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OpenStax and Lumen Learning By the end of this section, you will be able to: Describe changes over time in the way the president and vice president are selected Identify the stages in the modern presidential selection process Assess the advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College The process of electing a president every four years has evolved over time. This evolution has resulted from attempts to correct the cumbersome procedures first offered by the framers of the Constitution and as a result of political parties' rising power to act as gatekeepers to the presidency. Over the last several decades, the manner by which parties have chosen candidates has trended away from congressional caucuses and conventions and towards a drawn-out series of state contests, called primaries and caucuses, which begin in the winter prior to the November general election. The framers of the Constitution made no provision in the document for the establishment of political parties. Indeed, parties were not necessary to select the first president, since George Washington ran unopposed. Following the first election of Washington, the political party system gained steam and power in the electoral process, creating separate nomination and general election stages. Early on, the power to nominate presidents for office bubbled up from the party operatives in the various state legislatures and toward what was known as the king caucus or congressional caucus. The caucus or large-scale gathering was made up of legislators in the Congress who met informally to decide on nominees from their respective parties. In somewhat of a countervailing trend in the general election stage of the process, by the presidential election of 1824, many states were using popular elections to choose their electors. This became important in that election when Andrew Jackson won the popular vote and the largest number of electors, but the presidency was given to John Quincy Adams instead. Out of the frustration of Jackson's supporters emerged a powerful two-party system that took control of the selection process. In the decades that followed, party organizations, party leaders, and workers met in national conventions to choose their nominees, sometimes after long struggles that took place over multiple ballots. In this way, the political parties kept a tight control on the selection of a candidate. In the early twentieth century, however, some states began to hold primaries, elections in which candidates vied for the support of state delegations to the party's nominating convention. Over the course of the century, the primaries gradually became a far more important part of the process, though the party leadership still controlled the route to nomination through the convention system. This has changed in recent decades, and now a majority of the delegates are chosen through primary elections, and the party conventions themselves are little more than a widely publicized rubber-stamping event. The rise of the presidential primary and caucus system as the main means by which presidential candidates are selected has had a number of anticipated and unanticipated consequences. For one, the campaign season has grown longer and more costly. In 1960, John F. Kennedy declared his intention to run for the presidency just eleven months before the general election. Compare this to Hillary Clinton, who announced her intention to run nearly two years before the 2008 general election. Today's long campaign seasons are seasoned with a seemingly ever-increasing number of debates among contenders for the nomination. In 2016, when the number of candidates for the Republican nomination became large and unwieldy, two debates among them were held, in which only those candidates polling greater support were allowed in the more important prime-time debate. The runners-up spoke in the other debate. In 2020, it was the Democratic party that had a large field that required staggered debates, before the field narrowed and ultimately led to the nomination of former vice president Joe Biden, who would go on to choose fellow campaigner Kamala Harris as his running mate. Finally, the process of going straight to the people through primaries and caucuses has created some opportunities for party outsiders to rise. Neither Ronald Reagan nor Bill Clinton was especially popular with the party leadership of the Republicans or the Democrats (respectively) at the outset. The outsider phenomenon has been most clearly demonstrated, however, in the 2016 presidential nominating process, as those distrusted by the party establishment, such as Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, who never before held political office, raced ahead of party favorites like Jeb Bush early in the primary process. Figure 1. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), though disliked by the party establishment, was able to rise to the top in the Iowa caucuses in 2016 because of his ability to reach the conservative base of the party. Ultimately, Cruz bowed out of the race when Donald Trump effectively clinched the Republican nomination in Indiana in early May 2016. (credit: Michael Vadon) The rise of the primary system during the Progressive Era came at the cost of party regulars' control of the process of candidate selection. Some party primaries even allow registered independents or members of the opposite party to vote. Even so, the process tends to attract the party faithful at the expense of independent voters, who often hold the key to victory in the fall contest. Thus, candidates who want to succeed in the primary contests seek to align themselves with committed partisans, who are often at the ideological extreme. Those who survive the primaries in this way have to moderate their image as they enter the general election if they hope to succeed among the rest of the party adherents and the uncommitted. Primaries