?

March-May:

More primaries, fewer candidates

Winning or doing well in Iowa and New Hampshire helps candidates. For those who do poorly, it usually means the end of the road.

That long list of candidates needs to get trimmed down somehow, and activists and donors will start abandoning those candidates, deciding that they will not be able to win. In early February,

several will end their campaigns, or drop out. (As noted above, some candidates who had a hard time gaining support have already dropped out, and it's quite likely more will have done so before February.)

Nevada and **South Carolina** vote later in February, and during the first two weeks of March, more than 20 states will hold their primaries and caucuses, including big states like California, Florida, Illinois, and Ohio.

It costs a lot to campaign in all these places, and by mid-March, there will probably be only a few candidates left. But sometimes, the campaign goes on, and even candidates who are not doing well will stay in the race. Sometimes these are candidates using the campaign to promote a cause or their careers, as mentioned above.

But sometimes there's another reason. Remember, the primaries and caucuses select delegates who will be the people to officially vote on their party's nominee. And both parties require candidates to get a **majority** of the delegates' support to get nominated — that's at least one more than half of all the delegates. So if a candidate has only won the support of 45% of the delegates, another 30%, and a third the other 25%, it is not clear who the winner will be. With so many Democratic candidates running, it's possible that could happen in 2020, but it has not occurred in a long time.

June-July:

Meet the running mates

The last primaries take place in early June. By then, we will almost certainly know who the candidates will be — and the election will still be five months away! After the hectic primary rush, things will get slow for a while. And reporters will start talking about who will be the candidates for vice president.

Each party nominates what is called a **ticket** — candidates for president and vice president who run together. When people vote in November, they have to vote for both; they can't vote for the Democratic presidential candidate and the Republican vice presidential candidate.

The **vice president** has a somewhat undefined role in the U.S. government. According to the Constitution, the vice president's job is to preside over (that is, oversee) the Senate, but in reality, vice presidents rarely do that. The vice president also gets to vote in the Senate if there is a tie, but not otherwise. Beyond that, it is up to the president to decide how much the vice president should do. Recent presidents have made their vice presidents important advisors and assigned them big tasks, but some past presidents barely spoke with their vice presidents at all.

But a vice presidential candidate has an important role in the presidential campaign, and a big job: to help the ticket win.

While presidential candidates are selected by caucus and primary voters, the vice presidential candidate is selected by the presidential nominee. (The vice presidential pick is called the **running mate** because the candidates run together.)

Sometimes the presidential candidate chooses someone because of experience. Barack Obama selected Joe Biden because Biden had been a senator for a long time. George W. Bush selected Richard Cheney because Cheney had a lot of experience with foreign policy, which Bush did not.

Sometimes they choose someone who did well in the presidential primaries. John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, selected John Edwards, a senator who had also sought the nomination that year.

Sometimes they choose someone to appeal to a different part of their own party. There are a lot of viewpoints within each party, and not every party activist is always enthusiastic about the presidential nominee. By selecting someone with different views, the presidential candidate can reassure these activists. In 2012, Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, selected Paul Ryan, a congressman from a different segment of the party.

And sometimes the choice is intended to appeal to voters in other ways. A young presidential candidate may choose an older running mate (Obama, who was 47 when he was elected, selected Biden, who was 65) or vice versa (Romney was 65, and Ryan was 42). John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate in 2008, was concerned about polls showing him trailing among women voters, so he selected Sarah Palin, the governor of Alaska. A candidate from the Northeast might want a candidate from the South or the West.

In 2008, Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. McCain's campaign thought Palin would appeal to women, and also wanted to confront concerns about McCain's age by picking a young candidate.

President Trump is expected to again pick current Vice President Mike Pence as his running mate, though he may change his mind. It is rare for an incumbent president to pick a new running mate.

Since the vice presidential picks always make news, the presidential candidates may announce their selections sometime during that lull in June and early July. It's a good way to get some attention and get people excited before the party conventions begin.

What do you think makes a good vice presidential candidate?

Does the choice of a vice presidential candidate affect how you feel about a candidate?

