12

Elections and Voting

In the sixth year of an eight-year presidency, the voting public generally tends to punish the party in control of the White House, and 2014 was no exception. Ahead of the election, President Barack Obama's popularity hovered near the 40 percent level and many viewed the election outcome as an expression of discontent of the president and his policies. But a number of factors that relate to key concepts explored in this chapter contributed to the results of the 2014 midterm election in which the Republican Party gained control of the Senate, increased its House majority to the highest total since the one it held after the 1928 election, and maintained its edge on governorships.

The Republican Party was advantaged in significant ways. Although the Democrats didn't trail far behind, the Republicans raised and spent more money. For the 2014 election, an estimated $1.75 billion was spent by and on behalf of Republicans, $1.64 billion by and on behalf of Democrats. While both parties received plenty of support, Republican and conservative outside groups outpaced the spending of Democratic and liberal ones.

The Senate map for 2014 featured the best lineup for the Republicans since 1980. Owing to the Red nature of the states, the fifteen Republican Senate seats at stake were considered by many to be "in the bag" and Republicans were able to capitalize on the map they were handed. By contrast, many of the twenty-one Democratic seats were located in Red or Purple states. But Republicans also had some impressive victories by strong candidates, including Joni Ernst in Iowa and Cory Gardner in Colorado, both in two states that twice voted for President Obama.

Compared to presidential election years, midterm turnout usually, though not always, favors Republicans, as it did in 2014. Democratic-leaning constituencies, such as minorities and the young tend to show poorly, whereas Republican-leaning constituencies, including whites and those over age 60 turn out in decent numbers.

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ELECTIONS ALLOW CITIZENS TO CHOOSE THEIR LEADERS In order to be elected to Congress, candidates must convince voters to turn out on Election Day. Above, Representative Vito Marcantonio (Labor–NY) campaigns for office in the 1940s. Below, Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) appeals to voters as a down-to-earth farm girl in 2014.

electorate
The citizens eligible to vote.

However, discontent over partisan rancor and in gridlock Washington contributed to an overall dismal voter turnout of only 36.4 percent, the lowest overall turnout in seventy years. Partisan redistricting reduced the number of truly competitive House districts in a general election to an absolute minimum, in turn reducing interest and excitement in the electorate. Finally, the Senate class of seats at stake in the 2014 election involved only about half of the nation's voters, in contrast to the roughly three-quarters engaged in the seats to fill the 2006 and 2010 Senate classes.

With the Republican gains in Congress, the gridlock that has defined Washington is likely to deepen in the short term. Yet, partisan rancor stands in contrast to the sentiments of most Americans who believe their representatives in government should compromise. The disconnect between Washington and the American public highlights the need for more ideologically moderate candidates who can engage voters in the middle and get them more active in every stage of the political process.

•••

Every year, on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November, a plurality of voters, simply by casting ballots peacefully across a continent-sized nation, reelects or replaces politicians at all levels of government—from the president of the United States to members of the U.S. Congress to state legislators. Americans tend to take this process for granted, but in truth it is a marvel. Many other countries do not enjoy the benefit of competitive elections and the peaceful transition of political power made possible through the electoral process.

Americans hold frequent elections at all levels of government for more offices than any other nation on earth. And, the number of citizens eligible to participate in these elections has grown steadily over time. Despite increased access to the ballot box, however, voter participation remains historically low. After all the blood spilled and energy expended to expand voting rights, only about half of eligible voters bother to go to the polls.

This chapter focuses on elections and voting in the United States. We will explore both presidential and congressional contests, and examine the range of factors that affect vote choice and voter turnout. We will also assess the shortcomings of the democratic process in the United States, including low rates of participation in American elections.

Roots of American Elections

12.1 Trace the roots of American elections, and distinguish among the four different types of elections.

Elections are responsible for most political changes in the United States. Regular free elections guarantee mass political action and enable citizens to influence the actions of their government. Societies that cannot vote their leaders out of office are left with little choice other than to force them out by means of strikes, riots, or *coups d'état*.

