

The American Election Process

Part 1 - Caucus or Primary

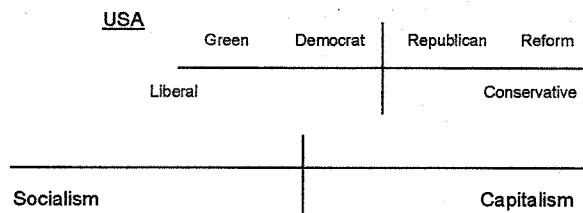
By Jenny Pettersson

This year is an election year in United States. The American people will be able to choose who is going to lead the country for the next four years. Every day there are reports, articles, and TV-shows about this sometimes difficult and confusing topic. Therefore, in a series of articles from April to November, we are planning to explore and explain the American election process.

American Parties

The Republican Party and the Democratic Party are the two parties who have dominated the political scene since the civil war in 1860. However, they are not the only ones. There exist at least a dozen small parties, and within this group the largest ones are the Green Rainbow Party and the Reform (or Libertarian) Party. These parties are collectively called third parties. Some people don't feel their beliefs are represented by either one of the above mentioned parties. What they can do is to run for president as an independent candidate. However, this is a rare phenomenon.

On a left-to-right scale, Republicans and Democrats are placed in the middle with the Democrats slightly to the left and the Republicans more to the right. The Green Party is by far most leftist and the Reform Party is its equivalent on the right. Nevertheless, all parties are more conservative than their counterparts in Europe and therefore slightly more to the right on the socialism-capitalism scale.



The election process can be divided into two different seasons. First there is the primary season which starts in January and ends with the conventions in July. Then there is the general election season, which starts after the conventions in July and ends in November when citizens vote for the president candidates. The final part of the process is when the Electoral College elects the new president in December.

America has what is called a two-party system. This means that even though there are many different parties campaigning at the beginning of the primary election season, there are usually only two left once the general election race starts. An independent candidate may run for president along with the two parties but this is very rarely the case. Today the two main parties in the system are considered the Democrats and the Republicans, and all other parties are called third parties. The purpose of the

primary season is to select which candidates are going to participate in the general election race. Since George Bush only has been elected once, the Republicans already know who will represent them, so this year the primary election race is to find out who is going to be his opponent. If Bush wins this election, he cannot be reelected once more. This means that during the primary season in 2008 candidates from both parties must be nominated.

Campaign Finances

Campaign finances are a critical issue in the election race. Every party has a huge amount of volunteer workers but still it takes a lot of money to run a campaign. They have to finance their own organization and everything around it, pay for TV time and other types of media. The government provides some public funding for those parties that received at least 5 % of the vote in previous election. Nevertheless, to a certain extent they need to finance their own campaign. This is made through fundraising and campaign contributions. The candidate depends on individual voters and different organizations' financial support. The result is somewhat overwhelming. Democrats and Republicans each raise several millions dollars every election period and therefore some candidates choose not to accept public funds.

There is an ongoing debate about this method of funding campaigns. Some say that all of the focus on money is poisoning politics and that the need to raise money is too time consuming. They mean that all that time could and should be spent on issues that are more important. Other sees it like a filter, meaning that every candidate has to articulate his or her beliefs and policies. In their eagerness to raise money, they have to convince voters through strong political engagement. Non-articulate candidates will not be able to survive and as a result, only good candidates will last.

Primary or Caucus

Primaries and caucuses are two different ways a party nominates its candidates. In a primary, party members chose their candidate through election. This means they go to the polls and vote for their top choice for nominee. In proportion to how many votes the candidates gets, a number of state delegates are assigned to represent them at the convention. The primary method is the most common one among all states. Depending on state law, party members can vote directly for the presidential candidate or for the delegates who then support the preferred candidate at the convention.

The process of a caucus is more complicated. It starts in small neighborhood meetings where people divide themselves into groups according to whom they support for president. Then delegates are assigned in proportion to the number of people supporting each candidate. The delegates then represent the neighborhood in a higher level caucus. It could be on city, regional, state or congressional district level. The process repeats itself until it reaches the state or congressional district. At this level, the final decision is made concerning how many state

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delegates each candidate will have at the national convention.

