

## CLOSE UP IN CLASS: ELECTION CENTER

Close Up's Election Center helps students to develop an understanding of the primaries and caucuses, the major policy issues driving the election, and the positions all major candidates are taking on key issues. For more information on Close Up and our online resources, please visit [www.CloseUp.org](http://www.CloseUp.org).

### PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES

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#### CENTRAL QUESTION

Should Iowa and New Hampshire maintain their first-in-the-nation voting status?

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#### INTRODUCTION

On November 8, 2016, Americans will go to the polls to elect a new president. Voters will choose between one Democrat, one Republican, and any third-party candidates who have qualified for the ballot. So, how do the two major parties choose their nominees? The process begins months before Election Day, as candidates build campaign organizations; raise money to spend on outreach, advertisements, and travel; and participate in a series of televised debates. Their goal? To win the support of voters in the primaries and caucuses—the United States' system for choosing presidential nominees.

In this *Close Up in Class Election Discussion*, we will outline the primary and caucus system in the United States, examine the significant role that two states—Iowa and New Hampshire—play in the nominating process, and challenge you to consider whether there is reason to alter the primary calendar.



# PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES: BACKGROUND

Adopted in their current form by the McGovern-Fraser Commission of 1969–1972, primaries and caucuses are elections that commit party delegates to certain candidates based on popular vote results.<sup>1</sup> After each state party has held its primary or caucus, the delegates attend their party convention, where they participate in a roll call vote to formally nominate a candidate for president.

**What Is a Primary?** Roughly three-quarters of the states hold primaries, or statewide elections in which voters cast secret ballots for their preferred candidate.<sup>2</sup> Some states have open primaries, in which registered voters may choose from any of the candidates, no matter their party affiliation. Other states have closed primaries, in which voters may choose only from the candidates of their registered party.<sup>3</sup>



**Does your state have an open primary, a closed primary, or a hybrid of the two?**

**What Is a Caucus?** In a smaller group of states—Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming—one or both of the political parties have chosen to hold caucuses instead of primaries.<sup>4</sup> A caucus is a party meeting in which participants—usually registered party voters—show support for their preferred candidates by raising their hands or breaking into groups. Caucuses are used to select delegates for county, state, and national nominating conventions, and often attract fewer—but more politically engaged—voters than primaries.<sup>5</sup>

Most state parties choose to hold primaries instead of caucuses because primary elections are funded by the states. In return, the state parties must abide by state laws that govern when the election is to be held, and what type of primary (open or closed) it will be. If the state party wants to move the date or more tightly control who may vote, it may choose to fund its own caucus instead.<sup>6</sup>

**When Do the Primaries and Caucuses Occur?** In 2016, the first four states—Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina—hold their influential primaries or caucuses in February, while the remaining states follow in March, April, May, and June.

- February 1: Iowa Democrat and Republican caucuses
- February 9: New Hampshire Democrat and Republican primaries
- February 20: Nevada Democrat caucuses and South Carolina Republican primary
- February 23: Nevada Republican caucuses
- February 27: South Carolina Democrat primary<sup>7</sup>

**How Do Primary and Caucus Results Lead to a Nomination?** Among Democrats, the pledged convention delegates in each state are allocated proportionally to the candidates who clear a certain threshold—which can be no higher than 15 percent—of the vote in the primary or caucus. Democrats also have hundreds of unpledged superdelegates, or elected officials and party members who may choose which candidate to support. Republicans are taking a similar proportional approach for primaries and caucuses that are held on or before March 14, but the threshold for winning delegates can be as high as 20 percent. After March 14, state Republican parties can choose proportional allocation, a winner-take-all system, or a hybrid system of awarding delegates.<sup>8</sup>

In the end, there will be 2,470 delegates to the Republican National Convention, which will occur July 18–21 in Cleveland, and the nominee must win the support of at least 1,236 of them.<sup>9</sup> The delegate count for Democrats is still in flux, but the nominee will need to win an estimated 2,246 of the roughly 4,491 total delegates in Philadelphia for the Democratic National Convention July 25–28.<sup>10</sup>



**Video: The primaries, caucuses, and conventions explained.**

# PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES

## THE CURRENT SITUATION

Iowa and New Hampshire have hosted the first events in the primary calendar since 1972, and New Hampshire has held the first primary since 1920.<sup>11</sup> Iowa passed a state law requiring that its caucus be the first event in the campaign season, while New Hampshire law dictates that the state must hold the first primary.<sup>12</sup> These early contests are important to candidates because they offer an opportunity to gain momentum on the national stage. In fact, since 1976, only one major party candidate has secured the nomination without winning at least one of these two states.<sup>13</sup> That candidate was Governor Bill Clinton, D-Ark., who lost Iowa in 1992 to Senator Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and New Hampshire to former Senator Paul Tsongas, D-Mass.<sup>14</sup>

But in recent years, some pundits, activists, and politicians have questioned the wisdom of granting so much power to two states—especially two small states that are not demographically representative of the United States. To minimize the significance of Iowa and New Hampshire, the political parties—particularly Democrats—have supported moving up the dates of other states’ primaries and caucuses.<sup>15</sup>