Purposes of Elections

Popular election confers on government a legitimacy that it can achieve no other way. Elections confirm the concept of popular sovereignty, the idea that legitimate political power derives from the consent of the governed, and they serve as the bedrock for democratic governance. At fixed intervals, the **electorate**—citizens eligible to vote—is called on to judge those in power. Even though the majority of office holders in the United States win reelection, some inevitably lose power, and all candidates are accountable to the voters. The threat of elections keeps policy makers focused on public opinion and promotes ethical behavior.

In addition, elections are the primary means to fill public offices and to organize and staff the government. Because candidates advocate certain policies, elections also provide a choice of direction on a wide range of issues, from abortion to civil rights to national defense to the environment. If current office holders are reelected, they may continue their policies with renewed resolve. Should office holders be defeated and their challengers elected, a change in policies will likely result. Either way, the winners will claim a **mandate** (literally, a command) from the people to carry out a party platform or policy agenda.

Types of Elections

The United States is almost unrivaled in the variety and number of elections it holds. Under the Constitution, the states hold much of the administrative power over elections, even when national office holders are being elected. Thus, as we will see, states have great latitude to set the date and type of elections, determine the eligibility requirements for candidates and voters, and tabulate the results.

The electoral process has two stages: primary and general elections. In most jurisdictions, candidates for state and national office must compete in both of these races. Some states (but not the national government) also use the electoral process to make public policy and remove office holders. These processes are known as the initiative, referendum, and recall.

PRIMARY ELECTIONS In **primary elections,** voters decide which candidates within a party will represent the party in the general elections. Primary elections take on a number of different forms, depending on who is allowed to participate. **Closed primaries** allow only a party's registered voters to cast a ballot. In **open primaries,** however, independents and sometimes members of the other party are allowed to participate. Closed primaries are considered healthier for the party system because they prevent members of one party from influencing the primaries of the opposition party. Studies of open primaries indicate that **crossover voting**—participation in the primary of a party with which the voter is not affiliated—occurs frequently.[2] Nevertheless, research suggests that these crossover votes are usually individual decisions; little evidence exists for organized attempts by voters of one party to influence the primary results of the other party.[3]

In eleven states, when none of the candidates in the initial primary secures a majority of the votes, there is a **runoff primary,** a contest between the two candidates with the greatest number of votes.[4] Louisiana has a novel twist on the primary system. There, all candidates for office appear on the ballot on the day of the national general election. If one candidate receives over 50 percent of the vote, the candidate wins and no further action is necessary. If no candidate wins a majority of the vote, the top two candidates, even if they belong to the same party, face each other in a runoff election. Such a system blurs the lines between primary and general elections.

GENERAL ELECTIONS Once the parties have selected their candidates for various offices, each state holds its general election. In the **general election,** voters decide which candidates will actually fill elective public offices. These elections take place at many levels, including municipal, county, state, and national. Whereas primaries are contests between the candidates within each party, general elections are contests between the candidates of opposing parties.

INITIATIVE AND REFERENDUM Taken together, the initiative and referendum processes are collectively known as ballot measures; both allow voters to enact public policy. They are used by some state and local governments, but not by the national government.

An **initiative** is a process that allows *citizens* to propose legislation or state constitutional amendments by submitting them to the electorate for popular vote, provided the initiative supporters receive a certain number of signatures on petitions supporting the placement of the proposal on the ballot. Twenty-four states and the District of

mandate
A command, indicated by an electorate's votes, for the elected officials to carry out a party platform or policy agenda.

primary election
Election in which voters decide which of the candidates within a party will represent the party in the general election.

closed primary
A primary election in which only a party's registered voters are eligible to cast a ballot.

open primary
A primary election in which party members, independents, and sometimes members of the other party are allowed to participate.

crossover voting
Participation in the primary election of a party with which the voter is not affiliated.

runoff primary
A second primary election between the two candidates receiving the greatest number of votes in the first primary.

