Elections are a key way that citizens express their will.

Types of Elections

Why are there different types of elections in the American political system?

How many people do you think hold elected office in the United States? The president, the vice president, and all the members of Congress add up to 537. When you add the 50 state governors and other state and local officials, the total might surprise you. There are more than half a million (500,000) elected officials in the United States.

With so many elected officials, it is not surprising that elections are a large part of American life. In this lesson, you will find out how elections work. Learning about elections will prepare you for the day you take part in this exciting aspect of citizenship.

Primary and General Elections

In most states, the first step in the election process is called a primary election. These elections are usually held in the spring or summer. The purpose of the primary election is to choose one candidate from each party to run in the general election. The person who receives the most votes in each party becomes the party’s candidate for an office.

Sometimes no person wins a majority of the votes in a primary. In some states when this happens, a runoff election is held. The person who wins the runoff moves on to the general election.

The general election is held throughout the country on the same day. These elections always take place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. National elections are held in even-numbered years. All seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and about one-third of the seats in the Senate are up for election every two years. Presidential elections are held every four years. Usually state and local officials, such as state legislators, mayors, and city council members, are also elected at this time.

For most offices, the candidate who wins the most votes wins the election. Voting for the president has special rules that will be described later in the lesson. If an election is very close, the loser can demand a recount. In that case, all the votes are counted a second time. If that fails to settle the election, another election might be held. In the case of a national election, Congress may step in to settle a dispute.

Initiatives and Referendums

In many elections people vote on issues, or topics of public interest. Suppose a city council wants to build a new school. It might put the idea on a ballot so voters can approve or reject it.

Two special processes give voters a direct voice in governing. One is called an initiative, and the other is called a referendum. An initiative is a process that lets voters propose new laws or amendments to state constitutions. First, people in favor of the law must gather enough signatures to place the item on the ballot. The proposed law is called a proposition, or “prop.” In the election, people vote for or against the proposition.

A referendum asks voters to accept or reject a law passed by a state or local legislature. Some states require voters to approve changes to the state constitution, for instance. Often, a referendum involves new taxes or tax increases.

Special Elections

Some states allow recall elections. In a recall, people vote on whether to remove an official from office. Like an initiative, the process begins with people signing a petition. If enough citizens ask for a recall, a special election will be held. If the majority votes to remove the official in that election, he or she must give up the office.

Sometimes an official dies in office or resigns before the term of office has ended. In those cases, a special election might be held. These elections are staged to fill a vacant office. They are called “special” because they do not take place at a regularly scheduled time.

Comparing What is the difference between a recall election and a special election?

Presidential Elections

How are presidents elected?

Who elects the president of the United States? If you answered “the American people” or even “registered voters,” you would be wrong. Many Americans are shocked to learn that presidents are not elected directly by the people. The rules for choosing a president are different from those for filling most offices.

Understanding the Electoral College
When voters cast their ballots in a presidential race, they are actually electing special representatives called electors. These electors have pledged to vote for a particular candidate. Electors represent their state in the group known as the **Electoral College**. A person voting for a Republican presidential candidate, for example, is really voting for a Republican to represent his or her state in the Electoral College.

Each state has the same number of electors as it has members of Congress. In addition, the District of Columbia has three electors. As a result, there are 538 electors in all.

After a presidential election, in December, the winning electors meet in their state capitals. They cast their electoral votes for president and vice president. They send their votes to the Senate. In January, the House and Senate meet to count these votes. The candidate who wins a majority of the electoral votes—at least 270—is the winner of the election. The electoral vote determines the president. The purpose of the **popular vote**, the votes cast directly by the people, is to choose the electors.

**Criticisms of the Electoral College**

In most states, the winner of the popular vote in a state wins all of that state’s electors. Some people criticize this **winner-take-all system**. Under this system, a candidate who loses the popular vote can still win the electoral vote and the presidency. In other words, a candidate who wins the popular vote can lose the election. This has happened four times in our nation’s history, most recently in 2000.

There is another problem with the winner-take-all system. It is extremely difficult for third-party candidates to be represented in the electoral vote.

The Constitution set up the Electoral College system. When the Framers discussed how to choose the president, two different views arose. Some wanted the American people to have direct control over government. Others felt that giving the people the power to choose the president might be dangerous. The people could be too easily moved by emotions to make a wise choice, they feared. The Framers settled on a mixed system. Electors choose the president, but the popular vote chooses the electors.

