

US election 2024: A really simple guide

Americans will head to the polls in November 2024 to elect the next US president. The person sitting in the White House's Oval Office has a big influence on people's lives both at home and abroad, so the outcome of this election matters for everyone. The US political system today is dominated by just two parties, so every president in modern times has belonged to one of them.

The Democrats are the liberal political party, with an agenda defined largely by its push for civil rights, a broad social safety net and measures to address climate change. It is the party of incumbent President Joe Biden, who is trying to secure a second term in power.

The Republicans are the conservative political party in the US. Also known as the GOP, or the Grand Old Party, it has stood for lower taxes, shrinking the size of the government, gun rights and tighter restrictions on immigration and abortion. Former President Donald Trump is the last Republican left in the race and has secured enough support to be nominated the Republican candidate.

When is the next US presidential election?

The 2024 election will be on Tuesday, 5 November 2024. The winner will serve a term of four years in the White House starting in January 2025.

Who are the candidates and how are they nominated?

The 2024 presidential campaign is well under way. It started with 15 candidates - nine Republicans, four Democrats and two independents - although nearly all have already dropped out of the race. The two main parties nominate a presidential candidate by holding a series of state primaries and caucuses. There are differences between the parties and the process varies from one state to another. One of the biggest polling days is known as Super Tuesday - named because more than a dozen states all held their primary contests on Tuesday 5 March.

President Biden announced his re-election bid earlier this year and has won enough support to secure the Democratic Party nomination despite some long-shot challenges. In the Republican Party, former President Donald Trump saw off his last remaining challenger, former UN ambassador Nikki Haley, and has won enough primary contests to propel him over the finish line to be nominated the Republican candidate. There are also some independent candidates running for president, including Robert F Kennedy Jr, nephew to former president John F Kennedy.

How does the US presidential election work?

Both candidates compete to win electoral college votes. Each state has a certain number of electoral college votes partly based on its population and there are a total of 538 up for grabs, so the winner is the candidate that wins 270 or more. This means voters decide state-level contests rather than the national one, which is why it's possible for a candidate to win the most votes nationally - like Hillary Clinton did in 2016 - but still be defeated by the electoral college.

All but two states have a winner-takes-all rule, so whichever candidate wins the highest number of votes is awarded all of the state's electoral college votes. Most states lean heavily towards one party or the other, so the focus is usually on a dozen or so states where either of them could win. These are known as the battleground states.

Who else is being elected?

All of the attention will be on who wins the presidency, but voters will also be choosing new members of Congress - the government's legislature - when they fill in their ballots.

All 435 seats in the House of Representatives are up for election, while 33 Senate seats are also up for grabs. Republicans control the House and Democrats are in charge of the Senate. These two chambers pass legislation so can act as a check on White House plans if the controlling party in either chamber disagrees with the president.

When do we know who has won the election?

Usually a winner is declared on the night of the election, but in 2020 it took a few days to count all the votes.

The period after the election is known as the transition if there is a change of president. It's a time for the new administration, including cabinet ministers, to form and make plans for the new term.

The president is officially sworn into office in January in a ceremony known as the inauguration, held on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington DC.