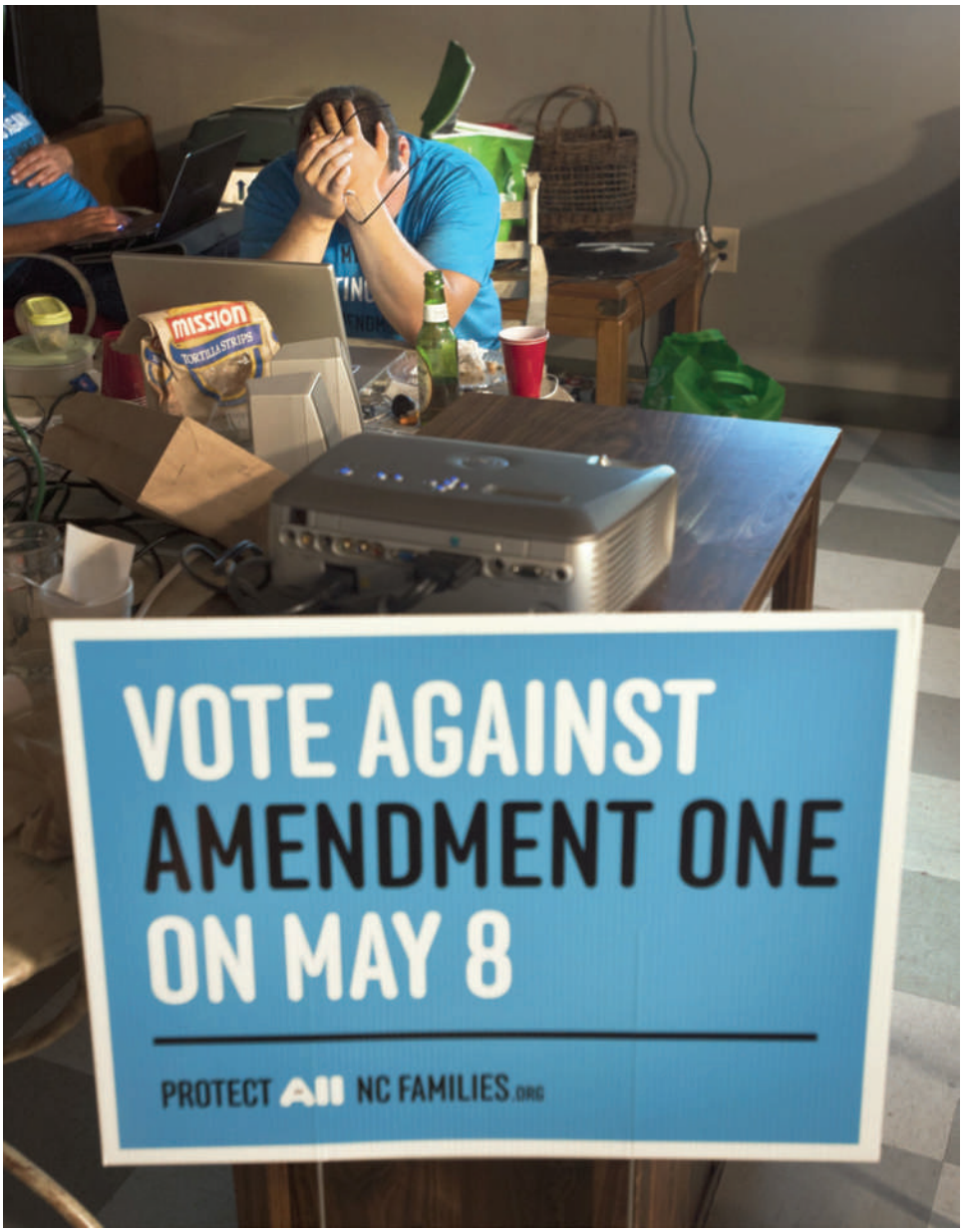
general election
Election in which voters decide which candidates will actually fill elective public offices.

initiative
An election that allows citizens to propose legislation or state constitutional amendments by submitting them to the electorate for popular vote.

referendum
An election whereby the state legislature submits proposed legislation or state constitutional amendments to the voters for approval.

Columbia use the initiative process. In a legislative **referendum**, the *state legislature* submits proposed legislation or state constitutional amendments to the voters for approval. A popular referendum is a measure to approve or repeal an act of the legislature that appears on the ballot as a result of a voter petition drive.

