

## **4.3 Participation and democracy in US politics Elections in the US.**

### **Aspect: The process of presidential elections: the invisible primary; primary and caucus systems; the national nominating conventions.**

This unit considers the processes of presidential elections: the invisible primary; primary and caucus systems; the national convention (4.3.1).

#### **Introduction:**

This unit covers the specification elements related to 'The Processes of presidential elections'. This topic also relates closely to 'The influence of money on campaigning', which is also a long topic in this series. As with all topics it is not inclusive of all potential material required for examination purposes. Both teachers and students will also need to undertake their own research/reading in order to provide a fully comprehensive coverage of Presidential Elections and particularly those that apply to Donald Trump's win in 2016 which went against the standard norms of previous US elections.

Teachers should be aware that the exercise and lesson timings depend on the interaction of the group. Therefore exercises and task may have to be reduced in length to avoid spending too much time on this topic area.

There are 4 interactive exercises in this unit and 3 additional tasks.

#### **Aims and Objectives:**

##### **Aim:**

- The identification and critical analysis of the processes of presidential elections.

##### **Objectives:**

1. To examine the nature and importance of the invisible primary.
2. To illustrate the nature of the primary and caucus systems in the primary.
3. To determine the strengths and weaknesses of the primary and caucus systems.
4. To identify and critically explore the national nominating conventions.

#### **WJEC Government and Politics Assessment Objectives:**

A01 – The processes of caucuses and primaries, the key terms applied

A02 - The determination of why the national conventions are important in the selection process

A03 - To seek to order the importance of central reasons and arguments with respect to determining the strengths and weaknesses of primaries

#### **Links to other parts of the WJEC specification:**

A2 Unit 4, 4.3.1 presidential and vice presidential tickets

A2 Unit 4, 4.3.1 the influence of money and media

**Introducing the resource:**

The session commences with a general introduction explaining that it is covering the key elements in the mechanics of selecting a presidential candidate. The teacher should explain that although there are some similarities to elections in the UK, mainly the electoral system first-past-the-post, there are also many differences, including the fact that we don't elect our own head of state – the Queen. There are a set of processes which are open to the whole American electorate to join in, should they so wish. They end with both Democrats and Republicans having selected both a President and a Vice Presidential candidate.

The teacher should note that the selection process normally only applies if the political parties do not have a sitting president (incumbent). It is normal for any president to seek a second term and if they do they are rarely challenged by another candidate from within their own party. Therefore depending on which party is in office it may only be one of the two main political parties that is going through the presidential selection process. The session goes through the different stages of the process of presidential elections prior to the actual political campaign from August onwards.

**Conclusion:**

The session concludes by the teacher reminding the students that the electoral process is one of the oldest in the world. It has a number of strengths and many weaknesses. The teacher should ask the students why they think that it has not been changed to a different method over time but merely reformed? The answers may include the fact that it reinforces the two party system and therefore they are not in favour of change. The winners tend to be Democrat for 8 years, Republican for 8 years and therefore the victories are evenly spread. It is also a system that normally produces clear winners.

## Exercise 1: Is the election a popular vote on a straight majority?



### Guidance

For the first exercise the teacher should ask two questions in order to make students aware that the election is not, as many people assume, by popular vote on a straight majority.

Students should answer the two questions individually – the teacher should then go over the answers. They should emphasise the indirect nature of US elections. They can identify that unlike other presidential elections across the world it is not the popular vote that elects the candidates but it is the election that selects the delegates who elect the president.



### Activity - Questions and Classroom Discussion

**Question 1** – The U.S. president is directly elected by the votes of the American people. True or false? Give a reason for your answer.

**Answer** – False. In fact, the president is chosen by 538 people, the members of the Electoral College. The electors meet in December of the election year, and the candidate that receives the majority of their votes becomes president on 20 January.

**Question 2** – For the population of America, Election Day is the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. True or false? Give a reason for your answer.

**Answer** – True it is – but the American president is *indirectly* elected in a two-step process involving a vote of the general population and an Electoral College.

## Exercise 2: A little bit of history - The 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment – How did the Electoral College evolve?



### Guidance

The teacher should note that the framers of the constitution believed that a system to choose the President and Vice President could be designed to work effectively. The candidate with the most votes would become President, and the candidate with the second highest total would become Vice President. But it did not envisage that political parties would become involved and thought that they would always remain independent candidates. This didn't last long. Undertake the exercise and put the events in order.



### Activity - Ordering of Events

[Click to open activity](#)

**See Worksheet 2**

Students should put the events in order that ensured the evolution of The Electoral College. The correct answers are below.