offer tests of candidates' popular appeal, while state caucuses testify to their ability to mobilize and organize grassroots support among committed followers. Primaries also reward candidates in different ways, with some giving the winner all the state's convention delegates, while others distribute delegates proportionately according to the distribution of voter support. Finally, the order in which the primary elections and caucus selections are held shape the overall race. Currently, the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary occur first. These early contests tend to shrink the field as candidates who perform poorly leave the race. At other times in the campaign process, some states will maximize their impact on the race by holding their primaries on the same day that other states do. The media has dubbed these critical groupings "Super Tuesdays," "Super Saturdays," and so on. They tend to occur later in the nominating process as parties try to force the voters to coalesce around a single nominee. The rise of the primary has also displaced the convention itself as the place where party regulars choose their standard bearer. Once true contests in which party leaders fought it out to elect a candidate, by the 1970s, party conventions more often than not simply served to rubber-stamp the choice of the primaries. By the 1980s, the convention drama was gone, replaced by a long, televised commercial designed to extol the party's greatness. Without the drama and uncertainty, major news outlets have steadily curtailed their coverage of the conventions, convinced that few people are interested. The 2016 elections seem to support the idea that the primary process produces a nominee rather than party insiders. Outsiders Donald Trump on the Republican side and Senator Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side had much success despite significant concerns about them from party elites. Whether this pattern could be reversed in the case of a closely contested selection process remains to be seen. Figure 2. Traditional party conventions, like the Republican national convention in 1964 pictured here, could be contentious meetings at which the delegates made real decisions about who would run. These days, party conventions are little more than long promotional events. (credit: the Library of Congress) Early presidential elections, conducted along the lines of the original process outlined in the Constitution, proved unsatisfactory. So long as George Washington was a candidate, his election was a foregone conclusion. But it took some manipulation of the votes of electors to ensure that the second-place winner (and thus the vice president) did not receive the same number of votes. When Washington declined to run again after two terms, matters worsened. In 1796, political rivals John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were elected president and vice president, respectively. Yet the two men failed to work well together during Adams's administration, much of which Jefferson spent at his Virginia residence at Monticello. As noted earlier in this chapter, the shortcomings of the system became painfully evident in 1800, when Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr finished tied, thus leaving it to the House of Representatives to elect Jefferson. The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, provided for the separate election of president and vice president as well as setting out ways to choose a winner if no one received a majority of the electoral votes. Only once since the passage of the Twelfth Amendment, during the election of 1824, has the House selected the president under these rules, and only once, in 1836, has the Senate chosen the vice president. In several elections, such as in 1876 and 1888, a candidate who received less than a majority of the popular vote has claimed the presidency, including cases when the losing candidate secured a majority of the popular vote. A recent case was the 2000 election, in which Democratic nominee Al Gore won the popular vote, while Republican nominee George W. Bush won the Electoral College vote and hence the presidency. The 2016 election brought another such irregularity as Donald Trump comfortably won the Electoral College by narrowly winning the popular vote in several states, while Hillary Clinton collected nearly 2.9 million more votes nationwide. Not everyone is satisfied with how the Electoral College fundamentally shapes the election, especially in cases such as those noted above, when a candidate with a minority of the popular vote claims victory over a candidate who drew more popular support. Yet movements for electoral reform, including proposals for a straightforward nationwide direct election by popular vote, have gained little traction. Supporters of the current system defend it as a manifestation of federalism, arguing that it also guards against the chaos inherent in a multiparty environment by encouraging the current two-party system. They point out that under a system of direct election, candidates would focus their efforts on more populous regions and ignore others. Critics, on the other hand, charge that the current system negates the one-person, one-vote basis of U.S. elections, subverts majority rule, works against political participation in states deemed safe for one party, and might lead to chaos should an elector desert a candidate, thus thwarting the popular will. Despite all this, the system remains in place. It appears that many people are more comfortable with the problems of a flawed system than with the uncertainty of change. Electoral College Reform Following the 2000 presidential election, when then-governor George W. Bush won by a single electoral vote and with over half a million fewer individual votes than his challenger, astonished voters called for Electoral College reform. Years later, however, nothing of any significance had been done. The absence of reform