

## US elections 2020: a simple guide to the race for the White House

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The election cycle has been revving up since January 2019, when candidates started entering the race to be the Democratic party's nominee for president - ie the pe  
Illustration: Sam Morris/Getty Images

From the debates, to the conventions, to the electoral college, here's everything you need to know

On 3 November 2020, Americans will head to the polls and render their verdict on the Donald Trump presidency. Here's your quick guide to what's in store.

### What's the 2020 election all about?

In a word, Trump. Control of the US Congress, state legislatures and governorships are also in play. But the big question is whether the incumbent president can win re-election. All eyes are on the Democrats and the candidate they will nominate to take on Trump.

In 2016, Trump pulled off a mammoth political upset against Hillary Clinton, taking swing states such as Florida and North Carolina while overcoming the Democrats' supposed "blue wall" in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan. But this time the candidates are different, the issues are different and the electorate has changed. Can Trump do it again?

The general election isn't just about the presidency, however.

Democrats have a chance to take control of the US Senate from Republicans, with 34 out of 100 seats up for election and about a third of those looking competitive. Democrats also will try to defend their majority in the House of Representatives, where all 435 seats come up for re-election every two years.

States will host legislative elections and 11 of them will hold elections for governor.

### Who can vote?

There are more than 224 million people of voting age in the US. The 2020 electorate will be more diverse and younger than ever before, according to a January 2019 analysis from the Pew Research Center. Non-white voters will account for a third of eligible voters - their largest share ever - and one in 10 eligible voters will be of Generation Z (between ages 18 and 23).

In 2016, about 30% of Americans who were eligible to vote decided not to or were blocked, but given the surge in turnout for the 2018 midterm elections, 2020 could see an expanded electorate. However, experts say voter suppression and gerrymandering may have hindered Democrats in 2018 and may continue to counter the effects of a more enthusiastic voting base.

### What's about to happen?

The election cycle has been revving up since January 2019, when candidates started entering the race to be the Democratic party's nominee for president - ie the person to take on Trump. The president filed his paperwork to run for re-election on the day of his inauguration.

More than 10 Democratic candidates - from the former vice-president Joe Biden to the 2016 insurgent candidate Bernie Sanders - are running for the nomination. Only one nominee will emerge from the Democratic side, although the race could be complicated by the entry of a third-party candidate.



A voter casts his ballot in the midterm election at a polling station in the Brooklyn borough of New York City on 6 November 2018. Photograph: Angela Weiss/AFP/Getty Images

Though Trump is not running entirely unopposed in the Republican primaries, he doesn't face any serious challengers.

### What are the primaries?

The primaries and caucuses are a series of contests, in all 50 US states plus Washington DC and outlying territories, by which the party selects its presidential nominee. The goal for candidates is to amass a majority of delegates whose job it is to nominate the candidate. In some states, delegates are awarded on a winner-take-all basis; other states split their delegates proportionally among top winners.

The goal for candidates is to win early-voting states and create name recognition and a sense of momentum. Sometimes the nominee emerges quickly, but the last two major Democratic primary contests, pitting Barack Obama against Clinton and then Sanders against Clinton, have lasted from the Iowa caucuses in January through late spring.

### What's a caucus?

Most states hold primary elections, in which voters go to a polling place, mail in their ballots or otherwise vote remotely. But a handful of states hold caucuses, hours-long meetings with multiple rounds of balloting in which voters can switch sides until one candidate emerges as victor.



A volunteer brings a dog to a polling booth in Raleigh, North Carolina, on election day in 2016 to help de-stress voters Photograph: Caitlin Penna/EPA

The primary season in the modern political era has typically begun with the Iowa caucuses followed by the primaries in New Hampshire and South Carolina and caucuses in Nevada. That's why candidates spend so much time in those states in the lead-up to the first voting.

Iowa will hold its caucuses on 3 February 2020. A large cluster of states, 13, plus Democrats living abroad, will vote in primaries on so-called "Super Tuesday" on 3 March 2020. After that the identity of the nominee might be clear.

The last primary season voting is scheduled to take place in Puerto Rico in early June. The Democratic national convention, where the nominee will be officially designated unless something very unusual happens, is scheduled for 13-16 July in Milwaukee.

### OK, then what?

After the primaries, the two parties will hold their national conventions, at which they will officially designate their candidates.

The conventions are a mix of political business, theater, and party in both senses of the word. Party delegates from across the country converge on a city, fill hotels, ballrooms, restaurants and bars, hold meetings and eventually fill a big arena to say something prideful about their state and cheer

wildly for the nominee. It's more convenient for the party if the identity of that nominee is clear going in, but that's not been the case as recently as 1980.

During the convention, politicians and/or celebrities give speeches in support of the party's candidate. The candidate gives a rousing speech. Lots of confetti and balloons will rain down, and someone like Alicia Keys or Demi Lovato might perform. It looks great on TV, as it's supposed to.



Hillary Clinton on stage at the Democratic national convention in Philadelphia in 2016 Photograph: Tannen Maury/EPA

The 2020 Democratic national convention will be held on 13-16 July in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, while the Republicans will hold theirs in Charlotte, North Carolina, on 24-27 August.

### Then it'll finally be election day, right?

Not even close! The general election - the race for president that most voters think of, when and if they do - begins in earnest after the conventions. It's possible that a significant third-party candidate could enter the race and stay through the general election, as happened as recently as 2000.

But with two major party candidates now squared off, the game is to identify the places to campaign and the voters to chase and then to do that on as much donor cash, little sleep and as much road food as possible. The candidates will choose and unveil running mates. They will reap endorsements and deploy surrogates surely including, on the Democratic side, the Obamas. There will be a series of presidential TV debates. Trump will also have the business of the presidency to attend to.



A Massachusetts delegate dressed as Trump in front of a mirrored wall at the 2016 Republican national convention in Cleveland, Ohio. Photograph: Andrew Gombert/EPA

Then 3 November 2020 will come, Americans will cast their votes and it will all come down to the electoral college.

### How does the electoral college work?

The electoral college is the name for the voting system that determines who will be president of the United States. Each of the 50 states plus Washington DC is given a specific number of electoral votes - 538 votes in total - based on their number of congressional districts, which in turn are based on population counts.

California has 55 electoral votes, the most of any state, while states with just one US representative wield three electoral votes. A candidate needs a majority of electoral votes, 270 if all are cast, to win outright.

With the exception of Maine and Nebraska, the candidate who wins a state gets all of its electoral votes, regardless of the margin they won by. This is why it's possible for a candidate to get enough electoral votes to win, but lose the popular vote (the actual number of votes that individuals cast for that candidate) - as Trump did in 2016 and George W Bush did in 2000.

### How do I register to vote?

The deadlines to register to vote vary by state. Some states allow US voters to register in person on election day, others set a deadline at as much as 30 days before election day. A full list of deadlines by state can be found [here](#).

## Key dates for your diary

### 3 February 2020

Iowa caucuses kick off the primaries

### 3 March

Super Tuesday - when Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont and Virginia hold their primaries

### 13-16 July

Democratic national convention

### 24-27 August

Republican national convention

### 3 November

Election day

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