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# Presidential Elections in America: A Primer

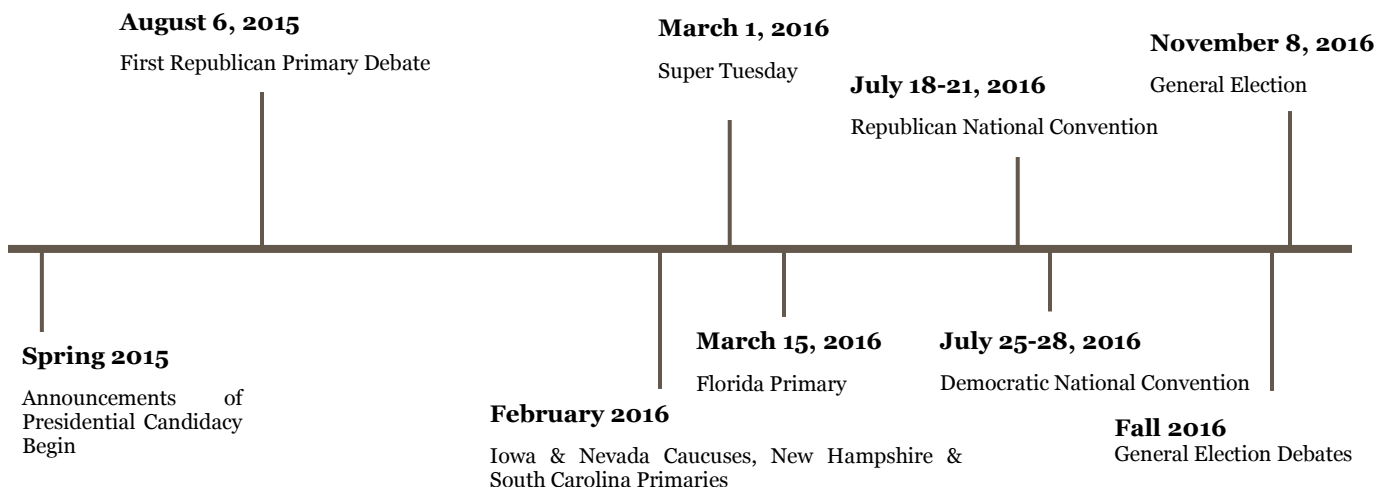
## Convolved by Design: the Manner of It Be Not Perfect

With its crowded field of 20 major candidates and growing, the presidential election must come across as a rather convoluted process to an observer outside of the United States. The election process begins with Iowa fairgrounds, New Hampshire pancake houses and podium-packed debate stages, culminates in balloon-dropping party conventions, and ends with victory and concession speeches. What happens in the long months in between, while not a secret, is a matter of enough intrigue to keep headline-writers, political websites and TV pundits of every description busy dishing on the latest development and its implications for the election.

The legacy of an 18th century compromise, the road to the White House is complicated by various state and federal election laws and steeped in over 200 years of evolving tradition, some of which is not even codified in law. This primer gives you the bottom line. A complete examination of the U.S. presidential election process from beginning to end could be considered too expansive for a college-level political science course and is certainly beyond the scope of this paper. What we do hope to provide is a concise rundown of both the primary process and the general election. We establish the historical context needed to understand U.S. elections, and we focus particular attention on more recent changes likely to be key factors in the current cycle. The objective is to distill a long, drawn-out process into its most essential elements and identify the key inflection points and the various factors that make this election cycle different.

*The road to the White House is steeped in over 200 years of evolving tradition.*

**Figure 1**



*"...the election of the President is pretty well guarded. I venture somewhat further, and hesitate not to affirm, that if the manner of it be not perfect, it is at least excellent. It unites in an eminent degree all the advantages, the union of which was to be wished for."*

*Publius (Alexander Hamilton)<sup>1</sup> - Federalist Paper Number 68: (March 17, 1788)*

Like many things in the founding of the United States, the framework for the presidential election was born from a compromise between Constitutional framers who wanted a popular vote and those who preferred to let Congress elect the president. Both sides wanted their own way, and both sides needed convincing, as did the broader electorate. That task fell to the authors of the Federalist Papers, a series of essays published in prominent newspapers under the pen name "Publius" to rally public support for ratification. The above quote came from Alexander Hamilton (who went on to become the first Secretary of the Treasury) in Federalist Paper number 68, which pitched the compromise that eventually became enshrined in Article Two of the U.S. Constitution a year later and established the Electoral College.