in the wake of such a problematic election is a testament to the staying power of the Electoral College. The 2016 election results were even more disparate. While in 2000, Al Gore won a narrow victory in the popular vote with Bush prevailing by one vote in the Electoral College, in 2016, Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of almost 3 million votes, while Trump won the Electoral College comfortably. In 2020, the results aligned, with Joe Biden winning the popular vote and Electoral College by comfortable margins, although several battleground states were very close. Those who insist that the Electoral College should be reformed argue that its potential benefits pale in comparison to the way the Electoral College depresses voter turnout and fails to represent the popular will. In addition to favoring small states, since individual votes there count more than in larger states due to the mathematics involved in the distribution of electors, the Electoral College results in a significant number of "safe" states that receive no real electioneering, such that nearly 75 percent of the country is ignored in the general election. One potential solution to the problems with the Electoral College is to scrap it all together and replace it with the popular vote. The popular vote would be the aggregated totals of the votes in the fifty states and District of Columbia, as certified by the head election official of each state. A second solution often mentioned is to make the Electoral College proportional. That is, as each state assigns it electoral votes, it would do so based on the popular vote percentage in their state, rather with the winner-take-all approach almost all the states use today. A third alternative for Electoral College reform has been proposed by an organization called National Popular Vote. The National Popular Vote movement is an interstate compact between multiple states that sign onto the compact. Once a combination of states constituting 270 Electoral College votes supports the movement, each state entering the compact pledges all of its Electoral College votes to the national popular vote winner. This reform does not technically change the Electoral College structure, but it results in a mandated process that makes the Electoral College reflect the popular vote. Thus far, fifteen states and the District of Columbia with a total of 196 electoral votes among them have signed onto the compact. In what ways does the current Electoral College system protect the representative power of small states and less densely populated regions? Why might it be important to preserve these protections? Follow-up activity: View the National Popular Vote website to learn more about their position. Consider reaching out to them to learn more, offer your support, or even to argue against their proposal. The general election usually features a series of debates between the presidential contenders as well as a debate among vice presidential candidates. Because the stakes are high, quite a bit of money and resources are expended on all sides. Attempts to rein in the mounting costs of modern general-election campaigns have proven ineffective. Nor has public funding helped to solve the problem. Indeed, starting with Barack Obama's 2008 decision to forfeit public funding so as to skirt the spending limitations imposed, candidates now regularly opt to raise more money rather than to take public funding. In addition, political action committees (PACs), supposedly focused on issues rather than specific candidates, seek to influence the outcome of the race by supporting or opposing a candidate according to the PAC's own interests. But after all the spending and debating is done, those who have not already voted by other means set out on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November to cast their votes. Several weeks later, the electoral votes are counted and the president is formally elected. Figure 3. The process of becoming president has become an increasingly longer one, but the underlying steps remain largely the same. (credit: modification of work by the U.S. General Services Administration, Federal Citizen Information Center, Ifrah Syed) See the Chapter 12.2 Review for a summary of this section, the key vocabulary, and some review questions to check your knowledge. definitionan informal meeting held in the nineteenth century, sometimes called a congressional caucus, made up of legislators in the Congress who met to decide on presidential nominees for their respective parties The process of electing a president takes almost two years. Learn the steps that result in the election of a U.S. president. An election for president of the United States happens every four years on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. The next presidential election is scheduled to be on November 7, 2028.What is the typical presidential election cycle?The presidential election process follows a typical cycle:Presidential Election Cycle TableTime of the yearEventSpring of the year before an electionCandidates register with the Federal Election Commission to run for president. While there is no federal deadline to register, there are other requirements. Learn about registering as a presidential candidate.Spring of the year before an electionCandidates announce their intentions to run.Summer of the year before an election through spring of the election yearPrimary and caucus debates take place.January to June of election yearStates and parties hold presidential primaries and caucuses. Find out more about primaries and caucuses.July to early SeptemberParties hold nominating conventions to choose their presidential candidates. Just before or during the convention, the presidential candidate announces their vice presidential running mate. Read more about the conventions.September and OctoberCandidates participate in presidential debates.Early NovemberElection Day is the first Tuesday after the