Ballot measures have been the subject of heated debate in the past decades. Critics charge that ballot measures—intended to give citizens more direct control over policy making—are now unduly influenced by interest groups and "the initiative industry—law firms that draft legislation, petition management firms that guarantee ballot access, direct-mail firms, and campaign consultants who specialize in initiative contests."[5] Critics also question the ability of voters to deal with the numerous complex issues that appear on a ballot. In addition, the wording of a ballot measure can have an enormous impact on the outcome. In some cases, a "yes" vote will bring about a policy change; in other cases, a "no" vote will cause a change.[6] Moreover, ballot initiatives are not subject to the same campaign contribution limits applied to donations in candidate campaigns. Consequently, a single wealthy individual can bankroll a ballot



HOW ARE BALLOT MEASURES USED?

Citizens and state legislators use ballot measures to make public policy on a wide range of controversial issues. Here, a sign expresses opposition to Amendment One, a 2012 North Carolina ballot measure that prohibited same-sex marriage in that state.

measure and influence public policy in a manner that is not available to the individual through the normal policy process.

Supporters of ballot measures argue that critics have overstated their case, and that the process has historically been used to champion popular issues that were resisted at the state level by entrenched political interests. Citizens have used initiatives, for example, in popular progressive causes such as banning child labor, promoting environmental laws, expanding suffrage to women, establishing same-sex marriage, and passing campaign finance reform. The process has also been instrumental in passing popular conservative proposals such as tax relief and banning gay marriages.[7] Furthermore, supporters point out that ballot measures can heighten public interest in elections and can increase voter participation.

RECALL **Recall** elections—or deelections—allow voters to remove an incumbent from office prior to the next scheduled election. Recall elections are historically very rare, and sometimes they are thwarted by an official's resignation or impeachment prior to the vote. In recent years, however, recall has become a more popular technique to challenge officials at the state and local levels. In fact, 65 percent of all recalls of state legislators have taken place in the past 30 years. In 2011, alone, voters attempted to recall the mayors of Miami and Omaha, sixteen Wisconsin state senators, and the entire Bell, California, city council. And, in 2013, in the first recall election of state lawmakers in Colorado's history, voters removed two Democratic state senators who provided crucial support for a package of gun laws. Observers attribute this growing use of recall to the development of new technologies, such as the Internet, that make fund-raising and signature gathering easier. Online news sources, too, may turn local recall elections into national news.[8]

recall
An election in which voters can remove an incumbent from office prior to the next scheduled election.

Presidential Elections

12.2 Outline the electoral procedures for presidential and general elections.

No U.S. election can compare to the presidential contest. This quadrennial spectacle brings together all the elements of politics and attracts the most ambitious and energetic politicians to the national stage. Voters in a series of state contests that run through the winter and spring of the election year select delegates who will attend each party's national convention. Following the national convention for each party, held in late summer, a final set of fifty separate state elections to select the president are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. This lengthy process exhausts candidates and voters alike, but it allows the diversity of the United States to be displayed in ways a shorter, more homogeneous presidential election process could not.