Order	
1.	At the Constitutional Convention meeting in 1787, delegates for the 13 states express concern that having a single body meet in the US capital to elect a President would allow undue influence by political parties, larger states, special interests groups or even foreign governments. They believe that by meeting in their own states to select the candidates they will make it harder for electors to find ways to collude or buy and sell votes.
2.	The framers of the constitution are concerned that a popular vote will either lead to the 'tyranny of majority' electing a future tyrant or electing a political faction that alienate the other minorities. They therefore decide to set up an Electoral College of 'reasoned men' to ensure that 'the right type of candidate' become president.
3.	Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution – establishes an electoral system in which each the state appointed the same amount of electors as they had senators plus representatives from that state combined.
4.	Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution – this does mention the role of political parties.
5.	The state electors meet separately to other states and cast two votes but does not differentiate between president and vice president. The candidate with over 50 per cent of the vote becomes president and the runner up vice president.
6.	Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution – states if there is no overall winner, with over 50 per cent of the vote, the House of Representatives choose the President, and the Senate pick the vice president.
7.	1796 presidential election, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, were the two main candidates but both opposed each other's ideals.

8.	John Adams, (Federalist), gained 71 electoral votes – more than half of the total vote – and Thomas Jefferson, a (Republican or Democratic-Republican), received 68 electoral votes. Adams becomes President and Jefferson Vice President – it's like Donald Trump becoming President and Hilary Clinton Vice President.
9.	1800 presidential election – to avoid the problems of 1796 the political parties nominate a presidential candidate and a vice presidential candidate from the same party.
10.	Democratic-Republican ticket of Thomas Jefferson (for President) and Aaron Burr, Vice President (Democratic-Republican) win with 73 electoral votes each.
11.	Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution – draws no distinction between Jefferson and Burr and both have the same vote.
12.	Neither Jefferson nor Burr had a majority over each other so the choice of president is decided by the House of Representatives.
13.	It takes 36 ballots and a lot of 'horse-trading' between candidates and Electoral College representatives before Jefferson is elected president and Burr vice president.
14.	Two chaotic elections result in an amendment (12th) to the constitution in June 1804 by allowing Electoral College representatives to cast a separate vote for president and vice president.

## Exercise 3: What is a primary?



### Guidance

The teacher may wish to give the students some facts about the nature of primaries before they watch the YouTube clip and answer the questions or provide this material afterwards. The final exercise also reflects on this information.



### Notes

The relevant information is that both the political parties and the states themselves set the rules for this intra-party state election. They don't actually elect the candidates but determine how the delegates will vote when they attend the nominating convention. The larger the state the more delegates they have, which can reflect on the amount of time the candidates campaign in that state. There are two types of election – open in which any voter can vote in a party's primary (but not both) or closed for registered party members only.

Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ertAvE9JxDQ>



### Activity – What is a Primary?

**See Worksheet 3**

Whilst watching the YouTube clip the students should answer the following questions:

1. How many Electoral College votes do you need to win the presidency?  
*Over 270*
2. What is the number of Electoral College votes based on?  
*The number of members in the House of Congress.*
3. What is the minimum representation each state receives?  
*Three.*
4. In most states who do the Electoral Colleges votes go to?  
*The one with the most votes.*
5. Which states don't abide by this rule?  
*Maine and Nebraska*
6. What happened in the 2000 election?  
*Bush beat Gore on a minority vote.*
7. How would most of the US population like to vote?  
*By the popular vote.*

8. How have population changes affected the elections?

*Moved more states to the Republicans.*

*Source: The Economist (2012) Videographic: How does the US presidential election system work?*



## Guidance

Having learned what a primary is students should learn some of the key terms. This exercise involves some need for student research and role play.



## Activity – Key Terms Associated with Primaries

You are a journalist working for BBC Wales covering the US elections. Your editor rings you and asks you a number of questions about terms they have heard recently on a broadcast about the American presidential elections on CNN. They ask you to explain them and where relevant, give examples of each. The terms are:

1. Momentum
2. Outsider candidate
3. Insider candidate
4. Front-loading
5. Invisible primary
6. New Hampshire primary
7. Super Tuesday

You can research the meaning of each. You will need to construct some dialogue as a conversation. Your dialogue piece between the editor and the journalist should last no longer than two minutes.



## Notes

Answers could reveal some of the following details.