July-August:

Party time for the parties

Up until this point, the campaign has been in what reporters call the primary campaign phase — the race to select each party's presidential candidate. With the end of the primaries, the campaign switches to the **general election campaign** — the race between the Democratic and Republican tickets for the support of millions of voters, not just party members.

This phase gets underway with the **party conventions**. These are events that last several days at which the candidates are officially selected. Cities compete to host the conventions because having all the delegates and reporters come to town brings in a lot of money. The **Democrats** have chosen to hold their convention in **Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from July 13-16**. The **Republicans** will hold their convention in **Charlotte, North Carolina, from August 24-27**.

The 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio officially nominated Donald Trump for president and Mike Pence for vice president.

Conventions used to be the most exciting time of the campaign, since they used to actually choose the candidates. Since each party requires a candidate to win a **majority** of the delegate vote, in the days before primaries and caucuses narrowed the field there were often multiple candidates, none of whom had the backing of half the delegates going in. If no one got a majority the first time the delegates voted (the **first ballot**), they would vote again. And again. And again, until someone got a majority. In 1924, it took the Democrats 103 ballots to select a presidential nominee!

The last time a Democratic or Republican convention took more than one ballot to choose a candidate for president was in 1952. It could happen again in 2020, if no candidate has the support of more than half the delegates after the primaries. But it is more likely that party leaders would work out an agreement in advance, rather than have a messy fight for the nomination on national television.

So if the candidates are known in advance, is there any point to the conventions? That's a question a lot of people ask. These days, the conventions are basically advertisements for each party, and the media does not give them as much coverage as they used to because of this.

The parties use their conventions to try to appeal to as many undecided voters as possible. They do this by using the limited amount of time the television networks will broadcast the conventions to highlight interesting party officials or those who may appeal to a certain segment of the public, to introduce the presidential and vice presidential candidates' family members to the public, and sometimes to show off celebrities who back the party's ticket.

After the delegates officially cast their votes to nominate the ticket, the presidential and vice presidential candidates give speeches. While party activists and people who follow politics

closely have been paying attention for a long time, this is the first chance for the candidates to speak to the tens of millions of voters who are just starting to think about the election. It is also a chance for the presidential candidate to switch from trying to appeal just to the party activists needed to get the nomination, to appealing to the nation as whole.

Now that you've seen the primary process from start to finish, what do you think of how the parties choose their candidates? Do you think the system makes sense? Do you think it would be a good idea to change anything?

Down to two?

With the conventions over, that long list of candidates will have been narrowed to just two — the parties' official candidates for president. So the election is just between them, right?

Not necessarily. Two big parties have emerged over time because presidential candidates needed a majority to win, and having lots of candidates makes it harder for one ticket to get a majority. But there are others who run, despite the odds.

Sometimes, they run without a party, as **independent candidates**. The most significant independent candidate in recent years was H. Ross Perot, a wealthy businessman who received nearly 20 million votes in 1992. Several well-known business figures have spoken about running independent campaigns in 2020, but it does not appear any of them will do so.

There are also other parties that have been around for a while and run tickets every four years just like the Democrats and Republicans. These are called **third parties**, alternative parties, or sometimes minor parties.

They rarely come close to winning the presidency, but their campaigns have a purpose. Like some of those primary candidates, they use the attention of the election process to draw attention to their issues. And they may use that attention to attract new supporters as they focus on winning smaller offices on a local level.

Such parties have risen up throughout U.S. history to promote certain causes like the abolition of slavery, prohibition of alcohol, and labor reform. While these parties never elected a president, they gained enough support that their ideas were enacted by presidents and legislators from other parties.

Gary Johnson was the Libertarian Party presidential nominee in 2012 and 2016, while Jill Stein was the Green Party presidential nominee in both of those years.

There are currently two alternative parties that appear on the ballot in most states:

The **Green Party** is a liberal party that has run a national ticket in every election since 1996. It focuses on issues like poverty, the rights of workers, peace, and environmentalism. Its candidate in both 2012 and 2016 was activist Jill Stein. In 2016, she received about 1.5 million votes.