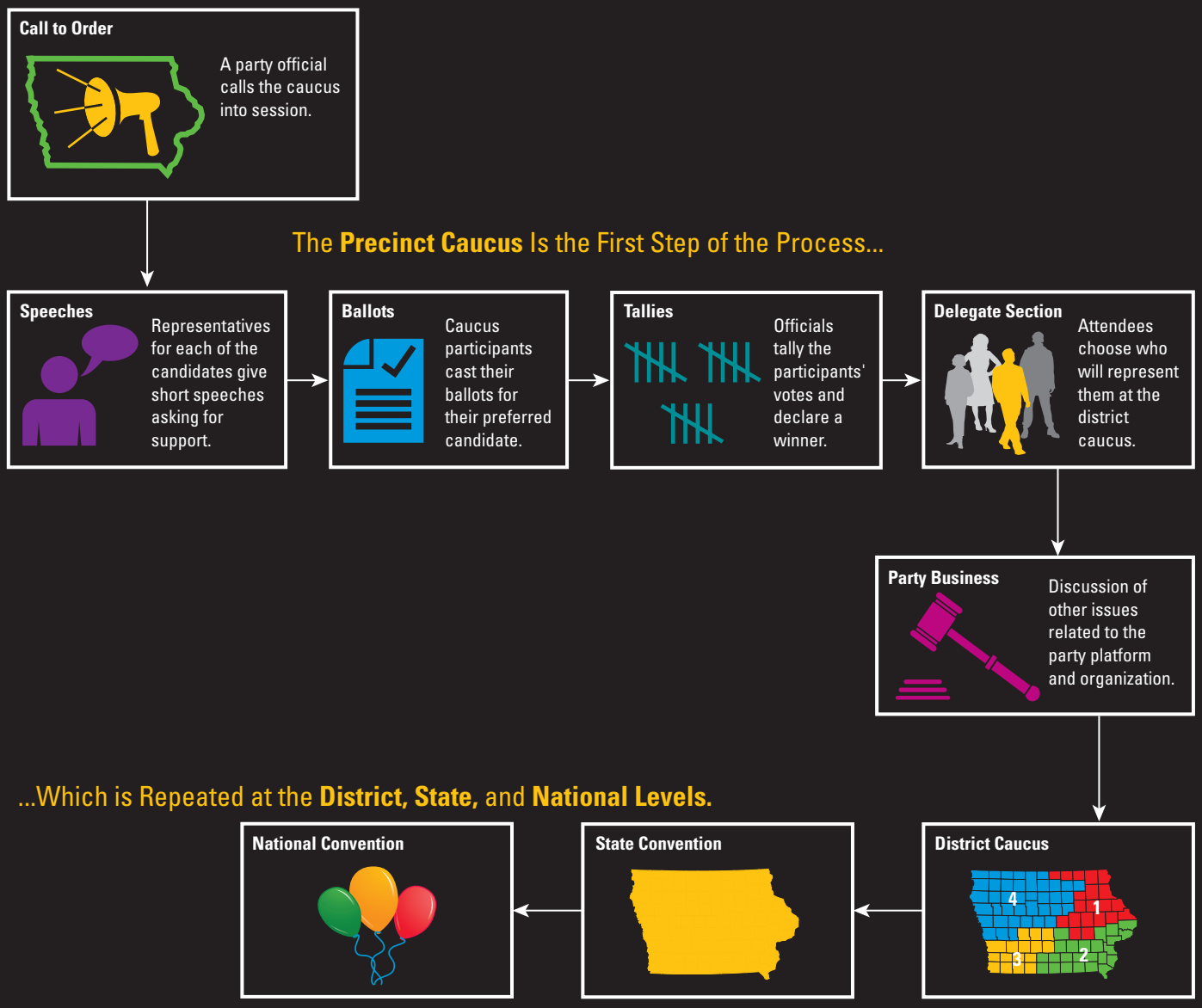
Primaries and Caucuses

The state party organizations use several types of methods to elect the national convention delegates who will ultimately select the candidates running against each other in the general election:

1. *Winner-take-all primary.* Under this system the candidate who wins the most votes in a state secures all of that state's delegates. While Democrats no longer permit its use because they view it as less representative than a proportional system, Republicans generally prefer this process, as it enables a candidate to amass a majority of delegates quickly and shortens the divisive primary season.
2. *Proportional representation primary.* Under this system, candidates who secure a threshold percentage of votes are awarded delegates in proportion to the number

How Does the Iowa Caucus Work?

Caucuses are the oldest and most traditional method of choosing a party's nominee for political office. Rates of participation in caucuses, however, may be lower than in primary elections because of the investment of time required by this method of choosing a nominee, as well as citizens' lack of familiarity with the process of caucusing. Examine the infographic below to learn more about how caucuses are conducted in the first caucus state, Iowa, as well as many other states.



