



Foundations First #21: Conventions and Runoffs

Introduction

In the United States, the process by which candidates become their party's official nominee for public office is far from uniform. While many voters are familiar with traditional primary elections, the reality is more complex. Across the country, states and political parties employ a variety of systems including convention-based nominations, hybrid convention-primary models, and runoff elections that shape who ultimately appears on the general election ballot.

For candidates, campaign professionals, and civic organizations, understanding these systems is not simply academic. The structure of a nomination process determines who participates, how campaigns allocate resources, and what strategies are most effective. In some systems, success depends on broad voter appeal; in others, it hinges on winning over a relatively small group of highly engaged party activists. In still others, candidates must prepare for multiple rounds of voting before securing a nomination.

This document provides a comprehensive overview of these systems, with particular attention to convention-style primaries and runoff elections. It is designed to equip readers with a clear understanding of how these processes function and why they matter.

The Baseline: Traditional Primary Elections

The most familiar path to a party nomination is the primary election. In this system, voters select their preferred candidate through a state-administered election, typically held several months before the general election. The candidate who receives the most votes, often a plurality rather than a majority, becomes the party's nominee.

Primary elections themselves vary in structure. In a closed primary, only voters registered with a political party may participate in that party's contest. Semi-closed systems allow unaffiliated voters to take part, while open primaries permit any voter to choose which party's primary to vote in on election day. Some states use nontraditional systems, such as "top-two" primaries, in which all candidates compete on a single ballot and the top two vote-getters advance to the general election regardless of party.

Despite these variations, traditional primaries share several key characteristics: they are broadly accessible, rely on popular vote, and typically award nominations based on plurality. However, not all states rely exclusively on this model. In several parts of the country, party conventions play a decisive, or at least influential, role.

Convention-Style Nomination Systems

Convention-based systems represent a fundamentally different approach to candidate selection. Rather than relying solely on a mass electorate, these systems place significant decision-making power in the hands of party delegates. These delegates are usually selected through local meetings, caucuses, or party organizing processes and tend to be more politically engaged than the average voter.



In a pure convention system, delegates gather at a party convention and vote to determine the nominee. Candidates must typically meet a predefined threshold, often a majority or a supermajority of delegate votes, to secure the nomination. If a candidate reaches that threshold, no primary election is necessary.

Utah provides one of the most prominent examples of this model. There, candidates who receive 60 percent of the delegate vote at convention can win the nomination outright. This creates a scenario in which a relatively small number of party activists can determine the outcome of a race without broader voter participation.

However, pure convention systems are relatively rare in modern elections. More commonly, states employ hybrid systems that combine conventions with traditional primaries.

Hybrid Convention-Primary Systems

Hybrid systems seek to balance the influence of party activists with broader voter participation. In these systems, conventions often serve as a gatekeeping mechanism, determining which candidates are eligible to appear on the primary ballot.

One common model requires candidates to receive a minimum percentage of delegate support at a convention, often between 20 and 40 percent, to qualify for the primary. Candidates who fail to meet this threshold are eliminated from contention before voters have an opportunity to weigh in.

Another widely used model allows candidates to qualify for the ballot through either the convention process or a petition signature requirement. This “dual path” system is used in states such as Utah and Colorado. It enables candidates to bypass the convention entirely if they can demonstrate sufficient support among voters by collecting signatures.

These hybrid systems have important implications. Because delegates are typically more ideologically motivated and politically active, candidates who perform well in conventions may differ from those who would succeed in a broad electorate. As a result, campaigns must often pursue a dual strategy: appealing to party insiders while also preparing for a potential primary election.

Caucuses and Their Role in Convention Systems

Caucuses are often confused with conventions, but they serve a distinct function. A caucus is a local gathering of party members who come together to discuss candidates and select delegates. These delegates then attend higher-level conventions, where the actual nomination decisions are made.