Under state and federal law, each state can choose between these two methods in order to nominate delegates to the convention. At the convention, all of the state delegates come together and choose their party's national leader. Each party has its own convention and this year the Democratic convention will be held here in Boston in July. The candidate who is elected national leader at that party's convention is the one who will run for the president post. In the end, that usually leaves two parties and two presidential candidates.

Super Tuesday

Not all states have their primary or caucus at the same time. There is in fact almost a competition between states in order to be first to go. Early states get more attention since the outcome of the election still is unknown. This brings publicity and promotes the state's economy. The first state to vote is Iowa, which has its caucus as early as January 19. The following state is New Hampshire with its primary held on January 27.

"Super Tuesday" is an early Tuesday in March. On this Tuesday, as many as ten states have their elections at once, and this is one of the most important days in the primary race. This year the primary is critical for the Democratic outcome since they are in the position of choosing a national leader and becoming the opposition party. If Bush wins in 2004, Super Tuesday becomes critical for both Democrats and Republicans in 2008 since both parties will need to select new presidential candidates.

What makes this day so important is when this day is over it is usually clear in which direction the primary election race is going and who is most likely to win the nomination. Among these 10 states are the two with the most delegates - California and New York - and Ohio, which traditionally has been a major deciding factor in primary elections. To secure the presidential nomination, one candidate needs at least 2162 delegates and Super Tuesday states account for as many as 1151 delegates.

The big winner of this year's Super Tuesday was the Democratic candidate John Kerry. He won nine out of ten states and at this moment, he is most likely to be the next national leader for the Democratic Party and the next democratic presidential candidate.

More reading:

CNN - American Votes 2004

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/>

National Center for Policy Analysis

<http://www.ncpa.org/pd/govern/govern2.html>

Sweden America Network (Swedish)

<http://www.nknet.com/san/thema/regering/partier.htm>

United States Election 2004

<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/election04/homepage.htm>

Glossary

Capitalism: This is an economic system with minimal governmental regulation. The individual can produce, exchange, and own goods, garments, or services. Another definition could be that the basic premise of capitalism is that markets are efficient and should function without interference from the government.

Caucus: A caucus is a group of people with common goals or characteristics. In a political sense, a caucus is a meeting where voters come together to choose nominees to represent their political party in a general election.

Congress: The congress is made up of U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. The Congress has, among other issues, has the power to make Federal laws but the president has to sign them. In very rare cases, the President can veto this law and the Congress, with a super-majority, can override him.

Conservatism: This is a political philosophy where the national government does not interfere in the economy and regulate social life. In this philosophy, the state and local governments have the power to make decisions. Another definition could be that conservatism is a political philosophy or attitude emphasizing respect for traditional institutions, distrust of government activism, and opposition to sudden change in the established order.

Constitution: This is the structure and fundamental principles of a government. It is usually in written form, and in the USA, all other laws, regulations, and executive actions must be consistent with it.

Democracy: Democracy is a form of government where people votes on different issues and the majority decide the outcome.

Electoral College: Each state has a number of electoral votes equal to the number of members each state sends to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Together these electoral votes constitute the Electoral College.

Federalism: In this political system, powers are divided and shared between national, state, and local levels.

Majority party: This party has the majority of seats in the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Minority party: This party has the minority of seats in the House of Representatives or the Senate.

National convention: A national convention is a meeting of party delegates that is held every four years. The delegates are elected in state primaries and caucuses, and the conventions' primary purpose is to nominate the presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

Republic: This is a form of democracy in which representatives who are chosen by the people make decisions.

Primary: In a primary election, party members choose their delegates through election. They go to the poll and indicate their top choice for nominee.

Socialism: This is a philosophy where the governmental authority should be used to make equal socioeconomic outcomes in terms of education, welfare, and health.