first Monday. Find out about the presidential general election.DecemberElectors cast their votes for president in the Electoral College. Learn about the Electoral College process.Early January of the next calendar yearCongress counts the electoral votes.January 20Presidential Inauguration DayFor an in-depth look at the federal election process in the U.S., read USA In Brief: ELECTIONS. LAST UPDATED: February 25, 2025 Make speeches/interviews. Go to community events. Issue statements (give their opinions) on topics. Debate other candidates. Presidential elections are major media events. The formal campaign has three stages: winning the nomination, campaigning at the convention, and mobilizing support in the general election . What are the steps in the presidential election process quizlet? nominate. the act of officially naming a candidate. national party convention. ... primary election. ... caucus. ... Delegate. ... Electoral College. ... popular vote. ... political parties. Why do you think only one third of senators are up for election every two years? Every two years, one-third of the Senate's members must be reelected or vacate their seats at the end of their terms. ... Framers hoped biennial elections would bring stability to the Senate, and in turn, to other branches of the new government. What are 3 methods of voting? The regular methods of voting in such bodies are a voice vote, a rising vote, and a show of hands. Additional forms of voting include a recorded vote and balloting. The assembly could decide on the voting method by adopting a motion on it. Different legislatures may have their voting methods. What are 2 methods of voting? There are many variations in electoral systems, but the most common systems are first-past-the-post voting, block voting, the two-round (runoff) system, proportional representation and ranked voting. What are the 4 types of votes in the House? Voice vote. A voice vote occurs when Members call out "Aye" or "No" when a question is first put by the Speaker. ... Division vote. ... Yea and Nay Vote. ... Record Vote. Are among the most successful in obtaining subsidies? Those businesses, which Good Jobs First defines as the "most successful at obtaining subsidies from all levels of government" are Boeing, Ford Motor, General Electric, General Motors and JPMorgan Chase . Who actually elects the president and vice president quizlet? President and vice president are the only nationally elected offices. Elected through the electoral college , rather than a popular vote. Party convention held every four years to nominate the party's candidate for the presidency. Which group does the president most rely on? The White House staff and National Security Council are very much people the president will rely on in the day to day operation of presidential business. What are the three major steps in the presidential election process? Step 1: Primaries and Caucuses. People with similar ideas usually belong to the same political party. ... Step 2: National Conventions and General Election. After the primaries and caucuses, each major party, Democrat and Republican, holds a national convention to select a Presidential nominee. ... Step 3: The Electoral College. What are the three major steps in a presidential election? Step 1: Primaries and Caucuses. There are many people who want to be president. ... Step 2: National Conventions. Each party holds a national convention to finalize the selection of one presidential nominee. ... Step 3: General Election. ... Step 4: Electoral College. What is the process and timeline for counting electoral votes quizlet? Electoral votes from each state are collected and sent to the President of the Senate (the Vice President), who then hands them over to Congress once they convene in early January. Then the votes are officially counted in the presence of both houses of Congress . How many years does a senator serve? A senator's term of office is six years and approximately one-third of the total membership of the Senate is elected every two years. Look up brief biographies of Senators from 1774 to the present in the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. How many terms can a senator serve? Senators are elected to six-year terms, and every two years the members of one class—approximately one-third of the senators—face election or reelection. How many US Senators are up for reelection in 2022? Last election 48 50 Seats needed 1 Seats up 14 20 Party Independent Current seats 2 Candidates must meet age, citizenship, and residency requirements to run for president.Winning the presidential election involves both primaries and electoral votes.The Electoral College plays a key role in the final decision of the presidential election. So you want to be president of the United States. You should know that making it to the White House is a daunting task, logistically speaking. Understanding how the president is elected should be your first priority. There are volumes of campaign finance rules to navigate, thousands of signatures to gather across all 50 states, delegates of the pledged and unpledged varieties to glad-hand, and the Electoral College to deal with. If you're ready to jump into the fray, let's walk through the 11 key milestones of how the president is elected in the United States. Presidential candidates must be able to prove they are a "natural born citizen" of the U.S., have lived in the country for at least 14 years, and are at least 35 years old. Being "natural born" doesn't mean you have to have been born on American soil, either. If one of your parents is an American citizen, that's good enough. Children whose parents are American citizens are considered "natural-born citizens," regardless of whether they're born in Canada, Mexico or Russia. If you meet those three basic requirements for being president, you can move on to the next step. It's time to get with the Federal Election Commission, which regulates elections in the