

Presidential Primaries and Caucuses

Primaries and caucuses are two ways that people help states and political parties choose presidential nominees. Learn how they work and the differences between the processes.

How presidential primaries and caucuses work

Presidential primaries

Most states hold primaries 6-9 months before a presidential election. Primary voters choose their preferred candidate anonymously by casting secret ballots. The state where the primary is held takes the results of the vote into account to award delegates to the winners.

Caucuses

Several states hold caucuses in the months leading up to a presidential election. Caucuses are meetings run by political parties that are held at the county, district, or precinct level. Some caucuses choose candidates by secret ballot. Others require participants to divide themselves into groups according to the candidate they support. Undecided participants form their own group. Each candidate's group gives speeches and tries to get others to join their group. At the end, the number of delegates given to each candidate is based on the number of caucus votes they received.

Types of primaries and caucuses

Depending on state and political party rules, primaries and caucuses can be "open," "closed," or some hybrid of the two.

- During an open primary or caucus, voters do not have to be registered with a political party to take part in its primary or caucus.
- During a closed primary or caucus, only voters registered with that party can take part and vote.
- "Semi-open" and "semi-closed" primaries and caucuses are variations of the two main types.

Each state has its own way of operating its primaries and caucuses. Learn which states have which types of primaries.

Awarding delegates from the primaries and caucuses

States and political parties use different methods for deciding how many delegates they will award to each candidate. For information about your state's presidential primaries or caucuses, contact your state election office or the political party of your choice.

Delegates go on to represent their state at national party conventions. Learn about the role of delegates in choosing their party's presidential nominee during the national conventions.