Many Americans think we should elect the president by direct popular vote. Others think that a state’s electoral votes should be divided among candidates according to how many popular votes they receive. No change to the Electoral College can happen without amending the Constitution.

**Identifying** When people vote for the president of the United States, for whom are they actually voting?

**Running for Office**

*How do candidates run for political office?*

National elections take place every two years. States might hold elections every two years also, as might local governments. With so many elections, it can seem that it is always campaign season.

An election campaign is a candidate’s effort to win an election. Running for office is serious business. Even local races can be expensive and complicated. For a national election, the effort is staggering. In 2008, the candidates for president together raised and spent more than $1.5 billion.

**Running a Campaign**

A campaign might involve a mom running for the local school board. It could center around a well-known politician running for president. Either way, all runs for office have some things in common. First, a candidate must meet the qualifications for office. These are standards set by law. For example, a candidate for president must be at least 35 years old, have lived in the United States for at least 14 years, and be a natural-born citizen.

Someone thinking of running for president often begins by forming an exploratory committee. The committee’s job is to find out how much support the person is likely to get. If a full campaign seems worthwhile, the candidate will publicly announce that he or she is running for office. Candidates try to get a lot of media attention when they make these announcements.

Typically, several people from each party run against one another for the same office. In the end, though, usually only one candidate is chosen to run. In a presidential campaign, this choice is often made in a series of state primary elections. The results from these primaries are ratified at the party’s national convention. Delegates to the convention are chosen to represent the majority vote in their state’s primary election. Some states’ delegates are selected by party committees or in party meetings.

National conventions are huge, televised events. They last several days. Political parties use the conventions to get as much media coverage as possible.

Once they are chosen, candidates for any office hit the campaign trail. Campaigning includes many different actions. Candidates make speeches and give interviews to the press. They appear at community events. They answer voters’ questions at special meetings. They issue statements giving their positions on issues. They debate their opponents. The goal of all these actions is to convince as many people as possible to vote for them. Candidates have busy schedules. The work gets even busier the closer it gets to the election.
Of course, candidates have staffs to help them. Volunteers help candidates pursue voters in a variety of ways. Some canvass neighborhoods, or go door-to-door to gather support. Some contact voters by telephone or the Internet. Candidates also hire experienced professionals. These staff members give advice on how to appeal to the most voters.

Candidates try to boost their image by getting endorsements, or public support from important people and groups. Celebrities, politicians, newspapers, unions, professional groups, and countless private groups endorse candidates.

Candidates also advertise on television, radio, and Web sites. They use newspapers, bumper stickers, yard signs, and buttons to get their names and ideas out in public. It costs vast amounts of money to stay in the public eye.

**Campaign Finance**

Campaigns are expensive. Local campaigns cost thousands of dollars. State campaigns cost hundreds of thousands. Congressional campaigns can cost tens of millions. A race for president requires hundreds of millions of dollars.

Where does all the money come from? Most of it comes from donations. Individuals, corporations, unions, and various private groups donate to political campaigns. Political action committees (PACs) are organizations set up by interest groups to collect and direct money to candidates and their campaigns.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulates campaigns and how they are funded. Still, many Americans worry that campaigns have gotten too expensive. They believe that politicians will want to help the people who donated money more than they will want to be impartial, or fair, when they are in office.

**Inferring** Why do candidates want endorsements?

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### 21st Century SKILLS

**Distinguishing Fact from Opinion**

Analyze the home page of a government official’s Web site, such as your state representative or governor. What claims does she or he make? Are those claims supported by facts? Remember, a fact is a statement that can be verified. Which claims seem justified and which do not?

### Why It MATTERS

**Campaign Rules**

To run a fair and winning campaign, candidates must follow campaign rules. What are the rules for elections to your school’s student government? Stage a mock election for that government in your classroom following those rules.

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### LESSON 2 REVIEW

**Review Vocabulary**

1. What is the difference between an *initiative* and a *referendum*?

   LAFS.68.RH.2.4

2. In a presidential election, what is the relationship between the *popular vote* and the *Electoral College*?

   LAFS.68.RH.2.4

**Answer the Guiding Questions**

3. **Inferring** How is the role of voters different in primary elections and in general elections?

   SS.7.C.2.10

4. **Synthesizing** How does a candidate for president win the office?

   SS.7.C.3.8

5. **Explaining** What role do political action committees play in political campaigns today?
6. **ARGUMENT** Study the experience of two candidates in a current or recent election. Write a paragraph explaining which you would vote for based on their experience.