

# The System of Elections in the USA and Political Parties

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## Types of Elections

*In the USA, elections are organized on a regular basis for the President, both houses of Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate), and state and local government offices. In practice, candidates in the majority of cases run for office as members of the party (one of two main political parties – the Democrats or the Republicans) in order to get the party's support for their candidacy. However, in principle, whoever wants to run as an independent candidate can organize a petition. In that case, if it is collected enough signatures, the person can run. According to the electoral law, any American citizen over the age of 18 may vote in an election under conditions that the person is registered and meets the requirements for residency in a state (one out of 50).*

## Elections for the Members of Congress

The US Congress (Parliament) is composed of two houses: the House of Representatives (in fact, the Lower House, representing the people) and the Senate (in fact, the Upper House, representing the states). The House of Representatives has 435 members. Each member is serving a two-year term. However, the exact number of each state depends on the size of its population. For instance, some states like Montana, as they have very small populations, have a few representatives (Montana has only one) while other states with bigger populations have proportionally more representatives: for example, California with the largest population has 53. The borders of the districts that members of the House of Representatives represent are changed every ten years after each census or official counting of the inhabitants. The purpose is to include an equal number of voters.

Every state elects two Senators (altogether 100). Each of them is serving a six-year term. However, every two years, around 1/3 of the Senate comes up for re-election. The elections

for the Senate are organized at the same time either as elections for the House of Representatives or for the President.

In both cases of elections for Congress, the people in the particular district or state choose their representative and only the candidate with a plurality of votes (i.e., with the most votes) is elected for the Congress.

Alongside the elections on the national level, each state has its own government which is set up like the federal government with elections held in the same way.

## **The Presidential Elections**

Elections for the President and Vice-President are held every four years according to, in fact, a complicated and very particular procedure that is unique in the world.

The first electoral step is primaries or primary elections. It means that from January to June in the election year, political parties choose their candidates through a series of elections in each state. In other words, people choose the party whose primary they want to vote in and vote for their choice of candidates. The second step is the congressional convention, i.e., in the summer, each political party (in fact only the two biggest) holds a convention in order to make its final choice of candidates. Teams of delegates from each state go to the convention to vote for the pair of candidates that won their party's primary elections. Nevertheless, usually, the party chooses the final candidates informally in advance, based on who has been most successful in the primaries.

It has to be noted that the presidential election all the time are organized on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November. Several weeks before the election, the voters who are registered to vote receive a card telling them the address of the polling station where they have to cast their vote. Every voter at the polling station casts a single presidential vote (for both a President and Vice-President), together with separate votes for a member of the House of Representatives and (in the case of hold elections) a senator.

The next procedure goes after the votes are counted in the presidential election. The point is that each state (50) has a number of electors (one for each congressional district and senator) who make up the Electoral College (like a committee). According to the rules, each elector casts two votes, one for the President and another for the Vice-President (formally not dependent on the results of voting by the people but in reality following the people's wish expressed in the elections). In fact, the members of the Electoral College chose both candidates who received the greatest number of votes in the state. Finally, a candidate with the support of at least 270 of 538 electors becomes President or Vice-President.

## **The Two-party System**

In the USA there are two focal political parties - the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. In practice, there are other smaller political parties and associations but they very rarely win major elections. In essence, therefore, in the USA exists a two-party system at least for the very practical reason that the US "winner-take-all" political system makes it difficult for more than two main political parties to exist at one time.

The Democrats as a party started in the 1820s growing from the branch of the US' first political party - the Federal Party. The Republican Party began as an anti-slavery party in

1854 with members from the Democratic Party and the Whigs.

Belonging to a party involves simply choosing that party when you register to vote. There are no membership dues or requirements. In practice, it is normal for people to change membership or vote across party lines. It has to be noticed that the heads of the national parties do not hold official positions in the government.

Concerning the role of the political parties in the USA at first place has to be said that party organizations are less important compared to the states with the Parliaments. For the very reason of the way the government is composed, the same political party does not necessarily control the two houses of Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate) or the presidency at the same time. Consequently, it is very difficult to hold one party responsible for the actions of the government. In essence, US citizens (those with voting rights) vote for individual candidates for each office rather than a party state (list of candidates). Basically, it means that the candidate's personal quality or electoral propaganda performance is in the majority of cases more valuable than his/her party's membership.

For both major political parties in the US, one of the most important activities is to organize the party convention (big meeting). It is organized every four years at the time before the elections for the President. The convention officially chooses the presidential candidate of the party (together with the Vice-President) and at the same time proclaims the political-electoral platform (ideas and policies) of the party.

Both national parties raise money for election campaigns and provide additional kinds of help to their candidates to win. Local branches of the parties (with the ordinary people active in the party) are working to support local and national candidates.

According to the rules, in Congress (the House of Representatives and the Senate), the majority party controls the most important and powerful committees which make significant decisions on the issues and laws that are dealt with by Congress. As a matter of comparison, the members of the US Congress are more independent from their parties than British Members of Parliament. They aim to appear loyal first to the people they represent but, nevertheless, at the same time, they are trying to be as loyal as to their party's membership in order to have a chance to become members of important committees and, therefore, fight for the support for their own proposals. Many politically active US citizens do not want politicians to be too much partisan (strongly attached to their party) but to have a more bipartisan (cooperative) attitude and, henceforth, work together for the common good of the nation.

In general, if we are comparing the US parties' politics with many other countries, both the Democrats and the Republicans can be understood from the wider perspective as the parties of the political center. However, what is differentiating them from each other is that the Democratic Party is to the left while the Republican Party is to the right of the center. Traditionally, the Democratic Party program and politics support spending on social welfare programs while the Republican Party is against such policy. Typically, the Republicans support spending on the US Army believing there should be few laws restricting the business of producing the arms. The Republican Party is called the Grand Old Party (GOP) having an elephant as the party's symbol while a donkey symbolizes the Democrats.

During the last several decades, the Democrats have been getting support more and more

from young voters, low-paid workers, union members, the urban population, and African-Americans (and other minorities). However, more rich people, those with stronger conservative-religious approaches and/or patriarchal standpoints followed by the white citizens who reside in central and southern portions of the USA usually support the Republican Party.

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