The **Libertarian Party** believes in a very limited role for government. The party generally disagrees with liberals on economic issues like taxes and health care, but also disagrees with conservatives on social issues like abortion and gay rights. The party, which has run a national ticket in every election since 1972, is also against foreign aid and most military intervention. Its candidate in both 2012 and 2016 was Gary Johnson, a former Republican governor of New Mexico. In 2016, he received about 4.9 million votes, a record for the party.

Neither Stein nor Johnson is expected to run in 2020, and it is not clear who their parties may pick. Justin Amash, a U.S. representative from Michigan, is considering running for the Libertarian nomination, as is Lincoln Chafee, a former governor and U.S. senator from Rhode Island.

Would you ever vote for a third-party or independent candidate?

Do you think there's a place for more candidates outside the two major parties or will the race be too tight?

August-October:

The fall campaign

The conventions are over. The tickets have been selected, and the candidates, their families, and prominent supporters (sometimes called **surrogates** because they speak on behalf of the candidate) are traveling across the U.S. seeking support. And yet, they still only seem to be focusing on a few states. Why?

Americans do not directly elect the president. While in elections for offices like senator and governor the person who gets the most votes wins, the presidency is decided by an indirect election.

Each state has a certain number of **electors** equal to their total number of senators plus members of the House of Representatives, which means no state has fewer than three. (The District of Columbia gets three as well.) California, which has more people than any other state, has 55, followed by Texas, which has 38. There are 538 electoral votes in all, and to win, a ticket needs a majority: **270 electoral votes**.

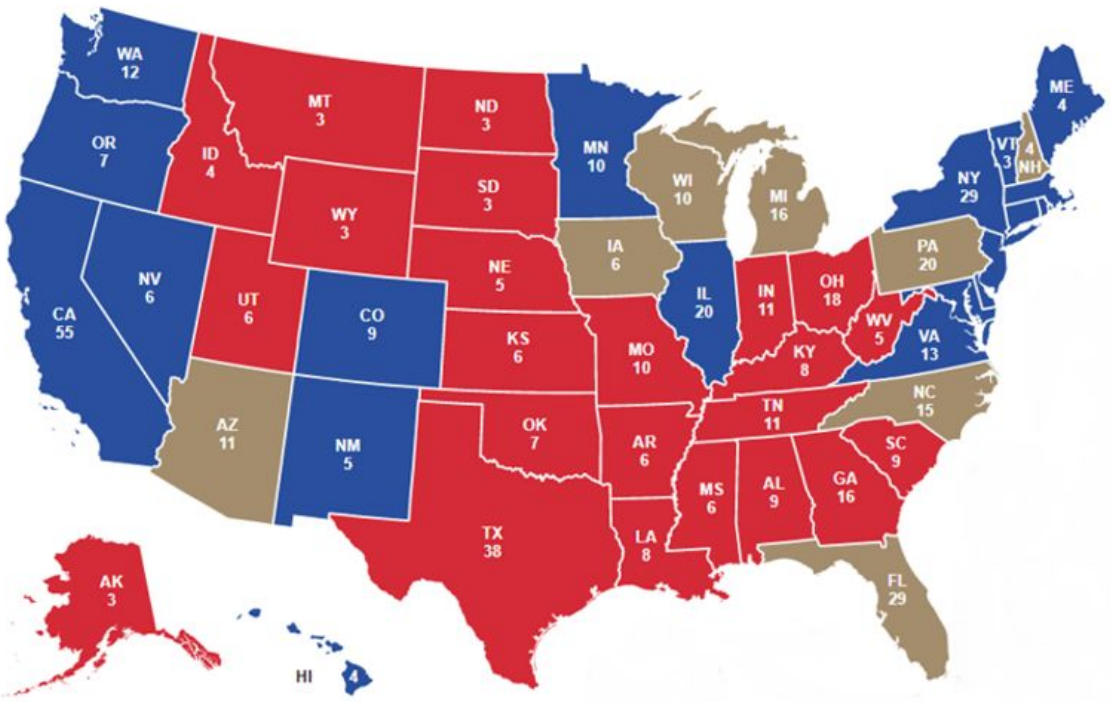
Presidential candidates are not competing for the highest number of individual people's votes nationwide — called the **popular vote** — but to get a majority of the **electoral vote**.

