



POL.USC9 US Elections: The Electoral College, Primaries and Caucuses

Total Marks

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · Calculators not allowed · about 90 minutes

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / ____

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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** This question tests basic factual knowledge of the US Electoral College as used in presidential elections.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

- 2** This question tests understanding of the allocation of Electoral College votes to states in the US presidential election system.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

- 3** This question asks about the historical role of 'faithless electors' in US presidential elections.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

- 4** This question tests knowledge of primary types used in US nomination contests.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

- 5** This question asks about the 'invisible primary' in US presidential politics prior to formal primaries and caucuses.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

- 6** This question is about the effect of the Electoral College on campaign strategy in the US presidential contest.

(Total for Question 6 is 5 marks)

- 7** This question asks about one major criticism of the Electoral College related to the split between the national popular vote and the electoral vote.

(Total for Question 7 is 6 marks)

- 8** This question tests knowledge of how some states allocate electors differently from winner-takes-all.

(Total for Question 8 is 5 marks)

- 9** 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 9 is 12 marks)

- 10** This question asks about voter turnout differences between primaries and general elections in the US electoral process.

(Total for Question 10 is 6 marks)

- 11** Evaluate the view that the Electoral College should be replaced by a national popular vote.

(Total for Question 11 is 30 marks)

Mark scheme · POL.USC9 US Elections: The Electoral College, Primaries and Caucuses

Question 1

- **B1** States that electors in the Electoral College formally cast votes for President and Vice President
- **Answer: Electors in the Electoral College formally cast the votes for President and Vice President.**

Question 2

- **B1** Identifies that each state's electoral votes equal its number of Senators plus its number of Representatives in the House
- **B1** Notes the addition of 3 electors for the District of Columbia under the 23rd Amendment (1961) cao
- **Answer: Each state has electoral votes equal to its two Senators plus its number of House Representatives; the District of Columbia has three electors under the 23rd Amendment (1961).**

Question 3

- **B1** Defines a faithless elector as an Electoral College elector who does not vote for the candidate they pledged to support
- **B1** Notes that faithless electors have been rare and have not changed a successful presidential result in modern times
- **Answer: A faithless elector is an Electoral College elector who casts a vote different from the candidate they were pledged to support; such cases are rare and have not altered the outcome of a successful presidential election in recent history.**

Question 4

- **B1** 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
- **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 5

- **B1** Identifies the invisible primary as the period of fundraising, persuasion and elite endorsement before voting begins
- **B1** Explains that it involves securing endorsements, building campaign organisations and fundraising to show viability
- **B1** Gives a consequence, e.g. strong performance in the invisible primary can deter rivals and shape media coverage
- **B1** Links to nomination outcomes, e.g. candidates who fail to build support may drop out before the first contests
- **Answer: The invisible primary is the pre-voting period when candidates seek endorsements, raise funds and build campaign organisations to demonstrate viability; success can shape media narratives, deter rivals and influence who remains standing by the time primaries and caucuses begin.**

Question 6

- **B1** Identifies that candidates focus on swing states rather than campaigning evenly across all states
- **B1** Explains that swing-state focus leads to resource concentration and tailored policy messages for competitive states
- **B1** Identifies consequence for turnout and attention in safe states, which receive less national campaign attention
- **B1** Explains strategic use of battleground states due to winner-takes-all allocation in most states
- **B1** Offers a brief example, e.g. 2016 or 2020 campaigns prioritised states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin
- **Answer: Because most states use winner-takes-all allocation, campaigns concentrate time, spending and tailored messages on competitive swing states, reducing attention to safe states and directing resources where marginal electoral votes can decide the result; examples include Democratic and Republican focus on Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin in recent contests.**

Question 7

- **B1** Identifies that the Electoral College can produce a president who did not win the national popular vote
- **B1** Explains how this can undermine perceived democratic legitimacy
- **B1** Provides a factual example, e.g. 2000 (Bush v Gore) and 2016 (Trump over Clinton) where the electoral and popular vote differed
- **B1** Explains political consequences, e.g. protests, calls for reform and lower trust in institutions
- **B1** Notes counterargument, e.g. defenders argue the system protects federalism and small-state interests
- **B1** Offers brief evaluation, e.g. whether protecting federalism justifies the democratic cost is contested
- **Answer: The Electoral College can result in a president who lost the national popular vote, as in 2000 and 2016, which critics say damages democratic legitimacy and fuels calls for reform; defenders reply it protects federalism and smaller states, but whether that benefit outweighs the legitimacy cost is disputed.**

Question 8

- **B1** Identifies that Maine and Nebraska allocate electoral votes by congressional district with two additional votes to the statewide winner
- **B1** Explains that this can split a state's electoral votes between candidates
- **B1** Gives an example, e.g. in some elections districts in Nebraska or Maine voted differently from statewide result
- **B1** Notes that most states still use winner-takes-all
- **B1** Offers brief evaluation, e.g. district allocation can increase campaign focus on specific areas but also raise gerrymandering concerns
- **Answer: Maine and Nebraska allocate electoral votes by congressional district with two extra electors for the statewide winner, allowing a state's votes to be split between candidates; this can lead campaigns to target particular districts but also raises concerns about the influence of congressional district boundaries on outcomes.**

Question 9

- **Level 0** (0): No response or no relevant analysis of the sources.
- **Level 1** (1-3): 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.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Reasonable use of both extracts with some analysis of how primary and caucus forms influence participation, though explanation may be descriptive rather than analytical.
- **Level 3** (7-9): 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.
- **Level 4** (10-12): 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.
- **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

Question 10

- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **Level 1** (1-3): Basic explanation with limited use of examples or causal detail.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Clear, developed explanation of why turnout is generally lower in primaries and caucuses than in general elections, with examples or consequences.
- **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 11

- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **Level 1** (1-7): Basic, undeveloped knowledge of the Electoral College and popular vote, with little or no analysis or evaluation. Examples, if present, are generalised.
- **Level 2** (8-15): 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.
- **Level 3** (16-23): 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.
- **Level 4** (24-30): 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.
- **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.