

The Presidential Primaries and Caucuses

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The election season is officially underway! Just over a month into the year and Republican candidates have been hitting the campaign trail. Candidates have travelled throughout the country, focusing their attention both on the States that hold primaries and those that hold a “caucus”. Many have asked, “What is a caucus and how does it work?” In this week’s Thought 4 Thursday, TPI provides an overview and explanation.

What is a caucus?

By definition, a caucus is a meeting of the members of a legislative body who are members of a particular political party, to select candidates or decide policy.

How does a Caucus Work?

Unlike the privacy of a voting booth, a caucus is a gathering of members of a political party - either Democrats or Republicans - in which they choose the candidate they wish to nominate. The political party announces the date, time, and location of a meeting at which the candidates will be discussed. Any voter registered with the party may attend.

It's not just show up and vote. The caucuses are part poll, part meeting. Unlike in a primary, supporters of particular candidates are allowed to campaign on site. In fact, it's part of the process. Before any votes are cast (and the term "vote" is used loosely), supporters of the various campaigns are permitted a few minutes to make the case for their candidate.

The results of each caucus are tallied and then conveyed to the media. It is important to note that the results do not have a direct impact on who will become the next Presidential candidate. It is simply an indication of how the public is feeling.

What is the difference between a Primary and a Caucus?

Primaries and caucuses are set up in different ways in each state, but have general distinctions. Primaries are similar to general elections. Voters cast secret ballots at polling places, and can come and go as they please.

Caucuses, however, are longer time commitments. Voters have to stay throughout the duration of caucus, whether it lasts 15 minutes or several hours. The votes are in person, face-to-face, and often involve discussion and debate to persuade voters to change their positions. Caucuses yield lower voter turnout because of the time commitment, but cater to a more grassroots campaign style. Many experts see this as the reason Rick Santorum saw a last-minute surge in Iowa.

We have had 4 GOP events thus far in 2012 – 3 primaries and 1 caucus. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney has won 2 of the 4 (New Hampshire and Florida primaries), and thought he won the Iowa caucus as well (only to later have Santorum ultimately declared to have received the most votes). Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has won 1 (South Carolina primary).

The most recent primary was held this Tuesday in Florida. Mitt Romney received 46.4% of the votes, while Newt Gingrich received 31.9%. Rick Santorum and Ron Paul made up the remaining votes. Attention now turns to the Nevada caucus, followed closely by caucuses in Maine, Colorado and Minnesota. Nevada is familiar territory for Romney, who swept the state in the 2008 caucus with over 50 percent of the vote. It is expected that Romney and Gingrich will remain the top vote-getters. Who would have thought that the top GOP candidates would come down to a man named Mitt and the other Newt?

In Other News

Facebook took its first step toward becoming a publicly traded company on Wednesday, as it filed to sell shares on the stock market. The eight-year old social network is on track to becoming one of the biggest Web stock market debuts of all time. According to a regulatory filing, Facebook with more than 845 million users worldwide, said it was seeking to raise \$5 billion. The company will seek to have the ticker “FB” for its shares, but did not list an exchange.