While it might seem like a smart candidate would therefore focus on high- population states with a lot of electoral votes like California and Texas, that's not the case. With a couple of exceptions, states give all of their electoral votes to the candidate who gets the most popular votes in the state, whether the candidate wins by a margin of 10 votes or one million. And there are only a few states where presidential elections are usually close enough for candidates to try to compete.

California almost always votes for the Democratic presidential candidate by a wide margin, so Republicans don't bother trying to win there, and Democrats don't feel the need to campaign there. The situation is the same, but with the parties reversed, in heavily Republican states in the South.

In fact, in the last five presidential elections, 37 of the 50 states have voted for the same party each time! There are only a few states that are really close, and that is where the candidates will devote most of their energy.

Some of them are big states with a lot of electoral votes at stake: Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. A few are smaller, but will still get a lot of attention if the election is really close: Arizona, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin. (Other states could become close, or competitive, in the course of the campaign, but these definitely will be.)



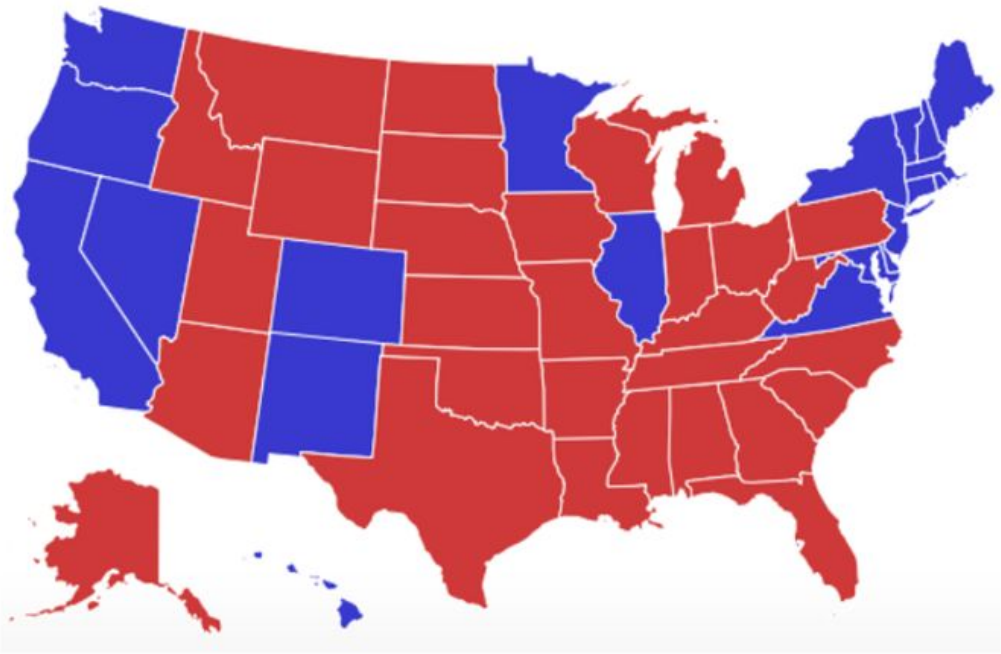
This map shows the number of Electoral College votes each state will have in 2020. States in blue are expected to lean toward the Democrats, and states in red are expected to lean toward the Republicans. The states in gray are expected to be the closest, so a lot of the campaign will focus there.

It is actually possible for a candidate to win the national popular vote but lose the electoral vote — and the election. How? If one candidate wins states adding up to 268 electoral votes by wide margins, and another wins states adding up to 270 electoral votes by narrow margins, the second candidate becomes president.