In the following pages we break down the need-to-know elements of the primaries, provide you insight on recent changes that make 2016 different and finish with a description of the general election itself.

### **The Primary Process: Narrowing Down the List**

Primaries narrow the field of candidates for each of the two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans.<sup>2</sup> The winner becomes that respective party's nominee. The basic terms of the general election are spelled out in the Constitution, and voting laws are generally determined at the state-level. Primaries, however, are not codified in law. Rather state-and-national level party committees set the terms.

***In modern elections, the role of PACs has helped to boost the funding coffers.***

Typically beginning January in the year before an election, the primary process for the 2016 election is already underway. A candidate starts by forming an exploratory committee to determine if a critical mass of support and the necessary funds needed for a presidential campaign can be raised. Coinciding with a candidate's exploratory committee are fundraising organizations, known as Political Action Committees or PACs, which help raise funds. After this initial exploration process, if the outcome is positive, the candidate will declare their intention to run. In order to make the declaration official, each candidate also needs to submit official paperwork to the Federal Election Commission. Next comes fundraising. Since 1974, there have been limits placed and caps set on the amount of money an individual can contribute to a political campaign.<sup>3</sup> In modern elections, the role of the PACs has helped to boost the funding coffers of political candidates and allow them to continue seeking the party's nomination and/or build general election campaign funds.

### **Campaigning & Within-Party Debates**

With the declaration completed and fundraising underway, candidates engage in the more visible side of things: the actual campaigning. Candidates will travel state-by-state across the country in an effort to gain popularity among voters within their own party. Part of this campaigning process is a series of debates among the primary candidates for a particular party. Republican candidates will debate with other Republicans and separately Democratic candidates will debate other Democrats. At this stage, the candidates do not formally debate across parties, although it is not uncommon to see political rhetoric directed to political foes in other parties. The state-by-state campaign stops and party-level debates are all in an effort to whittle down the list of potential candidates and help each party select its nominee.

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, Alexander, Federalist No. 68: "The Mode of Electing the President." New York Packet, March 17, 1788

<sup>2</sup> We generally limit our comments in this piece to a discussion of the two primary parties; while third party candidates can most assuredly affect the outcome of a general election, a third-party candidate has not been a viable winner of the general election in modern U.S. presidential politics.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Election Commission. (2015). Appendix 4: The Federal Election Campaign Laws: A Short History. <http://www.fec.gov/info/appfour.htm>.

The next step in the winnowing process is the actual primary election or caucus.<sup>4</sup> The date of the primary election or caucus varies by state as can be seen in the Appendix but in general, these preliminary elections span from January to June in the election year. Candidates try to campaign in early primary states in order to build momentum for their campaigns. Without victories or good showings in early primaries/caucuses, candidates typically start to see fundraising dry up and will exit the race (often endorsing another candidate within their party).

***Candidates try to campaign in early primary states to build momentum.***

### ***National Party Conventions***

Following the early voting, the last major step before the general election is the party conventions. These made-for-TV events are comprised of delegates representing each state. The number of delegates from each state is pre-determined by the political party. The actual decision of which candidate will be the party nominee is determined by the delegates. The Democratic Party uses a proportional method for awarding delegates based on primary election results. For example, if a state has a total of 10 delegates and two candidates to choose from and “candidate X” wins 60 percent of the vote and “candidate Y” wins 40 percent of the state’s primary vote, then candidates X and Y would receive six delegates and four delegates, respectively. The Republican Party allows each state to decide if they want to use a winner-take-all method, where the candidate with the most votes receives all of that state’s delegates or the proportional system that is used for the Democratic primaries. At the political conventions in the summer of the election year, a single candidate is selected with great pomp and celebration and that candidate is officially declared that party’s nominee for President of the United States. (Cue the balloons and confetti.)

### **2016 Presidential Election Differences: Beware the Ides of March**

Changes in recent years to the primary election process have implications for the current 2016 Presidential election. Most of these changes have been initiated by the Republican National Committee (RNC). In a bid to shorten the primary process, the Republicans have moved up the timing of their National Convention from late August in the 2012 election to July 18-21 in 2016. The Democratic National Convention will be held the week of July 25, 2016.

***Moving up the Republican convention has the effect of shortening the primary process.***

Moving up the Republican convention has the effect of shortening the primary process because the RNC rules dictate that each state is required to submit its delegate lists to the party 45 days prior to the party’s national convention. Thus, the states holding their primaries in June will have to submit their delegate lists before the primary vote is complete, although some states may be granted waivers.

