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Questions, answers on election process

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When you vote in your state's presidential primary or caucus, are you voting for (a) the candidate of your choice, (b) delegates who will support the candidate of your choice at the national party convention or (c) both?

Give yourself a gold star if you chose both.

That's because while you're actually voting for a candidate, the number of votes your candidate gets usually determines the number of delegates the candidate will be allotted. And it's the delegates who vote for the nominees at their party's national convention.

If you didn't know the answer, don't get down on yourself. The presidential nominating process can be complex and confusing.

But to help guide you through the remainder of the 2008 primary and caucus season, here are answers to some commonly asked questions about the process by which the nation's two major parties select their presidential nominees.

The answers are based on GNS research, including interviews with political scientists Philip Klinkner at Hamilton College and James Campbell at University of Buffalo-State University of New York.

Question: Who are delegates?

Answer: They are hard-core party loyalists, many of whom actively participate in political campaigns, selected to attend their party's national convention. The state parties choose them at the request of the various candidates' campaigns. The state Democratic parties also choose "super delegates" -- elected officials and party leaders -- to attend the convention. The Republican Party doesn't pick super delegates.

Q: How many delegates are required to win the party's nomination?

A: A candidate needs to win a majority of the party's delegates to become the nominee. For Democrats, the total required is 2,025 delegates. A Republican candidate needs 1,191 delegates to lock up the nomination.

The Democratic National Convention will be held in Denver from Aug. 25-28 this year. The Republican National Convention will be held from Sept. 1-4 in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Q: Are delegates required to vote for the candidates who choose them?

A: Yes and no. Most delegates are "pledged" to a particular candidate. That means they are required to vote for that person, but only in the first round of balloting at the national conventions.

Usually, the nominee is chosen after the first round of balloting. The winner is the candidate who wins a simple majority of votes cast.

However, if no candidate wins at least 51 percent of the votes cast, the parties hold additional balloting rounds. And from the

second round onward, delegates can vote for whomever they choose.

Q: Do states have the same number of Democratic and Republican delegates?

A: No. The totals vary widely. This is partly because Democrats choose super delegates as well. In general, a traditionally Democratic state would offer more Democratic delegates and a traditionally Republican state more GOP delegates.

For example, Democratic stronghold New Jersey, which holds presidential primaries Feb. 5, offers 127 Democratic delegates and 52 Republican ones. In contrast, Alaska -- whose caucuses are on the same day -- offers 29 Republican delegates and 18 Democratic ones.

Q: How are delegates awarded to the candidates?

A: In Democratic contests, delegates are awarded on a proportional basis, but a candidate must win at least 15 percent of the votes to qualify for delegates.

In Republican contests, some states have "winner take all" rules. Under that system, the candidate who wins the most votes in that state gets all of that state's delegates.

Q: What's the difference between a primary and a caucus?

A: A primary is like any other election, in which voters go to a polling place and place a secret ballot. A caucus is more like a town hall meeting. The voters assemble at a particular place at a particular time and announce their candidate choices.

Studies have shown that more people vote in primaries than in caucuses.

Q: How has the nomination process changed over time?

A: In the early days of the nation, party bosses decided who the nominees would be. President Andrew Jackson instituted reforms in the 1830s to democratize the process, and caucuses became prevalent.

Presidential primaries came about in the early 1900s as leaders sought to give all voters more of a say in picking each major party's nominee. But party bosses retained the most influence in selecting the nominee until the violence-marred 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

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