South Carolina and Nevada, for example, have moved into third and fourth place, and vote ahead of the 15 states that go to the polls on March 1, also known as “Super Tuesday.”<sup>16</sup> And in 2012, Florida attempted to increase its significance by moving its primary to January, violating a Republican National Committee (RNC) ban on primaries held before February. To maintain their early voting status, New Hampshire and South Carolina moved their primaries to even earlier in January (January 10 and January 21, respectively). All three states were penalized by the RNC, but their actions sparked a national debate about the order of the primaries, a debate that resurfaced in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

	United States	Iowa	New Hampshire
Population	321,419,000	3,123,899	1,330,608
Persons Under 18	23.1%	23.4%	20.1%
Persons 65 and over	14.5%	15.8%	15.9%
White	77.4%	92.1%	94.0%
African American	13.2%	3.4%	1.5%
Asian	5.4%	2.2%	2.5%
Hispanic/Latino	17.4%	5.6%	3.3%
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	86.3%	91.3%	92%
Persons in poverty	14.8%	12.2%	9.2%

Source: Census Bureau. All statistics are from July 2014, except population (2015).

# PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES: DEBATE

## Should Iowa and New Hampshire maintain their first-in-the-nation voting status?

### YES: Iowa and New Hampshire take their responsibilities very seriously.

In the early days of the 2016 presidential election, there were 17 candidates vying for the Republican nomination alone.<sup>18</sup> Some of these candidates had vast amounts of money to spend on television advertising, direct mail campaigns, and large rallies; other candidates did not.<sup>19</sup> Yet campaign money is significantly less important in small states like Iowa and New Hampshire—states that level the playing field by enabling candidates to travel small distances easily and connect with voters in more intimate settings.

“As the story goes, New Hampshire residents need to meet a candidate three times before they’ll consider offering up their votes in the first-in-the-nation primary,” wrote Nick Reid, a reporter for the *Concord Monitor*.<sup>20</sup> Although New Hampshire voters do not actually meet each candidate, Reid makes an important point that the state’s voters take their time to get to know the candidates and their positions.<sup>21</sup> They attend town hall meetings and speak to the candidates directly. But if a large state like California or New York were to go first in the primary calendar—states where candidates must travel long distances and deal with expensive media markets and enormous populations—this kind of personal politics would be impossible.

“New Hampshire has earned its place as the first-in-the-nation presidential primary state because our voters are sophisticated and take their role in the nomination process seriously,” New Hampshire Republican State Committee chairwoman Jennifer Horn argued. “The entire nation benefits when candidates are forced to answer the concerns of voters face-to-face in living rooms and backyards across New Hampshire.”<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the intense scrutiny that candidates face in Iowa and New Hampshire is good for the entire nation: it weeds out the pretenders from the contenders.

### NO: Iowa and New Hampshire are not sufficiently representative of the nation.

“Historically, Iowa and New Hampshire account for about half the news media coverage of the entire primary season, with the winners absorbing the lion’s share of the attention,” Democratic consultant Mark Mellman wrote. “Moreover, coverage of the winners tends to be almost entirely positive, which fuels rising poll numbers. It’s extremely difficult for those who fail to win either of the first races to catch up.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite having a combined 2014 population of 4.4 million people—or 1.3 percent of the national population—Iowa and New Hampshire dominate the election cycle in ways that are unhealthy to democracy.<sup>24</sup> Decisions made in these two states drastically alter the opinions of residents in other states, as candidates who win in Iowa and New Hampshire instantly gain front-runner status.<sup>25</sup> This makes the later primaries less meaningful, as candidates with early victories receive greater campaign contributions and more media coverage than others. “It is not natural,” David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* wrote. “It’s undemocratic, in fact. It is unfair to voters in the other 48 states.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, these two states are inadequate representatives of the nation as a whole. Both are rural and overwhelmingly white, while neither has a high rate of poverty when compared with the national average.<sup>27</sup> “You’re hard pressed to find two whiter states,” said Matt Barreto, a pollster for Latino Decisions.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Schaller, a professor of political science, added, “The prominence and first-in-the-nation position of Iowa and New Hampshire do elevate white primary voters over nonwhite ones, and in both parties.”<sup>29</sup>

It is time to develop a presidential election system that better represents and listens to all Americans, not just the lucky few in Iowa and New Hampshire.

# PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

**Overall, do you believe primaries and caucuses make up the best system to nominate presidential candidates? Why or why not? Is there another system that would be more effective?**

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**Take a look at this Census Bureau website (<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00,19,33>) to see how the populations of Iowa and New Hampshire compare with that of the nation as a whole. In what ways would you say these two states are representative of the United States? In what ways are they not?**

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**Now, using the same website and your own experience, consider your own state. Do you think it would be a better site for an early primary or caucus than Iowa or New Hampshire? Why or why not?**

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## PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES: ENDNOTES

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