SOURCE: *Des Moines Register*, "How the Iowa Caucuses Work," http://caucuses.desmoinesregister.com/how-to-caucus/.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How does the caucus process enable citizens to learn more about the candidates before they cast their ballot? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a system?
2. What types of voters are most likely to participate in caucuses? How does this affect the ultimate selection of a party's candidate for office?
3. What would a diagram of a primary election look like? What are the similarities and differences between these two methods of delegate selection?

of popular votes won. Democrats now use this system in many state primaries, where they award delegates to anyone who wins more than 15 percent of the vote in any congressional district. Although proportional representation is probably the fairest way of allocating delegates to candidates, its downside is that it renders majorities of delegates more difficult to accumulate and thus can lengthen the presidential nomination contest.

3. *Caucus.* The caucus is the oldest, most party-oriented method of choosing delegates to the national conventions. Traditionally, the caucus was a closed meeting of party activists in each state who selected the party's choice for presidential candidate. Today, caucuses (in Iowa, for example) are more open and attract a wider range of the party's membership. Indeed, new participatory caucuses more closely resemble primary elections than they do the old, exclusive party caucuses.[9] At a caucus, participants spend several hours learning about politics and the party. They listen to speeches by candidates or their representatives and receive advice from party leaders and elected officials, then cast a well-informed vote.

front-loading
The tendency of states to choose an early date on the nomination calendar.

SELECTING A SYSTEM The mix of preconvention contests has changed over the years, with the most pronounced trend being the shift from caucuses to primary elections. Only seventeen states held presidential primaries in 1968; in 2012, thirty-seven states chose this method. In recent years, the vast majority of delegates to each party's national convention have been selected through the primary system.

Many people support the increase in number of primaries because they believe that primaries are more democratic than caucuses. Primaries are accessible not only to party activists but also to most of those registered to vote. Thus, although both primaries and caucuses attract the most ideologically extreme voters in each party, primaries nominate more moderate and appealing candidates—those that primary voters believe can win in the general election. Primaries are also more similar to the general election and thus constitute a rigorous test for the candidates and a chance to display, under pressure, some of the skills needed to be a successful president.

Critics contend that the qualities tested by the primary system are by no means a complete list of those needed by a successful president. For instance, skill at handling national and local media representatives is by itself no guarantee of an effective presidency. The exhausting primary schedule may be a better test of a candidate's stamina than of his or her brain power. In addition, critics argue that although primaries may attract more participants than do caucuses, this quantity does not substitute for the quality of information held by caucus participants.

FRONT-LOADING The role of primaries and caucuses in the presidential election has been altered by **front-loading,** the tendency of states to choose an early date on the nomination calendar (see Figure 12.1). This trend is hardly surprising, given the added press emphasis on the first contests and the voters' desire to cast their ballots before the competition is decided. Front-loading has important effects on the nomination process. First, a front-loaded schedule generally benefits the front-runner, since opponents have little time to turn the contest around once they fall behind. Second, front-loading gives an advantage to the candidate who wins the "invisible primary," that is, the one who can raise the bulk of the money *before* the nomination season begins. Once primaries and caucuses begin, less opportunity is available to raise money to finance campaign efforts simultaneously in many states.

However, Internet fund-raising has emerged as a means to soften the advantage of a large campaign fund going into a primary battle, since it allows candidates to raise large sums from many small donors nationwide virtually overnight. All of the major 2012 presidential candidates relied on online donations to finance their campaigns. President Obama's technology team received such acclaim for their innovative fund-raising efforts that, in a twist of irony, they found themselves headlining fundraisers attracting other campaign strategists who wanted to learn from their record-breaking fund-raising efforts.[10]

Electoral College
Representatives of each state who cast the final ballots that actually elect a president.

elector
Member of the Electoral College.

reapportionment
The reallocation of the number of seats in the House of Representatives after each decennial census.