1. Momentum also called 'big mo', refers to a large rise in support after the initial primaries and caucuses. It normally involves much more media attention on that candidate and can force others from the field more quickly. Donald Trump gained significant momentum early on in the 2016 US presidential contest for the Republicans.
2. Outsider candidate – those that lack direct experience of Washington DC politics – normally this means that the candidate has held public office outside of Washington as a governor or in the military. Donald Trump, however, became the first president without a government service before taking office.

3. Insider candidate – those candidates who have held an elected post in Washington DC normally in the senate or as Vice President
4. Front-loading – the term used when states move their primary forward in order to achieve more influence during the contest.
5. Invisible primary – the period before the first primary-caucus where either the candidate has or has not been officially declared but they seek to test the waters for their candidacy. They may write a book, build up a financial campaign war chest and generally seek to gain an advantage over their rivals.
6. New Hampshire primary – New Hampshire is the state that is famous for holding the first primary and one in which much of the invisible primary work would have been undertaken in. Democrat candidates frequently lose it – Clinton in 1992, Obama in 2008 and Hilary in 2016. Republicans, however, normally win it – Romney in 2012 and Trump in 2016.
7. Super Tuesday – the date in March when a large number of states hold their primaries on the same day. It can be the key turning point in a candidate's fortunes and often knocks the weaker candidates out of the race.



## Exercise 4: What is a caucus?



### Guidance

The teacher may wish to give the students some facts about the nature of primaries before they watch the YouTube clip and answer the questions, or provide this material afterwards. The final exercise also reflects on this information.



### Notes

The first caucus is held in Iowa and is regarded the most important for giving its winner momentum for later contests. Before the 1960s most states held them instead of primaries but today it tends to be the more sparsely populated states such as Nevada that hold them. In these contests the delegates to the national conventions are chosen in a system of caucuses and conventions. Therefore a caucus is simply the word used for a meeting of party supporters. Caucuses are normally not that well attended and are seen to give too much power to the extreme elements in each party.

Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnQZ3eAl3EU>



### Activity – What is a Caucus?

**See Worksheet 4a**

Whilst watching the YouTube clip the students should answer the following questions:

1. Are caucuses the same as primaries?  
*No they are different*
2. How many jurisdictions hold caucuses?  
*17.*
3. Who chooses the highest percentage of their delegates by caucus?  
*The Republicans at 21 percent.*
4. How do they know who supports who at a caucus meeting?  
*At the end of the debate, a secret ballot or head count takes place.*
5. Where are the county results reported to?  
*State officials*
6. What do the proportional or winner takes all delegates then do?  
*They vote for candidates at the national convention*

*YouTube source: U.S. Elections: Caucuses Explained (2012)*



## Guidance

Students should study the map below showing methods of selecting Presidential delegates by state and create a graph or chart to represent the four different categories shown on the map.

Using the information from the graph they should then calculate what are the most prominent and least prominent methods.

The chart can also be used to familiarise students with the geographical nature of the USA.



