

LESSON PLAN – How Do Primaries Work

Subject: How Do Primaries Work

Grade Level: Grades 6, 7, 8

Standards:

USG.1.1 Define civic life, political life, and private life and describe the activities of individuals in each of these spheres.

USG.3.13 Explain the electoral process in terms of election laws and election systems on the national, state, and local level.

USG.3.16 Explain and evaluate the original purpose and role of the Electoral College and its relevance today.

USG.3.18 Identify the role of special interest groups in politics and explain their impact on federal, state, and local public policy.

USG.5.7 Explain how citizens in the United States participate in public elections as voters and supporters of candidates for public office.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

Computer

Paper and pencil/pen

Learning Objectives:

- Be able to describe the process of presidential primaries.
- Be able to define “delegate” in the primary process.
- Be able to describe the difference between a primary election and a caucus.
- Be able to define “Super Tuesday” as it relates to the primary process.
- Be able to describe the purpose of the Democratic and Republican national conventions following the primary elections.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Every four years the United States holds a presidential election in November. Before this election occurs, every state has a primary election. In the primaries or caucuses, delegates are selected to support a candidate at the Democratic or Republican national convention. It is a complex way of selecting candidates to run for president. In this lesson, you will learn more about the steps in this process.

Body of Lesson:

Watch the introductory video: How Do Primaries Work? (2:32 minutes)

<https://www.wfyi.org/programs/simple-civics/television/how-do-primaries-work-1>

Read this webpage describing the presidential election process

Watch the imbedded video on How to Become President of the USA (2:22 minutes)

<https://www.usa.gov/election#item-214417>

Discuss the following:

Primary Elections

- Each state holds a primary election (some hold caucuses)
- The primary elections select people (delegates) who will then go to the party's national convention and select a candidate to run for president
- Delegates are usually people who are important in the state political parties

When do we have Primaries or Caucuses?

- These are held early in the year of a presidential election (every 4 years)
- In February of election year, Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina hold primaries or caucuses
- In March, 16 states hold primaries or caucuses. This is called Super Tuesday because the elections are held on a Tuesday and because these 16 states have 1/3 of all the delegates in the country. So, a candidate who does well on Super Tuesday has a better chance of being selected in the national convention.
- By June, all states have completed the primary elections or caucuses. There are a total of 4,765 delegates that will go to the Republican and Democratic national conventions to select people to run for president.

Number of Delegates

- The number of delegates a state has is based on a formula
- The formula takes into account that state's electoral college and the strength of the political party in the state. It is a complicated formula.

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- For a candidate to get any delegates, that person needs to get at least 15% of the votes in a state.
- All candidates who get 15% or more votes will have the number of delegates divided between them.
- For example:
 - Candidate A 10% of votes No delegates
 - Candidate B 40% of votes 40% of delegates
 - Candidate C 25% of votes 25% of delegates
 - Candidate D 5% of votes No delegates
 - Candidate E 20% of votes 20% of delegates
 - After all of the primaries and caucuses, candidates with few or no delegates often will drop out of the race before the national convention.

National Conventions

- Delegates at the Republican national convention select their candidate to run for president.
- Delegates at the Democratic national convention select their candidate to run for president.
- The presidential candidates also select the people they want to run with them for vice president at the national conventions.
- In order to be selected as the presidential candidate, a person needs more than half of the delegate votes.

Break into groups or have students write individual responses to the following questions:

1. Which states have primary elections?
2. What is Super Tuesday?
3. What is a delegate or elector?
4. Why did the founders of our country decide that we should have an electoral college?
5. Describe how electors are selected in a primary election.
6. List the two main political parties in the United States
7. What is the purpose of a national convention for the political parties after the primary elections?

Watch video Explaining the Electoral College (3:08 minutes)

<https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/electoral-college-explainer-video/wviz-politics-on-point/>

Electoral College

- Group of people called electors
- 538 electors
- Each state has an elector for each senator and for each representative

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- Indiana has 11 electors
- California has the most because it has the largest population – 55 electors
- Washington, D.C. has 3 electors
- <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/statistics-and-maps/electoral-college-information/>
- In the presidential election, voters are actually voting for the electors
- In most states, the candidate who wins the popular vote gets all the elector votes from that state
- 270 electoral votes are needed to win the presidency
- Presidents who did not get the majority of the popular vote were elected by the electoral college 5 times in history. It happened in 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, and 2016.
- The United States is the only democracy in the world where the leader is selected by indirect vote.

Watch video: The Electoral College: Why Such a Big Debate? (9:19 minutes)

<https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/is-the-electoral-college-killing-democracy-video/above-the-noise/>

- Electoral College is not a college or building – it is a process
- The Constitutional Convention in 1787 created the Constitution and the process for electing president.
- During the Convention, there were major arguments about how to elect the president
- The Federalists wanted Congress to select the president. Others wanted the president to be elected by popular vote.
- There was concern that the average citizens could not read or write and would not be able to make good decisions about voting for a president.
- Women and African Americans (most were slaves at that time in history) were not allowed to vote.
- The Electoral College was created.
- There was concern that the South would have too many representatives if slaves were counted. The 3/5 Compromise was developed where each slave was counted as 3/5 of a person to determine representation in Congress and the Electoral College.
- Should we keep the Electoral College?
 - If we used the popular vote only, the candidates might only focus on large population centers such as California, New York, Florida.
 - The rural areas and the Midwest could be ignored
 - It is very difficult to change the Constitution.
 - A 2/3 majority vote in Congress is needed along with
 - 3/4 of the states voting to approve
- Should we abolish the Electoral College?

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- More people can read and write and thus we should be more informed.
- People are not equally represented. California has 55 electoral votes for 37.3 million people. This is 1 vote for 680,000 people. Wyoming has 3 electoral votes for 568,000 thousand people. This is 1 vote for 189,000 people. Does a vote in Wyoming count for more than one in California?
- The Electoral College makes it more difficult for a third party candidate to win.

After watching this video, break into groups for a discussion or hold a general class discussion or have each student write the answers to the following questions.

1. If a candidate wins the popular vote in a state, do all the electors then vote for that candidate? Is it the same in all states?
2. What are some alternatives to the primary system and the electoral college?
3. What would be some negative results of trying to change our system?
4. Do you think the primary system and the electoral college work well?
5. What do you think about the history of counting slaves as 3/5 of a person to determine numbers for the electoral college?
6. Do you think the founding fathers reached a good compromise when they created the Electoral College?

Summary/Closure

The founders of the United States did not want Congress to select a president. They also did not feel that the average citizens were well equipped to select a president. They devised a system of primaries, caucuses, and the electoral college to determine who would be president. Over the course of history this has resulted in men being elected as president without receiving most of the popular vote. There has been and continues to be debate about the need to change the system; but there have been no real attempts made to do so. In the meantime, it is important to understand our current system for electing the leaders of the United States.

Extension Activities

Caucus versus Primary – What's the Difference (1:26 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_gA766IT3c

What is a Caucus – MSNBC (2:23 minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZII_oqoOytw

The Electoral College

<https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/allocation>

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Review this website to learn more about the history of political conventions, primaries, and caucuses

<https://www.history.com/news/political-conventions-change>

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