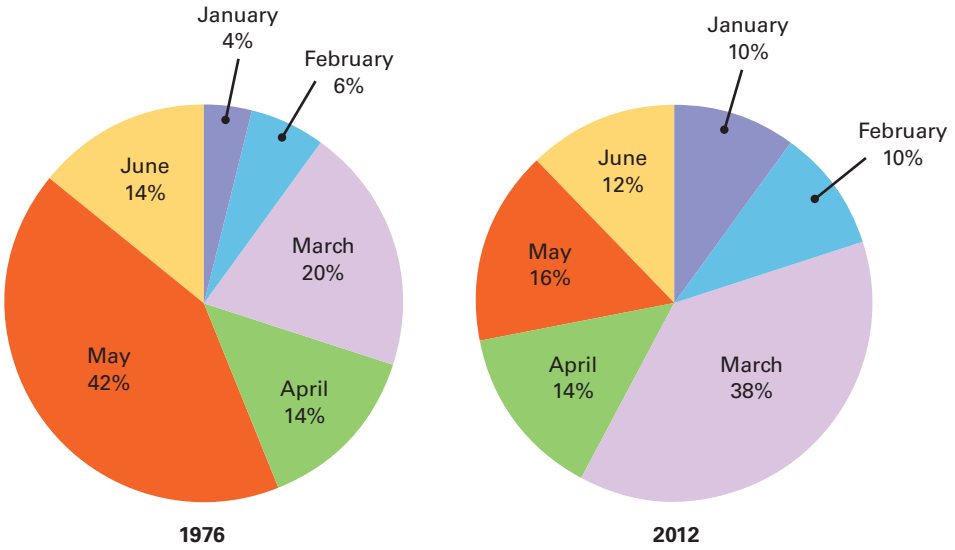


FIGURE 12.1 WHEN DO STATES CHOOSE THEIR NOMINEE FOR PRESIDENT?

These pie graphs show when Republican Party caucuses and primary elections were held in 1976 and 2012. The trend toward front-loading is evident. In 2012, for example, most states held their primaries and caucuses in March; in comparison, in 1976, most states held their nominating contests in May.

SOURCE: Joshua T. Putnam, frontloading.blogspot.com.

Selecting a President: The Electoral College

Given the enormous amount of energy, money, and time expended to nominate two major-party presidential contenders, it is difficult to believe that the general election could be more arduous than the nominating contests, but it usually is. The process of campaigning for the presidency (and other offices) is described in another chapter, but the object of the exercise is clear: winning a majority of the **Electoral College.** This uniquely American institution consists of representatives of each state who cast the final ballots that actually elect a president. The total number of **electors**—the members of the Electoral College—for each state is equivalent to the number of senators and representatives that state has in the U.S. Congress. The District of Columbia is accorded three electoral votes, making 538 the total number of votes cast in the Electoral College. Thus, the magic number for winning the presidency is 270 votes.

Keep in mind that through **reapportionment,** representation in the House of Representatives and consequently in the Electoral College is altered every ten years to reflect population shifts. Reapportionment is simply the reallocation of the number of seats in the House of Representatives that takes place after each decennial census. After the 2010 Census, for example, the Electoral College map was redrawn to reflect a sizeable population shift from the Midwest and the Democratic-dominated Northeast to the South and West, where Republicans are much stronger (see Figure 12.2). Texas, for example, gained four congressional districts, and therefore four additional seats in the House of Representatives and four additional votes in the Electoral College. Florida gained two seats and two votes, while six other states gained one. New York and Ohio both lost two seats and two votes, and eight states lost a single seat and electoral vote.

HISTORICAL CHALLENGES The Electoral College resulted from a compromise between those Framers who argued for selection of the president by the Congress and those who favored selection by direct popular election. Three points are essential to understanding the Framers' design of the Electoral College. The system was constructed to: (1) work without political parties; (2) cover both the nominating and electing phases of presidential selection; and (3) produce a nonpartisan president. Most of the challenges faced by the Electoral College are the result of changes in presidential elections that have occurred over time.