Because caucuses require participants to attend meetings at specific times and engage directly in the process, turnout is typically much lower than in primary elections. Those who do participate tend to be highly motivated and deeply involved in party politics. This dynamic further concentrates influence among a relatively small group of activists.

In systems that rely on caucuses and conventions, the path to nomination can be significantly different from that of a traditional primary. Candidates must invest in grassroots organizing, build relationships with party members, and mobilize supporters to attend meetings, often months before a broader electorate becomes engaged.



Runoff Elections: Ensuring Majority Support

While convention systems affect how candidates reach the ballot, runoff elections determine how winners are selected when no candidate achieves a majority. In many states, particularly in the South, a candidate must receive more than 50 percent of the vote to secure a party's nomination. If no candidate meets that threshold, a runoff election is held between the top two finishers.

This two-round system is designed to ensure that nominees have majority support rather than simply a plurality. In crowded races, it is possible for a candidate to win a primary with a relatively small share of the vote. Runoffs address this by requiring a second contest in which voters choose between the leading candidates.

States that commonly use primary runoff elections include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. In these states, runoffs are a routine part of the electoral process and can significantly shape campaign strategy.

North Carolina employs a variation known as a "second primary," which may be triggered under specific conditions if no candidate reaches a certain threshold and a runoff is requested.

Runoff elections typically occur within a few weeks of the initial primary. This compressed timeline creates unique challenges. Campaigns must quickly regroup, reallocate resources, and re-engage voters. Turnout in runoff elections is often significantly lower than in the initial primary, meaning that the composition of the electorate can change in meaningful ways.

Ranked Choice Voting as an Alternative

Some states have adopted ranked choice voting as an alternative to traditional runoff elections. In this system, voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and those ballots are redistributed based on voters' next preferences. This process continues until a candidate achieves a majority.

Alaska and Maine are the most prominent examples of this approach. By simulating a runoff within a single election, ranked choice voting eliminates the need for a separate second round. This can reduce costs and increase participation, though it also introduces additional complexity for voters and election administrators.

Strategic Implications for Candidates and Campaigns

The structure of a nomination system has profound implications for campaign strategy. In convention-driven systems, campaigns must prioritize early organization and grassroots engagement. Identifying and persuading delegates can be more important than building widespread name recognition. Candidates who appeal strongly to the party base, particularly those with clear ideological positions, may have an advantage.

In states with runoff elections, campaigns must plan for a potentially extended timeline. Resources must be conserved for a second round, and messaging may need to shift between the initial primary and the runoff. Building a broad coalition becomes essential, as candidates seek to win over supporters of eliminated opponents.



Hybrid systems require a combination of these approaches. Candidates must navigate both the insider-focused world of conventions and the broader electorate of primaries. This often demands careful resource allocation and a nuanced understanding of the political landscape.

Geographic Patterns and National Trends

The use of these systems is not evenly distributed across the country. Runoff elections are most common in the South, where majority requirements have long been a feature of primary elections. Convention and hybrid systems are more prevalent in parts of the Mountain West and, to a lesser extent, the Northeast.

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift toward alternative systems such as ranked choice voting. At the same time, some states have moved away from caucuses due to concerns about accessibility and participation.

These trends reflect broader debates about representation, voter participation, and the role of political parties in the nomination process. As states continue to experiment with different models, the landscape of candidate selection is likely to evolve further.

Conclusion

The process by which candidates secure a party nomination in the United States is more varied and complex than it may initially appear. While traditional primaries remain the most common mechanism, convention systems and runoff elections play a critical role in many states. These systems shape not only who runs for office, but also how campaigns are conducted and how voters engage with the political process. For candidates, understanding these rules is essential to building an effective campaign. For voters and civic organizations, it provides important insight into how representation is determined. Ultimately, the diversity of nomination systems reflects the decentralized nature of American elections. Each state and often each party has developed its own approach, resulting in a patchwork of processes that continue to influence the country's political landscape.