United States. Presidential candidates must complete a "statement of candidacy" by listing their party affiliation, the office they're seeking, and some personal information such as where they live. Dozens of candidates complete these forms in every presidential election—candidates most Americans never hear of and who are from obscure, lesser-known and unorganized political parties. That statement of candidacy also requires presidential hopefuls to designate a political action committee, an entity that solicits money from supporters to spend on television ads and other methods of electioneering, as their "principal campaign committee." All that means is that the candidate is authorizing one or more PACs to receive contributions and make expenditures on their behalf. Whenever they are not working on their public image, presidential candidates spend much of their time trying to raise money to pay for their campaigns. Among the major 2020 presidential candidates, for example, incumbent Republican Donald Trump's campaign committee and the Republican National Committee raised almost $1.33 billion as of September 20, 2020. The campaign committee of former Vice President Joe Biden, Trump's Democratic Party challenger, and the Democratic National Committee had raised $990 million as of the same date. By comparison, among all of the 2020 candidates, Democrat Michael Bloomberg led the field by raising more than $1 billion—largely from his own fortune—before dropping out of the race on March 3, 2020, proving that it's not always about the money. This is one of the most little-known details of how the president is elected: To become a major party's presidential nominee, candidates must go through the primary process in every state. Primaries are elections held by political parties in most states to narrow the field of candidates seeking the nomination to one. A few states hold more informal elections called caucuses. Taking part in primaries is essential to winning delegates, which is necessary to earn the presidential nomination. And to take part in the primaries, you've got to get on the ballots in each state. This entails presidential candidates collecting a specific number of signatures in each state. The point is that every legitimate presidential campaign must have a solid organization of supporters in each state that will work to meet these ballot-access requirements. If they come up short in even one state, they're leaving potential delegates on the table. Delegates are the people who attend their parties' presidential nomination conventions to cast votes on behalf of the candidates who won the primaries in their states. Thousands of delegates attend both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions to perform this arcane task. Delegates are often political insiders, elected officials, or grassroots activists. Some delegates are "committed" or "pledged" to a particular candidate, meaning they must vote for the winner of the state primaries; others are uncommitted and can cast their ballots however they choose. There are also "superdelegates," high-ranking elected officials who get to support the candidates of their choice. Democrats seeking the presidential nomination in the 2020 primaries, for example, needed to secure 1,991 delegates. Joe Biden crossed the threshold after winning a series of primaries on June 2. Biden's closest rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., accumulated 1,119 delegates by August 11, 2020. Republicans seeking the presidential nomination in 2020 needed 1,276 delegates. Largely unchallenged, Trump surpassed the goal after winning the Florida and Illinois primaries on March 17, 2020. Before the nominating convention takes place, most presidential candidates have chosen a vice presidential candidate, the person who will appear on the November ballot with them. Only twice in modern history have the presidential nominees waited until the conventions to break the news to the public and their parties. The party's presidential nominee has typically chosen their running mate in July or August of a presidential election year. The Commission on Presidential Debates holds three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate after the primaries and before the November election. While the debates typically don't influence the outcome of elections or cause major shifts in voter preferences, they are critical to understanding where candidates stand on important issues and evaluating their ability to perform under pressure. A bad performance can sink a candidacy, though it rarely happens anymore because politicians are coached on their answers and have become skilled at skirting controversy. The exception was the first-ever televised presidential debate, between Vice President Richard M. Nixon, a Republican, and U.S. Sen. John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, during the 1960 campaign. Nixon's appearance was described as being "green, sallow" and he appeared to need a clean shave. Nixon believed the first televised presidential debate to be "just another campaign appearance" and did not take it seriously; he was pale, sickly looking, and sweaty, an appearance that helped seal his demise. Kennedy knew the event was momentous and rested beforehand. He won the election. What happens on that Tuesday after the first Monday of November in a presidential election year is one of the most misunderstood facets of how the president is elected. The bottom line is this: voters do not directly elect the president of the United States. They instead chose electors, who meet later to vote for a president. Electors are people chosen by the political parties in each state. There are 538 of them, and a candidate needs a simple majority to win. States are allotted electors based on their population. The larger a state's population is, the more electors are allocated. For example, California is the most populous state with about 38 million residents. It