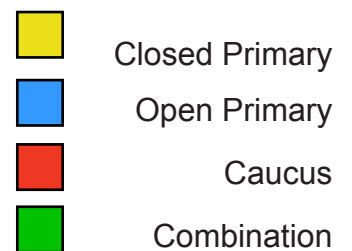
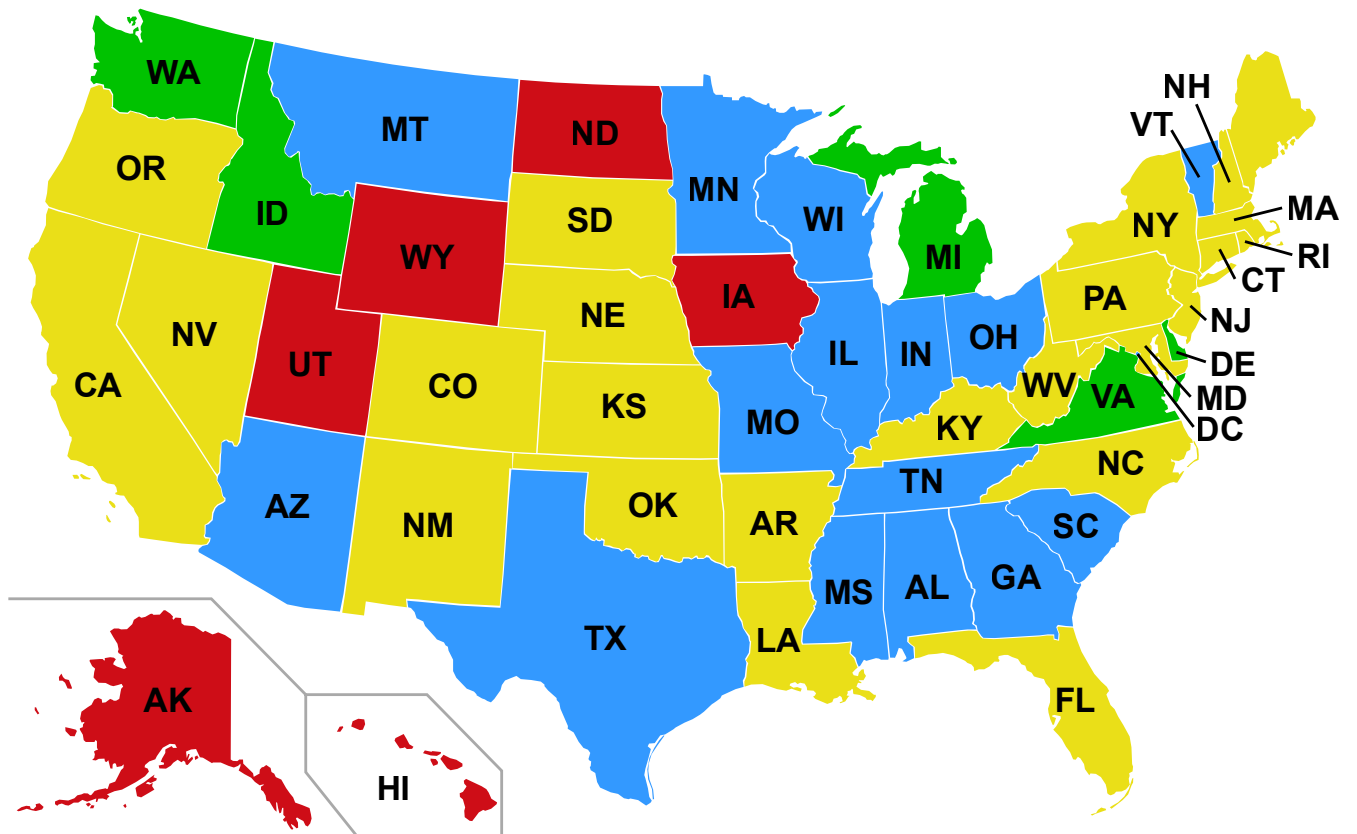
## Activity – Selecting Presidential Delegates

**See Worksheet 4b**

1. Students should create a graph or chart to represent the four different categories shown on the map below.
2. From the graph students should calculate what are the most prominent and least prominent methods of selecting delegates.

## The United States of America

Methods of Selecting Presidential Delegates by State:



## Exercise 5: Strengths and weaknesses of the process



### Guidance

The teacher should note that like all aspects of the presidential election process the primaries and caucuses are open to criticism. This was particularly so in the 2016 primaries. This exercise gets students to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the process. Before the exercise is undertaken the teacher should get the students to write what they believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the process. They should be asked to think of at least two on both sides.



### Activity - For and Against the Primaries

[Click to open activity](#)

**See Worksheet 5**

Students should decide whether the points support or go against the case for primaries. The correct answers are below.

For	Against
Primaries are more democratic than the closed system of caucuses – so called decision making in a ‘smoke-filled room’.	It rewards candidates with deep financial pockets, who may not be as good of those with less finance.
They allow candidates to demonstrate their capacity to win states in the November election – for example Trump could win across the south despite being based in New York.	The media focus and ‘reality show’ style contest tends to reward the candidates who are the most entertaining rather than necessarily being the best at governing. It has been said to trivialise democracy.
They weed out the weaker candidates with little chance of winning or no support. In the 2016 Republican primaries 16 of the 21 candidates had withdrawn by the second primary in South Carolina on 20 February 2016.	The campaigns go on for far too long, sometimes for 18 months beforehand when the invisible primaries are taken into account.
The long and gruelling contest ensures that candidates qualified are tested in the field fully before the presidential campaign starts.	It moves the candidates to the extremes of their party's ideology in order to appeal to their party's core base. They may make promises that are hard to change later on when it comes to attraction a wider vote.