Other changes implemented by the Republican Party include tougher penalties for states that schedule primaries before March 1 of the election year. Only Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada are permitted to hold primary elections/caucuses before March 1. Any state other than those four that decides to move up their primary would be restricted in the number of delegates to the 2016 Republican National Convention. In addition, the RNC adopted a rule that requires any state holding their primary between March 1 and March 14 to award their delegates proportionally based on the percentage vote as opposed to a “winner-take-all” process. Any state with a primary after March 14 can still choose how they award Republican delegates. One state in particular that decided to move their primary is Florida. Republicans in Florida seized March 15 as the date to hold its primary and to give all its delegates to the winner as opposed to prior primary cycles where the state was penalized with a reduced delegate count for holding their primary earlier. This trove of delegate support could change the complexion of the race, particularly in a year when two Florida natives are candidates seeking the Republican Party’s nomination. Although by pushing the dates later into the primary season, it also turns the heat on for these candidates to notch early wins in other states in order to build momentum going into the large delegate count of the Florida primary.

***Republicans in Florida seized March 15 to hold its primary and to give all its delegates to the winner. This changes the complexion of a race in which two GOP candidates from Florida seek the nomination.***

All of the rules changes proposed by the RNC will allow the primary process to conclude earlier in the year and allow more time for a general election run and help to solidify within-party support

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<sup>4</sup> Caucuses are run by the political parties and are independent events where individuals vote for a particular candidate as opposed to a primary election which is run by the state.

for a single candidate. This is also important from a funding perspective, as some money designated for presidential campaigns are restricted to a general election run. Thus a candidate must win that party's nomination in order to receive or tap into a greater portion of funds for the general election.

### The General Election Itself

At the conclusion of the party conventions and with the nominees known, the general election process kicks off. With just months remaining in the presidential election process, the campaigns shift into high gear. During this time period, a vice presidential running mate is announced for each party. During the months leading up to November of the election year, a series of presidential debates take place where the two parties lay out their visions for the nation. In modern elections, there is also at least one vice presidential candidate debate which allows the two running-mates to debate one another as well.

The continuous campaigning and presidential debates all lead up to the November general election date, which is the same for all states. In accordance with the federal law, the general election is held on the first Tuesday following the first Monday of November in an election year, which will be Nov. 8, 2016.<sup>5</sup> The presidential election process has two components: the popular vote, based on the results of the voting public and the Electoral College, which is the process by which the President is actually selected. The popular vote is simply the physical count of the number of individuals voting for each candidate.

Voting demographics within the U.S. have changed over the past generation. In 1984, for example, 87 percent of registered voters were White, compared to 76 percent of registered voters as of 2014 (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>6</sup> In terms of the makeup of the voting age of the population, in 1984 the age of registered voters was roughly evenly split, whereas today, the bulk of registered voters are over the age of 55 (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 2

1984 Electorate, Registered Voters by Race

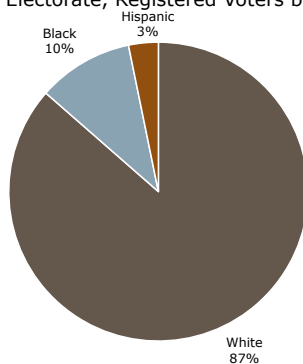
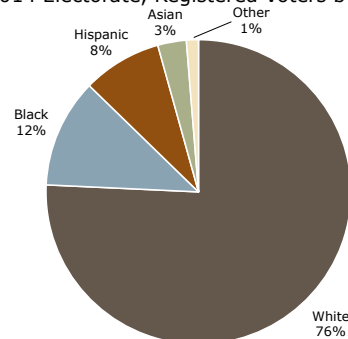


Figure 3

2014 Electorate, Registered Voters by Race



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce and Wells Fargo Securities, LLC

<sup>5</sup> Presidential Elections and Vacancies. 3 U.S.C § 1.

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau does not have as detailed demographic data dating back to 1984 on registered voters, thus the categories are different across Figures 2 and 3.