also holds the most electors at 55. Wyoming, on the other hand, is the least populous state with fewer than 600,000 residents; it gets only three electors. According to the National Archives and Records Administration: "Political parties often choose electors for the slate to recognize their service and dedication to that political party. They may be state elected officials, state party leaders, or people in the state who have a personal or political affiliation with their party's presidential candidate." When a presidential candidate wins the popular vote in a state, they win electoral votes from that state. In 48 out of 50 states, the successful candidates collect all electoral votes from that state. This method of awarding electoral votes is commonly known as "winner-take-all." In two states, Nebraska and Maine, the electoral votes are distributed proportionally; they allocate their electoral votes to the presidential candidates based on who did better in each congressional district. While those electors are not legally bound to vote for the candidate who won the popular vote in their state, it is rare for them to go rogue and disregard the will of voters. "Electors generally hold a leadership position in their party or were chosen to recognize years of loyal service to the party," according to the National Archives and Records Administration. "Throughout our history as a nation, more than 99% of electors have voted as pledged." Presidential candidates who win 270 or more electoral votes are called the president-elect. They don't actually take office that day, and they can't take office until the 538 members of the Electoral College get together to cast votes. The meeting of the Electoral College takes place in December, after the election, and after state governors receive the "certified" election results and prepare Certificates of Ascertainment for the federal government. The electors meet in their own states and then deliver the tallies to the vice president; the secretary of the Department of State in each state; the national archivist; and the presiding judge in the districts where the electors held their meetings. Then, in late December or early January after the presidential election, the federal archivist and representatives from the Office of the Federal Register meet with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House to verify the results. Congress meets in a joint session to announce the results. January 20 is the day every aspiring president looks forward to. It is the day prescribed in the U.S. Constitution for the peaceful transition of power from one administration to another. It is a tradition for the outgoing president and his family to attend the swearing-in of the incoming president, even if they are from different parties. There are other traditions, too. The president leaving office often write a note to the incoming president to offer encouraging words and well wishes. "Congratulations on a remarkable run," former President Barack Obama wrote in a letter to Trump. "Millions have placed their hopes in you, and all of us, regardless of party, should hope for expanded prosperity and security during your tenure." This, of course, is the final step. And then the hard part begins. Updated by Robert Longley By the end of this section, you will be able to: Describe changes over time in the way the president and vice president are selected Identify the stages in the modern presidential selection process Assess the advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College The process of electing a president every four years has evolved over time. 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Early on, the power to nominate presidents for office bubbled up from the party operatives in the various state legislatures and toward what was known as the king caucus or congressional caucus. The caucus or large-scale gathering was made up of legislators in the Congress who met informally to decide on nominees from their respective parties. In somewhat of a countervailing trend in the general election stage of the process, by the presidential election of 1824, many states were using popular elections to choose their electors. This became important in that election when Andrew Jackson won the popular vote and the largest number of electors, but the presidency was given to John Quincy Adams instead. Out of the frustration of Jackson's supporters emerged a powerful two-party system that took control of the selection process.19 In the decades that followed, party organizations, party leaders, and workers met in national conventions to choose their nominees, sometimes after long struggles that took place over multiple ballots. In this way, the political parties kept a tight control on the selection of a candidate. In the early twentieth century, however, some states began to hold primaries, elections in which candidates vied for the support of state delegations to the party's nominating convention. Over the course of the century, the primaries gradually became a far more important part of the process, though the party leadership still controlled the route to nomination through the convention system. This has changed in recent decades, and now a majority of the delegates are chosen through primary elections, and the party conventions themselves are little more than a widely publicized rubber-stamping event. The rise of the presidential primary and caucus system as the main means by which presidential candidates are selected has had a number of anticipated and unanticipated consequences. For one, the campaign season has grown longer and more costly. In 1960, John F. Kennedy declared his intention to run for the presidency just eleven months before the general election. Compare this to Hillary Clinton, who announced her intention to run nearly two years before the 2008 general election. Today's long campaign seasons are seasoned with a seemingly ever-increasing number of debates among contenders for the nomination. 