



U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2008

A Select Glossary

What's the difference between a red and blue state? Ever heard of a battleground state, or swing state? What does "staying on message" really mean? Such terms and phrases are used repeatedly during political seasons in the United States. Here's a list of U.S. election "slang."



Battleground (swing) state: A state in which polls show that neither candidate has a comfortable majority of votes and the outcome of the election is uncertain. Presidential candidates target such states in order to boost their electoral vote count on Election Day.



Blue state: A state where people tend to vote for the Democratic Party.



Caucus: A closed meeting of a group of persons belonging to the same political party usually to select candidates or to decide on policy. In the United States, the Iowa caucus is the first state-wide test for presidential candidates and is the traditional beginning of the presidential election season.



Checks and Balances: The U.S. Constitution guarantees that no part of the government becomes too powerful by setting up a 3-branch system of government - Legislative, Executive and Judicial - in which each branch has certain powers that limit another branch's level of responsibility, so power is shared among the branches.



Donkey: The political symbol for the Democratic Party. According to the party, the symbolic use of the donkey began in 1828, when then presidential candidate Andrew Jackson decided to turn an insult around and use it to his advantage. Opponents called him a "jackass", so he began using the donkey symbol in advertising. It became more permanently connected to the Democratic Party in the 1870's, when political cartoonist Thomas Nast adopted the donkey in his drawings.



Earmark: A provision written into Congressional legislation that directs federal funds to a specific project. Members of Congress will typically seek to insert earmarks that benefit particular projects, locations or organizations in the district or state they represent. (also see pork barrel)



Electoral College: The collective term for the 538 electors who officially elect the President and Vice President of the United States. The number of electors each state is allocated is equal to the combined total of its senators and representatives in Congress. Candidates must win 270 electoral votes to win the presidency.



Elephant: The traditional symbol for the Republican Party, dating back to 1874 when Thomas Nast began using it in his cartoons. Nast is also credited with establishing the donkey as the symbol for the Democratic Party.



Exit poll: A survey of voters taken immediately after they have cast their ballots and left the polling stations. An exit poll asks whom the voter actually voted for.



GOP (Grand Old Party): The traditional nickname for the Republican Party widely used in political reporting. The term, which may have evolved from the phrase "gallant old party" or "grand old man," dates back to the late 19th century when the abbreviation was cited newspaper reports.



Hockey mom: An "average" American mother who passionately supports her children's activities, including the sport of hockey. Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin admits to being a typical "hockey mom."



Independent: Registered voters who do not declare a particular party affiliation are grouped under the term "independent."



Joe the Plumber: The name used by the presidential candidates in reference to Joe Wurzelbacher, a plumber from Ohio whose on camera questions to Democratic nominee Barack Obama about how the candidate's tax plan would impact his business made its way into the third and final presidential debate.



Joe Six-Pack: Reference to an average, ordinary middle-class white American who might relax with a beer in the evening.



Maverick: A politician who is not afraid to go against his party and vote according to his conscience. Republican candidate John McCain is often referred to as a "maverick" for taking positions that differ from his party.



National convention: A party assembly held every four years, at which state delegates from across the country gather to vote on the party's candidate for president and vice president. Conventions now serve mainly to formalize the will of the majority of voters, expressed during the earlier state primaries and caucuses.



Oval Office: The office traditionally occupied by the president in the West Wing of the White House. The room did not exist until the 1930s, when it was added on as part of expansion work to the building. The term is often used to describe the presidency itself.



Pork barrel: Spending that is primarily for the benefit of particular local interests in a Congressional member's district and not obviously in the interests of the nation as a whole.



Primary: A state-level election held before a general election to nominate a party's candidate for office. Primaries are held for both the presidential and congressional races, although the exact regulations governing them and the dates on which they are held vary from state to state. In some states voters are restricted to choosing candidates only from the party for which they have registered support.



Pundit: An expert who offers analysis on election and political developments, most often during appearances on television news and analysis programs.



Red state: A state where people tend to vote for the Republican Party.



Running Mate: Once a party has selected its presidential nominee, that candidate picks a political colleague, or "running-mate," who, if elected, will become vice president.



Soft money: Political contributions not regulated by U.S. campaign finance laws. It is money given directly to political parties for the purposes of "party building," such as grassroots organizing, advertising and voter drives. It is not to be used on or given directly to political candidates.



Stump speech: The standard speech delivered by a candidate during the campaign, outlining the candidate's central message to the voters. The phrase stems from the days when candidates would make speeches standing on tree stumps, so they could be easily seen at a gathering. Campaigning politicians were said to be "on the stump."



Staying on message: A candidate's "message" is the core concept they want to convey to the voters and one of the top rules for a successful campaign. Political candidates are often criticized by analysts and experts if they stray off topic and are repeatedly encouraged to "stay on message."



Swing (battleground) state: A state in which polls show that neither candidate has a comfortable majority of the votes and the outcome of the election is uncertain. Presidential candidates target such states in order to boost their electoral vote count on Election Day.



Talking points: A list of summaries of a candidate's ideas for a public speaking engagement, television appearance or other public event.



Third-party candidate: A candidate who does not belong to one of the two main political parties in the United States (Republicans or Democrats). Examples of third-party candidates running in 2008 are Independent Ralph Nader and Bob Barr, the Libertarian candidate.



Tina Fey effect: The potential political impact from comedian Tina Fey's impersonations of vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin on the popular late night comedy TV show, Saturday Night Live.



Toss one's hat in the ring: An action that shows one clearly wants to compete with other people to win an election for political office.



Wedge issue: An issue on which voters hold strongly divided opinions, which a politician might raise in order to drive a wedge between different groups within his opponent's supporter base.