*In the months leading up to November, a series of debates allow the two parties to lay out their visions for the nation.*

Figure 4

1984 Electorate, Registered Voters by Age

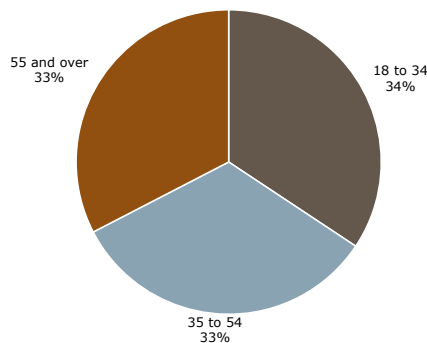
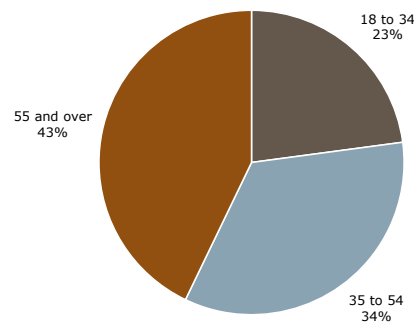


Figure 5

2014 Electorate, Registered Voters by Age



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce and Wells Fargo Securities, LLC

Even with shifting demographics, the turn-out of registered voters varies by election. As can be seen in the table below, voter turnout in the last four presidential elections ranged from 59.5 percent in 2000 to 63.8 percent in 2004. Even with shifting demographics among registered voters, the actual makeup of the individuals voting in the next election could look very different depending on actual voter turnout.

*Even with shifting demographics, the turn-out of registered voters varies by election.*

Table 1

Presidential Election Voter Turnout			
	Number of Adult U.S. Citizens (18 & over)	Votes Cast	Voter Turnout
2000	186,366,000	110,826,000	59.5%
2004	197,005,000	125,736,000	63.8%
2008	206,072,000	131,144,000	63.6%
2012	215,081,000	132,948,000	61.8%

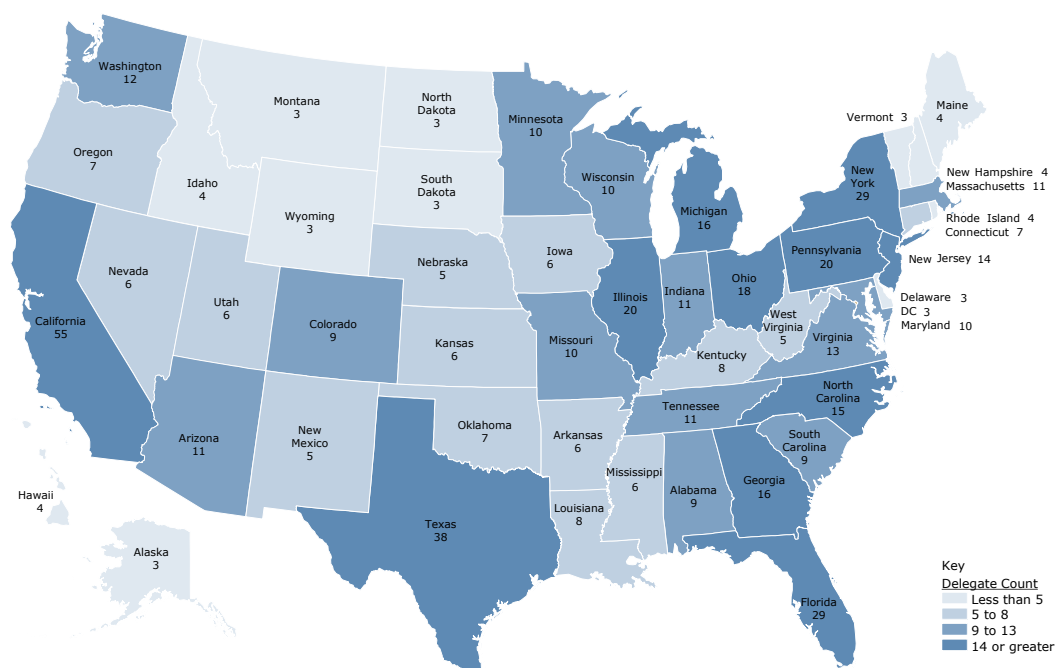
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce and Wells Fargo Securities, LLC

On Election Day voters cast their ballot for either the Republican or Democratic nominee or a third party or write-in candidate. After the polls close in each state, the votes are tallied and a winner of the popular vote is declared for each state. But the process is just beginning.

Upon the conclusion of the popular vote on election Tuesday for each state, the Electoral College process begins, which is the actual mechanism that selects the next President of the United States. In its most basic definition, the Electoral College is a body of electors who represent the voters of each state in choosing the president and vice president. The number of electors for each state is equal to the number of members of Congress in that state.<sup>7</sup> The winner is the candidate that receives an absolute majority of all available electoral votes. The map below shows each U.S. state and the number of electors for each state.

*Upon the conclusion of the popular vote on election Tuesday for each state, the Electoral College process begins.*

<sup>7</sup> While the District of Columbia is not a state, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Amendment grants it a number of electors equal to the least populous state; three at present.