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The outsider phenomenon has been most clearly demonstrated, however, in the 2016 presidential nominating process, as those distrusted by the party establishment, such as Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, who never before held political office, raced ahead of party favorites like Jeb Bush early in the primary process (Figure 12.6). Figure 12.6 Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), though disliked by the party establishment, was able to rise to the top in the Iowa caucuses in 2016 because of his ability to reach the conservative base of the party. Ultimately, Cruz bowed out of the race when Donald Trump effectively clinched the Republican nomination in Indiana in early May 2016. (credit: Michael Vadon) The rise of the primary system during the Progressive Era came at the cost of party regulars' control of the process of candidate selection. Some party primaries even allow registered independents or members of the opposite party to vote. Even so, the process tends to attract the party faithful at the expense of independent voters, who often hold the key to victory in the fall contest. Thus, candidates who want to succeed in the primary contests seek to align themselves with committed partisans, who are often at the ideological extreme. Those who survive the primaries in this way have to moderate their image as they enter the general election if they hope to succeed among the rest of the party adherents and the uncommitted. Primaries offer tests of candidates' popular appeal, while state caucuses testify to their ability to mobilize and organize grassroots support among committed followers. Primaries also reward candidates in different ways, with some giving the winner all the state's convention delegates, while others distribute delegates proportionately according to the distribution of voter support. Finally, the order in which the primary elections and caucus selections are held shape the overall race.20 Currently, the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary occur first. These early contests tend to shrink the field as candidates who perform poorly leave the race. At other times in the campaign process, some states will maximize their impact on the race by holding their primaries on the same day that other states do. The media has dubbed these critical groupings "Super Tuesdays," "Super Saturdays," and so on. They tend to occur later in the nominating process as parties try to force the voters to coalesce around a single nominee. The rise of the primary has also displaced the convention itself as the place where party regulars choose their standard bearer. Once true contests in which party leaders fought it out to elect a candidate, by the 1970s, party conventions more often than not simply served to rubber-stamp the choice of the primaries. By the 1980s, the convention drama was gone, replaced by a long, televised commercial designed to extol the party's greatness (Figure 12.7). Without the drama and uncertainty, major news outlets have steadily curtailed their coverage of the conventions, convinced that few people are interested. The 2016 elections seem to support the idea that the primary process produces a nominee rather than party insiders. Outsiders Donald Trump on the Republican side and Senator Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side had much success despite significant concerns about them from party elites. Whether this pattern could be reversed in the case of a closely contested selection process remains to be seen. Figure 12.7 Traditional party conventions, like the Republican national convention in 1964 pictured here, could be contentious meetings at which the delegates made real decisions about who would run. These days, party conventions are little more than long promotional events. (credit: the Library of Congress) Early presidential elections, conducted along the lines of the original process outlined in the Constitution, proved unsatisfactory. So long as George Washington was a candidate, his election was a foregone conclusion. But it took some manipulation of the votes of electors to ensure that the second-place winner (and thus the vice president) did not receive the same number of votes. When Washington declined to run again after two terms, matters worsened. In 1796, political rivals John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were elected president and vice president, respectively. Yet the two men failed to work well together during Adams's administration, much of which Jefferson spent at his Virginia residence at Monticello. As noted earlier in this chapter, the shortcomings of the system became painfully evident in 1800, when Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr finished tied, thus leaving it to the House of Representatives to elect Jefferson.21 The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, provided for the separate election of president and vice president as well as setting out ways to choose a winner if no one received a majority of the electoral votes. Only once since the passage of the Twelfth Amendment, during the election of 1824, has the House selected the president under these rules, and only once, in 1836, has the Senate chosen the vice president. In several elections, such as in 1876 and 1888, a candidate who received less than a majority of the popular vote has claimed the presidency, including cases when the losing candidate secured a majority of the popular vote. A recent case was the 2000 election, in which Democratic nominee Al Gore won the popular vote, while Republican nominee George W. Bush won the Electoral College vote and hence the presidency. The 2016 election brought another such irregularity as Donald Trump comfortably won the Electoral College by narrowly winning the popular vote in several states, while Hillary Clinton collected