

explainity explains: The US Presidential Election

It is that time again: The United States Presidential Election is around the corner. Every four years the American people decide whether a democrat or a republican gets to live in the white house for the next four years. But how exactly does the United States Presidential Election work? Well to understand this we have to take a closer look at the entire election year.

It all starts with the primaries, in which democrats and republicans each decide who is going to be their presidential candidate. How the primaries work and who is eligible to vote in them, varies from state to state. In some states, every registered voter is allowed to vote, in others only voters registered with a particular party can cast a ballot in that party’s primary. Even the dates the primaries are held are different in each state. Although there are some cluster primary dates, for example “Super Tuesday”. On “Super Tuesday” multiple states hold their primary.

And it gets even more complicated than that. Because the people don’t actually elect the presidential candidate directly. With their vote, they are technically electing delegates, who in turn will support a certain candidate. In a primary, each candidate is awarded a certain amount of “delegates” or representatives, based on the amount of votes they receive. Those delegates will later “vote” for their assigned candidate.

Once the delegates from the various primaries have been awarded, you can already get a good sense of who will become the presidential candidate. However, the delegates don’t officially “vote” for their candidates until the national convention. In the end, a candidate must receive over half of the delegate votes to win the party’s nomination.

If no candidate receives over half of the delegate votes at the convention, the party re-negotiates its entries into the presidential race. Additionally, sometimes candidates will end their presidential bids, and then the delegates will have to vote again. In that case, the delegates don’t necessarily have to vote for “their” candidates again, but are now free to choose whomever they like. This procedure continues until a presidential candidate has been found.

Once the two parties have officially chosen who is going head to head in the presidential race, the actual general election is held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Registered voters over 18 get to vote for their president on that day.

However, similar to the primaries, the president is not elected directly here either. The vote tally for each candidate determines how many “electors” are awarded to that candidate. These “electors” will then elect the candidate. Each state has a different number of electors, depending on how many people live in the state. But the electors cannot simply vote for the candidate they wish. In 48 of the 50 states, the “elector tally” is awarded “Winner-take-all”. This means, the winner of that state gets all the votes from that state!

Let’s say, a state has ten electors. If, at the end of the voting day, the tally awards six electors to the democratic candidate and four to the republican, the democrat has won the election in this state and gets all ten votes, while the republican gets nothing. The winner takes all!

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This is why in so-called swing states, states in which both parties have an equally high chance of taking the win, candidates are campaigning harder than in other states. It is hard to predict the electoral outcome, pre-election in these states.

There is a total of 535 electors. The candidate who can secure more than half of the electoral vote has won the election. This is why electors from the swing states are especially important.

Once the electors have been awarded, it is basically clear who will be the next president of the United States, while officially the decision is only made by the “electoral college”, which is the body made up of the awarded “electors”. This is usually 41 days after election day. On that day, the electors vote in their states. These votes are then counted in Congress around the beginning of January. And it is in Congress, too, where the next occupant of the white house is later officially announced. Finally, the inauguration of the next president takes place on January 20th, to formally end the election year.

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