5.9 US Elections: The Electoral College, Primaries and Caucuses

Total Marks

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answer questions may be brief but must be clear. For levels-marked questions, write a developed response using accurate political knowledge, examples and clear evaluation where required. The final two questions are source-based and essay tasks and require full-sentence answers.

1 State what is meant by an open primary, a closed primary and a caucus in US nomination contests.

(Total for Question 1 is 3 marks)

2 Explain why turnout is generally lower in primaries and caucuses than in general elections in the US electoral process.

(Total for Question 2 is 6 marks)

3 Evaluate the view that the Electoral College should be replaced by a national popular vote.

(Total for Question 3 is 30 marks)

4 Explain the criticism that the Electoral College can produce a president who has lost the national popular vote. Use one election example and explain the consequences for democratic legitimacy and demands for reform.

(Total for Question 4 is 6 marks)

5 Using the two source extracts provided below about turnout and the primary process in the United States, analyse how the nomination system can affect voter participation. Source A: 'Primary turnout in open primaries tends to be higher where independents may vote, but closed primaries often produce a smaller, more committed electorate of party members. The calendar of early contests like Iowa and New Hampshire can amplify the influence of engaged activists, shaping media attention long before most voters participate.' Source B: 'Caucuses typically produce lower turnout than primaries because they require time and active participation; caucus states have seen campaigns abandon caucuses in favour of primaries to widen participation. However, the invisible primary of endorsements and fundraising can limit genuine choice by narrowing the field before voters cast ballots.'

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 5.9 US Elections: The Electoral College, Primaries and Caucuses

Question 1

States what an open primary is, allowing any registered voter to participate regardless of party **B1**

States what a closed primary is, limited to voters registered with the party holding the primary **B1**

States what a caucus is, a local meeting of party members to select delegates often involving discussion and rounds of voting **B1**

Answer: An open primary allows any registered voter to take part regardless of party; a closed primary restricts participation to voters registered with that party; a caucus is a local meeting of party members who discuss and select delegates through in-person rounds of voting.

Question 2

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic explanation with limited use of examples or causal detail. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear, developed explanation of why turnout is generally lower in primaries and caucuses than in general elections, with examples or consequences. **4-6**

Indicative content:

- Primary and caucus turnout tends to be lower because they attract more partisan or engaged voters, occur at different times of year with less publicity, and can impose higher participation costs, especially for caucuses that require time and presence.
- General elections attract broader interest, are more heavily covered, involve decisions for many offices including the presidency or midterms, and usually have simpler, more accessible voting methods such as early voting and widespread polling stations.
- Consequences include nominees selected by a narrower slice of the electorate, which can affect candidate positioning and general election competitiveness.

Question 3

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, undeveloped knowledge of the Electoral College and popular vote, with little or no analysis or evaluation. Examples, if present, are generalised. **1-7**

Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of how the Electoral College operates and of the national popular vote alternative, with some analysis and partial evaluation. Arguments may be one-sided or lacking full development across AO1, AO2 and AO3. **8-15**

Level 3 Detailed knowledge deployed in a sustained analysis engaging with arguments for and against replacement, using precise examples and showing balanced evaluation across AO1, AO2 and AO3, reaching a reasoned judgement. **16-23**

Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging and accurate knowledge that analyses and evaluates the institutional, political and normative implications of replacing the Electoral College with a national popular vote. Response uses well-selected historical and contemporary examples, examines counterarguments and reaches a substantiated, balanced judgement. **24-30**

Indicative content:

- Arguments for replacement: a national popular vote is more directly democratic, avoids instances where the electoral vote diverges from the national popular vote as in 2000 and 2016, enhances perceived legitimacy of the winner and ensures every vote carries equal weight.
- Arguments for replacement - practical reforms: description of routes such as constitutional amendment (difficult) or the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which binds state electors to the national popular vote once enough states join, and practical obstacles each route faces.
- Arguments against replacement: defenders claim the Electoral College protects federalism by ensuring smaller states have influence, maintains a balance among diverse states and prevents purely regional candidates; it forces candidates to build geographic coalitions rather than win concentrated urban vote totals.
- Political consequences: replacing the Electoral College could change campaign strategy, shifting attention from battleground states to turnout-maximising efforts in population centres, which could alter policy platforms and the geographic focus of campaigning.
- Practical concerns and edge cases: consider third-party candidates, recount logistics in a nationwide close result, and whether a national recount would be feasible; the Electoral College can produce clear state-level results that resolve disputes locally.
- Evaluation of legitimacy and turnout: discuss evidence on whether winner-takes-all state systems suppress turnout, and whether a popular vote would increase turnout or simply change where parties focus mobilising efforts.
- Consideration of partisan incentives: demonstrate that parties advantaged by the current system are likely to resist change, making reform politically difficult despite normative arguments about fairness.
- Judgement: a reasoned conclusion weighing the democratic merits of equal vote weight and legitimacy against federalism, stability and practical difficulties, and noting that incremental reforms (e.g. district allocation, the Compact) offer partial remedies that have different trade-offs.

Question 4

Identifies that a candidate can win the Electoral College and become president without winning the national popular vote	**B1**
Explains the mechanism: winning electoral votes state by state, usually through winner-takes-all allocation, need not produce the same winner as the national vote total	**B1**
Provides an accurate election example, such as 2000 or 2016, showing the difference between the electoral winner and the national popular-vote winner	**B1**
Explains the democratic criticism that the candidate with the most votes nationally can lose, so the result does not reflect the national popular choice	**B1**
Develops the consequence for perceived legitimacy, such as voters questioning the winner's mandate or losing trust in the electoral system	**B1**
Explains why this can generate demands for reform, such as calls for a national popular vote so that the national vote winner becomes president; no counterargument or evaluation is required	**B1**

Answer: A candidate can become president by winning the Electoral College while losing the national popular vote. Electoral votes are won state by state, usually through winner-takes-all allocation, rather than by adding all votes nationally. In 2016 Trump won the Electoral College while Clinton won the national popular vote. Critics argue that this denies the national popular choice, weakening the winner's perceived democratic mandate and potentially reducing trust in the system. This can fuel calls for a national popular vote so that the candidate with the most votes nationally becomes president.

Question 5

Level 0 No response or no relevant analysis of the sources.	**0**
Level 1 Basic use of the source material with limited analysis. May paraphrase one or two points from the extracts without clear development or linkage to turnout effects.	**1-3**
Level 2 Reasonable use of both extracts with some analysis of how primary and caucus forms influence participation, though explanation may be descriptive rather than analytical.	**4-6**
Level 3 Good analysis using the sources to explain multiple mechanisms by which the nomination system shapes turnout, with some evaluation and additional knowledge beyond the extracts.	**7-9**
Level 4 Detailed, well-supported analysis driven by the sources, linking them to wider knowledge and evaluation. Consideration of trade-offs and an informed judgement on the overall effect on participation is presented.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Source A links open primaries to higher turnout by including independents, whereas closed primaries restrict participation to party members and so reduce turnout but may increase ideological commitment among voters who do participate.
- Source A highlights calendar effects: early contests like Iowa and New Hampshire amplify activist influence and media attention, which can shape voter choices and potentially depress later turnout if voters perceive the race as already decided.
- Source B contrasts caucuses with primaries, noting caucuses lower turnout because of time and effort costs, which favours organised activists and can skew selection towards candidates with committed grassroots support.
- Source B points out the invisible primary narrows choices before voting begins; heavy fundraising and endorsement advantages can lead to perceived foregone conclusions, discouraging turnout among voters who see little choice.
- Use of wider knowledge: cite reforms where caucuses became primaries (e.g. some states since 2012) and the measurable increase in participation after the switch, or statistics showing lower caucus turnout compared with primary turnout in equivalent states.
- Evaluation: weigh inclusiveness of open primaries against risks of cross-party voting; weigh candidacy narrowing from the invisible primary against benefits of filtering weak candidates; discuss whether lower turnout in caucuses is necessarily illegitimate if participants are highly engaged.
- Judgement: a balanced conclusion might argue the nomination system contains structural features that both increase and decrease turnout: open primaries and primary reforms tend to raise participation, while caucuses and an intense invisible primary reduce broad voter engagement, so the net effect depends on state rules and the timeline of the contest.