Source: U.S. National Archives and Record Administration and Wells Fargo Securities, LLC

***With 538 total electoral votes at present, a number of 270 or greater wins the White House.***

With 538 total electoral votes at present, a number of 270 or greater wins the White House. The electors are individuals designated by each presidential candidate and are selected by the results of the popular vote. Most states, with the exception of Maine and Nebraska, have a winner-take-all system for their electors. If a candidate wins the popular vote for that state, then all of the state's electors are given to that candidate. There are a number of U.S. states each election cycle that are designated as "swing states," which are states that could swing to one party or another as opposed to historically going for one party and play an important role in reaching 270, since just one or a hand full of these states could tilt the electoral count for a candidate.

While the winner is typically known on election night, the formal process continues both in the name of tradition and to satisfy constitutional requirements. The governor of each state prepares a "Certificate of Ascertainment" listing all of the candidates who ran for president in that state, the names of their respective electors and declares the winning presidential candidate for the state.<sup>8</sup> The electors meet in their respective states, where they cast their votes and each state's "Certificate of Vote," is prepared at the meeting of the electors. These certificates are counted at a joint session of Congress, which is the official vote count. The sitting vice president of the United States, who also serves as the president of the U.S. Senate, presides over the count and officially declares who has been elected president and vice president of the United States. The president-elect takes the oath of office and is sworn in as president of the United States on Jan. 20 in the year following the presidential election, in turn concluding the election process.

## Conclusion

Alexander Hamilton was right about the manner of presidential election not being perfect. This report provides the basic mechanics for how elections work from the primaries and caucuses through the general election. We have endeavored to provide just enough history to frame the discussion and also get into the more recent changes in the current process to provide the insight that you need to have an inside track on the 2016 election. We will build on this framework from time to time as the 2016 election comes into greater focus.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. (2012). U.S. Electoral College: What is the Electoral College? Office of the Federal Register. <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/about.html>.

***Alexander Hamilton was right about the manner of presidential election not being perfect.***

**Appendix**

<b>2016 Election Caucus &amp; Primary Dates</b>		
	<b>Republican Caucus/Primary Dates</b>	<b>Democrat Caucus/Primary Dates</b>
Alabama	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Alaska	TBD	3/26/2016
Arizona	3/22/2016	3/22/2016
Arkansas	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
California	6/7/2016	6/7/2016
Colorado	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Connecticut	4/26/2016	4/26/2016
Delaware	4/26/2016	4/26/2016
District of Columbia	6/14/2016	6/14/2016
Florida	3/15/2016	3/15/2016
Georgia	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Hawaii	3/8/2016	3/26/2016
Idaho	3/8/2016	3/22/2016
Illinois	3/15/2016	3/15/2016
Indiana	5/3/2016	5/3/2016
Iowa	2/1/2016	2/1/2016
Kansas	3/5/2016	3/5/2016
Kentucky	5/17/2016	5/17/2016
Louisiana	3/5/2016	3/5/2016
Maine	TBD	3/6/2016
Maryland	4/26/2016	4/26/2016
Massachusetts	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Michigan	3/8/2016	3/8/2016
Minnesota	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Mississippi	3/8/2016	3/8/2016
Missouri	3/15/2016	3/15/2016
Montana	6/7/2016	6/7/2016
Nebraska	5/10/2016	3/6/2016
Nevada	2/20/2016	2/20/2016
New Hampshire	February, Date TBD	February, Date TBD
New Jersey	6/7/2016	6/7/2016
New Mexico	6/7/2016	6/7/2016
New York	TBD	TBD
North Carolina	Late Feb or March, Date TBD	Late Feb or March, Date TBD
North Dakota	TBD	6/7/2016
Ohio	3/15/2016	3/15/2016
Oklahoma	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Oregon	5/17/2016	5/17/2016
Pennsylvania	4/26/2016	4/26/2016
Rhode Island	4/26/2016	4/26/2016
South Carolina	February, Date TBD	February, Date TBD
South Dakota	6/7/2016	6/7/2016
Tennessee	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Texas	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Utah	3/22/2016	3/22/2016
Vermont	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Virginia	3/1/2016	3/1/2016
Washington	TBD	3/26/2016
West Virginia	5/10/2016	5/10/2016
Wisconsin	4/5/2016	4/5/2016
Wyoming	TBD	4/9/2016

**Source: Andrews, W., Bennett, K. and Parlapiano, A. (Jul. 2015). "2016 Primary Calendar and Results." New York Times.**



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