



Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

Last night, voters in Iowa braved historically low temperatures to participate in the 2024 [Iowa caucus](#). Traditionally, the Iowa caucus is the first nominating election in the lead-up to the general election for president of the United States. For Iowans, this is important because as the race for president gears up, they are some of the first groups of voters to meet the candidates and question them about their records and policy initiatives. Depending on how the candidates fare, unexpected wins or second or third-place finishes have the potential to catapult a candidate and help their campaign gain momentum as the [nominating elections](#) move to New Hampshire on January 23rd and South Carolina on February 3rd.

It is important to note that the United States Constitution does not specify a process for nominating and electing candidates for political office. Consequently, the political parties have developed their own procedures [over time](#). This is why some states hold [primary elections](#), some hold [caucuses](#), and others use a combination of the two. Regardless of which method is used, the purpose is the same, and that is for voters to decide which of a party’s candidates receives the nomination to run as that party’s candidate for elected office in the general election. So, what is a caucus, and how is it similar to and different from a primary election?



Caucuses and primary elections differ in how they are organized and who participates. The [rates of participation](#) also differ widely.



A caucus is considered a private meeting that is paid for and run by political parties. These meetings are held at the county, district, or precinct level. In a caucus, registered voters arrive at a designated meeting place like a community center or school. Once there, voters will meet with other voters, listen to speeches from candidates or supporters of a candidate, and join in as different groups try to persuade attendees to vote a certain way. Typically, voters will cast their votes for a candidate publicly by a show of hands or by breaking into sectioned groups. At the end, the number of voters in each group determines how many delegates each

candidate has won. This process can take a few hours. A caucus tends to attract the more loyal, and some would say more extreme, voters since anonymity is removed from this process, as well as requiring a longer time commitment than a typical casting of a vote.

[Primary elections](#) are organized similarly to general elections. These elections are paid for and run by local and state governments. Voters typically have the length of an entire day to go to their polling location and cast a ballot. Voting is done through a [secret ballot](#).

The manner in which both caucuses and primary elections are conducted [varies widely by state](#). Both caucuses and primaries may be categorized as either closed, partially closed, partially open, open to unaffiliated voters, open, or blanket.

To Think and To Do: High voter turnout is essential to a healthy and functioning constitutional republic. However, voter turnout during caucuses and primary elections is lower than in a general election. Conduct some research on your state's caucus or primary election laws. What type of caucus or primary does your state utilize? Compare voter turnout rates for the 2020 and 2022 elections. What do you notice? Brainstorm some ways in which you can raise awareness and encourage family and friends to participate in your state's upcoming caucus or primary election.

LEARN MORE:

- [Primary Election Calendar 2024](#)
- [National Council of State Legislatures](#)

