

explainity explained: U.S. presidential elections 2012

In the USA, this year is once again a presidential election year. And once again, like every four years, the question is, will a Democrat or a Republican move into the White House.

But how do presidential elections in America work, exactly?

Well, to explain that, it isn't enough just to look at the one election day. Because the whole election year is important.

Election years begin with primaries and caucuses. They're elections to decide which Democrat candidate will compete against which Republican candidate in the presidential election. As regards the Democrats, it's almost certain that President Barack Obama will run for a second term. But who will Obama's rival be?

Well, that's decided in the primaries and caucuses. Here, several Republicans compete for nomination as the presidential candidate.

The way the primaries and caucuses are organised, and who's entitled to vote varies from state to state. An important fact is that in some states all voters and in others only Republicans are entitled to elect a Republican candidate for the presidency.

The dates of the primaries and caucuses are also fixed individually by each federal state. One day, "Super Tuesday" is special. On Super Tuesday this year, 10 states elect a Republican candidate.

But these Republican contenders for nomination as the presidential candidate are not elected directly. Because citizens only elect delegates, who in turn are bound to a particular candidate. Altogether, 2,286 delegates are elected.

The winner of the primaries is the candidate who ultimately obtains more than half of the delegates' votes. Once all the states have elected their delegates it's usually clear who the candidate for the Presidency will be. But officially, the delegates only vote for their candidate at the party's National Convention.

If none of the candidates obtains more than half of all the delegates' votes, negotiations are held within the party. Then some candidates may withdraw, so the delegates have to vote again. If that is the case, the delegates are no longer bound to a particular candidate; they can vote for a different candidate, and carry on doing so until one candidate wins.

So after the party's National Convention it's clear – and official – who the Republican candidate challenging Obama over the coming months will be. The election campaign can begin!

And the winner is decided by the citizens of the USA on Election Day, the 6th of November 2012. On that day all US citizens over 18 years old can cast their ballot. But here again – like in the primaries and caucuses – the presidential candidates are not voted for directly. Instead, US citizens vote for electors, who in turn are pledged to vote for one of the candidates. So if someone wants Obama to be President again, he votes for an elector who is also for Obama.

The number of electors in each federal state depends on the state's population. So at the end of an Election Day, in every state, a certain number of electors are for a Democrat president and a certain number are for a Republican president. However, they are not simply assigned to the presidential candidates, because in almost all states the "winner-takes-it-all" principle applies.

Let's assume a state has ten electors. Six of them are for Obama and four for the Republican candidate. Then Obama has won the election in that state and gets the votes of all ten electors. The Republicans go away empty-handed. The winner of a state takes it all!

This is the reason why the election campaign is harder-fought in some states than in others. Because while Texas, for example, almost always elects a Republican majority and California almost always a Democrat majority, there are other states where the result is not so certain. These are the so-called swing states. Florida, for example, is usually a swing state. Before every election it's uncertain which candidate will win there.

Altogether, there are 538 electors. The candidate who has more than half of all electors on his side has won the election. And there, the 25 electors from Florida can definitely be decisive!

So after the electors have been elected it's actually already clear who will be President. But officially, the President is elected later, by the Electoral College. It's then that all the electors cast their votes in their state, on the 17th of December.

However, these votes are counted at a still later date, namely on the 6th of January 2013, by the US Congress. And finally, then and there, it's also officially announced who will be entitled to move into the White House for the next four years.