nearly 2.9 million more votes nationwide. Not everyone is satisfied with how the Electoral College fundamentally shapes the election, especially in cases such as those noted above, when a candidate with a minority of the popular vote claims victory over a candidate who drew more popular support. Yet movements for electoral reform, including proposals for a straightforward nationwide direct election by popular vote, have gained little traction. Supporters of the current system defend it as a manifestation of federalism, arguing that it also guards against the chaos inherent in a multiparty environment by encouraging the current two-party system. They point out that under a system of direct election, candidates would focus their efforts on more populous regions and ignore others.22 Critics, on the other hand, charge that the current system negates the one-person, one-vote basis of U.S. elections, subverts majority rule, works against political participation in states deemed safe for one party, and might lead to chaos should an elector desert a candidate, thus thwarting the popular will. Despite all this, the system remains in place. It appears that many people are more comfortable with the problems of a flawed system than with the uncertainty of change.23 Following the 2000 presidential election, when then-governor George W. Bush won by a single electoral vote and with over half a million fewer individual votes than his challenger, astonished voters called for Electoral College reform. Years later, however, nothing of any significance had been done. The absence of reform in the wake of such a problematic election is a testament to the staying power of the Electoral College. The 2016 election results were even more disparate. While in 2000, Al Gore won a narrow victory in the popular vote with Bush prevailing by one vote in the Electoral College, in 2016, Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of almost 3 million votes, while Trump won the Electoral College comfortably. In 2020, the results aligned, with Joe Biden winning the popular vote and Electoral College by comfortable margins, although several battleground states were very close.Those who insist that the Electoral College should be reformed argue that its potential benefits pale in comparison to the way the Electoral College depresses voter turnout and fails to represent the popular will. In addition to favoring small states, since individual votes there count more than in larger states due to the mathematics involved in the distribution of electors, the Electoral College results in a significant number of "safe" states that receive no real electioneering, such that nearly 75 percent of the country is ignored in the general election. One potential solution to the problems with the Electoral College is to scrap it all together and replace it with the popular vote. The popular vote would be the aggregated totals of the votes in the fifty states and District of Columbia, as certified by the head election official of each state. A second solution often mentioned is to make the Electoral College proportional. That is, as each state assigns it electoral votes, it would do so based on the popular vote percentage in their state, rather with the winner-take-all approach almost all the states use today. A third alternative for Electoral College reform has been proposed by an organization called National Popular Vote. The National Popular Vote movement is an interstate compact between multiple states that sign onto the compact. Once a combination of states constituting 270 Electoral College votes supports the movement, each state entering the compact pledges all of its Electoral College votes to the national popular vote winner. This reform does not technically change the Electoral College structure, but it results in a mandated process that makes the Electoral College reflect the popular vote. Thus far, fifteen states and the District of Columbia with a total of 196 electoral votes among them have signed onto the compact. In what ways does the current Electoral College system protect the representative power of small states and less densely populated regions? Why might it be important to preserve these protections? Follow-up activity: View the National Popular Vote website to learn more about their position. Consider reaching out to them to learn more, offer your support, or even to argue against their proposal. See how the Electoral College and the idea of swing states fundamentally shapes elections by experimenting with the interactive Electoral College map at 270 to Win. The general election usually features a series of debates between the presidential contenders as well as a debate among vice presidential candidates. Because the stakes are high, quite a bit of money and resources are expended on all sides. Attempts to rein in the mounting costs of modern general-election campaigns have proven ineffective. Nor has public funding helped to solve the problem. Indeed, starting with Barack Obama's 2008 decision to forfeit public funding so as to skirt the spending limitations imposed, candidates now regularly opt to raise more money rather than to take public funding.24 In addition, political action committees (PACs), supposedly focused on issues rather than specific candidates, seek to influence the outcome of the race by supporting or opposing a candidate according to the PAC's own interests. But after all the spending and debating is done, those who have not already voted by other means set out on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November to cast their votes. Several weeks later, the electoral votes are counted and the president is formally elected (Figure 12.8). Figure 12.8 The process of becoming president has become an increasingly longer one, but the underlying steps remain largely the same. (credit: modification of work by the U. S. General Services Administration, Federal Citizen Information Center, Ifrah Syed)