This has happened five times in U.S. history, and two of those times were very recent. In 2000, Republican George W. Bush received 271 electoral votes but Democrat Al Gore beat him in the national popular vote by about 540,000 votes. And in 2016, Democrat Hillary Clinton won states like California and New York by millions of votes but lost to Donald Trump in Michigan,

Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin by just a few thousand votes each. That gave Trump a win in the electoral vote even though Clinton received 2.9 million more votes nationwide.

Popular and Electoral Vote for President in 2016



Donald Trump (Republican)	62,984,828 (46.1%)	306 Electoral Votes
Hillary Clinton (Democratic)	65,853,514 (48.2%)	232 Electoral Votes
Gary Johnson (Libertarian)	4,489,341 (3.3%)	
Jill Stein (Green)	1,457,218 (1.1%)	
Evan McMullin (Independent)	731,991 (0.5%)	
Other Candidates	1,152,384 (0.8%)	

For the three months of the general election campaign, the focus will be on those **competitive states**. Campaigns will also advertise nationally, to reach voters in those states, but also to encourage supporters elsewhere to **donate money** to the campaign and to **get out the message** in other ways. Campaigns will post messages on Facebook, Twitter, and elsewhere, encouraging supporters to share them with their friends, and the candidates themselves will continue to do a lot of interviews, and also make YouTube videos, hold online chat sessions, and more.

A lot of these campaign messages will be negative — intended to be critical of the opposing party's candidate, not just on the issues but sometimes questioning whether the other nominee has the right experience or personal character to be president. While voters say they hate

negative campaigning, research has shown that negative messages do more to motivate voters than positive ones. Simply put, negative ads work, so campaigns make them.

Media coverage of the general election campaign is a lot like coverage of the primary campaign. It focuses less on what the candidates are saying than on how they are saying it, and on whether it will "help" or "hurt." There will also be a lot of personality coverage of the candidates — what their favorite foods, books, and TV shows are, things like that. The American president is a part of Americans' lives for four years, and a lot of voters want a president who they like as a person, not just agree with as a leader.

Another reason for the personality-driven focus of the coverage, and of the campaigns, is that by the general election campaign, voters motivated primarily by policy have usually already decided who they will vote for. Voters who remain uncertain are more likely to decide based on what the candidates seem like as people.

Do you think the electoral college is the best system?

What do you think of candidates winning the popular vote but not the presidency? What difficulties does that create for the winning candidate?

What sort of campaign messages do you think are the most effective? Why do you think negative messages work so well?

Where do you see campaign messages the most? What role do you think social media plays in your or your family's decision making for candidates or voting?

Other Elections?

There is not just one election in 2020. Voters will be selecting candidates for a wide range of offices, depending on where they live.

U.S. senators hold six-year terms. Those elections are spread out, with some this year, some two years from now, and some four years from now. There will be 35 Senate elections in 2020. Elections for the U.S. House of Representatives take place every two years, so every voter will choose a representative.

In 11 states, voters will choose a state governor. In some states, voters will also elect state-level legislators -- who vote on state laws. Some cities and towns will also elect mayors and other local officials.

Because the presidential race gets so much attention, these races do not always get a lot of media attention. Local news outlets will usually run brief summaries of these races and the candidates. If you want to learn more about how congressional races work, you can look back at our guide to the midterm elections, which includes a lot about how the House and Senate are elected, as well as how gerrymandering works.

What other elections are happening where you live?

Do you support candidates of the same party as the presidential candidate you support?

Why might some people be more interested in watching the races for Congress than the president? How do Congress and the president work together?

The debates

The candidates get several chances during the fall campaign to talk directly to the public and to each other about the issues. In each presidential election, there are a series of **debates**. There are usually four — three of them between the presidential candidates and one between the vice presidential candidates. These last about an hour and a half each and are broadcast on all the major TV networks. They have different formats. Sometimes, one journalist asks questions; sometimes, several do. There is also usually a debate in which audience members get to ask questions.

The debates are run by an organization called the **Commission on Presidential Debates**, which is headed by former leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties. The Commission requires candidates to have reached at least 15% in national polls to be invited to debate. Parties like the Greens and Libertarians say this is unfair, since they also run national campaigns and it is hard for them to build poll support when they rarely get media coverage. They think any candidate who is on the ballot in most states should be invited, since that would still only be a few people in all.

Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton debated three times during the 2016 presidential campaign.

November 3:

Election Day!

Presidential elections in the U.S. are held on a Tuesday in early November once every four years. The 2020 election will be on **November 3**.

Holding elections on Tuesdays has been criticized over the years, with some people saying people who work long hours are unable to get out to vote. In recent years, many states have started letting people vote in advance on other days, or to vote by mail. Some have proposed allowing voting by the Internet, but nowhere does that yet.

Voters get a ballot listing all the candidates who have met their state's requirements for ballot access. This will include the Democratic and Republican candidates, and probably the Green and Libertarian candidates. (States have different standards for getting listed on the ballot — some make it easy for these candidates, and some make it hard.) In addition to voting for president, voters select candidates for offices such as U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, governor, and other state and local positions.

While people are voting, the media is getting ready to cover the results. Representatives of polling organizations will ask some voters leaving their polling places who they voted for and why. (This is called an **exit poll** since it happens right after voting.)

News organizations will use the data gathered to try to predict in advance who has won each state's electoral votes. The data are also used to get a sense of how people of different genders, races, religions, income levels, and other categories voted. Election coverage will often feature reporters saying things like a candidate "received 55% of the women's vote." These statistics come from the exit polls — who people actually voted for is secret.

In 2016, ABC projected election results on its building in Times Square, while NBC superimposed an electoral vote map over the skating rink at Rockefeller Plaza.

Election Night is a big deal for television networks as well as other types of media. They go out of their way to make the process of waiting for vote totals to come in as exciting as possible. They will use lots of graphics and special effects, but the centerpiece is a map of the United States. As each state's winner is decided, that state will be colored in — usually blue if the Democrat has won the state, and red if the Republican has won.

The actual business of Election Night starts around 6:00 p.m. Eastern Time, when the first polls close. The networks, using the exit poll data as well as by studying past election results in each state, already have a pretty good sense of who will win where (remember, only a few states may actually be close). But they do not announce any of these projected winners until the polls have closed in a state.

Election Night coverage can be long or short, depending on how close the election is. If one candidate is winning by a really wide margin — what's called a **landslide** — it may be over after a few hours. In years when elections are closer, it can take most of the night.

How will you hear about the election results?

Do you have any predictions for Election Night? What do you think will happen?

After Election Night

If there is a strong independent or third party candidate, it is possible that no candidate will get to 270 electoral votes. If that happens, the House of Representatives elects the president, and the Senate elects the vice president. But there hasn't been an election that the House had to decide in nearly 200 years.

So when you wake up on the morning of Wednesday, November 4, 2020, you will probably know whether Donald Trump will be president again or if someone else will be. The new presidential term will begin on January 20, 2021 at a ceremony called the Inauguration.

If someone new has won, that person — now called the **president-elect** — will spend the time in between getting ready to start the big job, selecting people to serve in the Cabinet and in other top jobs.

And at the same time, a bunch of other people will start getting ready to run for president in 2024!

Online resources

There are many great places online to follow the presidential campaign over the next year, and to learn more about past elections.

You can find all the presidential candidates' **Twitter** handles at http://twitter.com/cspan/lists/presidential-candidates/members/

Politics1, a website about elections, has links to all the candidates' official websites at http://politics1.com/p2020.htm

RealClearPolitics has the latest polling data at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/latest_polls/elections/

Political Wire (http://www.politicalwire.com/) and Politico (http://www.politico.com/) are websites devoted to elections and other political news.

The Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (http://uselectionatlas.org/) has lots of information on past election results.

270toWin (http://www.270towin.com/) is a site where you can look at past election results and play around with electoral vote maps to see who might win.

The Living Room Candidate (http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/) has an online archive of presidential campaign TV ads dating back to 1952.

The Campaign Trail (http://www.americanhistoryusa.com/campaign-trail/) is an online game where you can run the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns, as well as some other historical campaigns, and see if you can win.