For	Against
For the Republican and Democratic parties it ensures that they gain the national publicity that helps ensure that their parties remain the key components in the US's two party system.	Primaries can greatly weaken the political parties control over the candidate selection as candidates can bypass them on fundraising and generating support. In 2016 the Democratic Party's favoured candidate Hilary Clinton gained nomination but the Republican Party generally did not endorse Donald Trump, who won anyway.
	Low turnouts can result in unrepresentative results.
	The contest and competition can be very divisive as candidates seek to discredit their opponents. Donald Trump in 2016 split the Republican party and permanently alienated a number of senior Republicans.
	Primaries can give momentum to 'outsider candidates' with little experience of governing and no real preparation for the presidency such as Donald Trump in 2016. They can also promote candidates on the political fringes such as Bernie Saunders for the Democrats, also in 2016.

## Exercise 6: National Party Convention



### Guidance

The teacher should make the students aware that, unlike in the UK, the political parties do not hold twice yearly conferences. Instead they hold a national convention once every four years in July in order to officially endorse their presidential candidate. These are commonly known in the UK as an election rally, although the national conventions also have some other roles to fill.



### Notes

To win at the convention the candidate must win an absolute majority at the convention. The convention confirms rather than selects the candidate, however. Before it was reformed into its modern format had a key role in selecting the presidential candidate. In those days deals were brokered in 'smoke filled rooms' by Democrat or Republican party bosses who controlled the process. The convention also selects, 'crowns', the Vice Presidential candidate (running mate) although this is usually announced some time beforehand. It also acts as a unifying rally for the party, a chance to publicise their new candidates and confirm the party's election platform. The amount of media attention on them in recent years has been reduced to some of the key speeches as other forms of entertainment have proved more popular. The teacher should also note that the Democratic Party have a category called superdelegates. They are unpledged delegates that make up 15 per cent of the total delegates. They are free to support any candidate are normally senior Democratic Party representatives. In 2016 they mainly endorsed Hilary Clinton.

*Viewing the national conventions* - The teacher may wish to show the students excerpts from the acceptance speeches of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump and ask them to assess who the speeches are aimed at – such as party faithful, uncommitted voters, business, attacking the rival candidate etc.



### Activity - National Party Convention Statements Ranking

[Click to open activity](#)

**See Worksheet 6**

Students should consider how important are the national nominating conventions and rank the statements below in order of their importance on the diamond. Students could write the number of each statement in the most appropriate box on the diamond before discussing in class using the digital version and reaching a final outcome.

Students should then be asked to justify their answers. The successful 'crowning' of the candidate is often seen as the most important point, beyond this there is no defined order.

## Statements

- The convention ratifies the party's nominee and allows the party to unite around the chosen candidate.
- The convention is the only time that the political parties meet nationally, otherwise they remain as 50 separate state parties.
- The convention puts forward the party's official policy positions and adopts them. Although they have already been shaped and determined prior to the convention.
- The presidential candidates hope to achieve an electoral bounce after the convention. In 2016 polls indicated that Trump received a post convention bounce of 2-3 per cent whilst Clinton's was 5-6 per cent.
- It is used as an opportunity to announce the vice-presidential candidate, although this is almost always known beforehand.
- It allows those opposed to the winning candidate to demonstrate their opposition in a democratic way. Although the party mainly seeks to ensure this is minimised.
- It allows the parties to project their candidates in the media on a national platform.
- The convention enables the party's supporters to meet and network in a way that they would not normally be able to do.
- The party are able to publically demonstrate the diversity of their own support base to a wider nation.

## Exercise 7: Elections in the US, Key terms



### Guidance

This exercise revises some key terms that students covered in this unit. The teacher should ask the students to link each one with four answers supplied. It acts as a summary for the session.



### Activity - Elections Key terms

[Click to open activity](#)

[See Worksheet 7](#)

Students should link the statements correctly to each of the 4 categories.  
The correct answers are below.

Primary	Caucus
An intra-state (multi state) election to select the Democrat or Republican candidate for the presidential election.	This is for the states that do not hold primaries to select their presidential nominee?
The rules for these contests are decided by the individual States themselves.	Normally found in less densely populated states such a Nevada.
They can be open to anyone or closed to only party members.	The first is in Iowa.
The first was in New Hampshire.	They only contain party activists.
	Also referred to as 'low-turnout high intensity elections'.

'Invisible primary'	National nominating conventions
Held in the period before the official primaries and Caucuses start.	Where the party's officially ratify their nominees for president and vice president.
Where potential candidates test the political waters.	A national media event in which the parties seek to demonstrate unity and drawing together.
A period when potential candidates make their first public appearances, start opinion polling and fund raising.	Where the political parties set out their policy agenda for the forthcoming elections.
A period in which the political candidate seeks to gain an advantage over potential rivals by getting an early start.	A time where the candidate seeks to gain an electoral bounce to give them momentum in the polls.