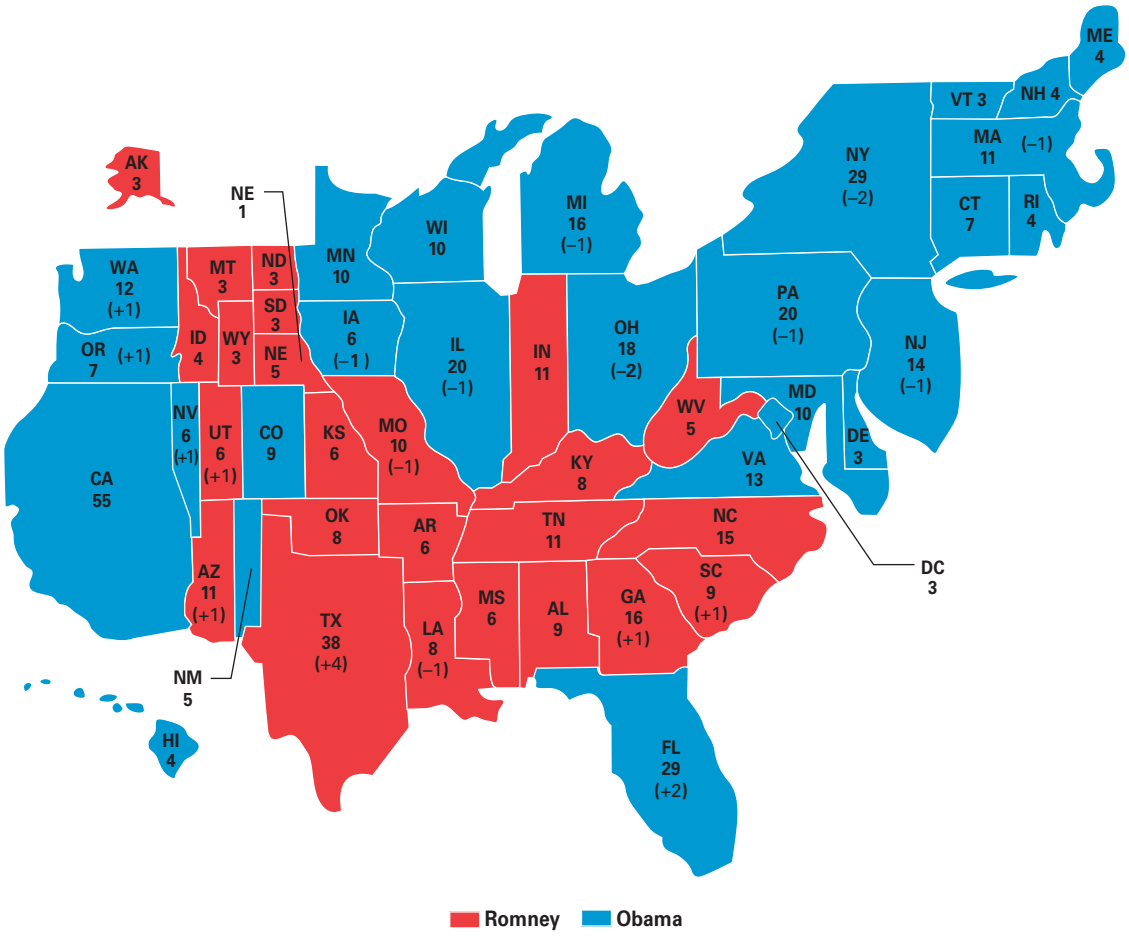


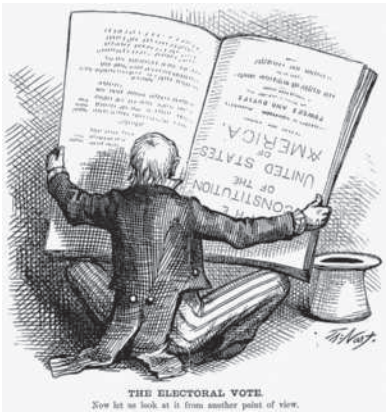
FIGURE 12.2 HOW IS VOTING POWER APPORTIONED IN THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

This map visually represents the respective electoral weights of the fifty states in the 2012 presidential election. For each state, the gain or loss of Electoral College votes based on the 2010 Census is indicated in parentheses. Note the loss of seats in the Northeast and the gains in the South and West.

SOURCE: CNN, http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/results/race/president.

For example, because the Framers expected partisanship to have little influence, they originally designed the Electoral College to elect the president and vice president from the same pool of candidates; the one who received the most votes would become president and the runner-up would become vice president. To accommodate this system, each elector was given two votes. Following the development of the first party system, the republic's fourth presidential election soon revealed a flaw in this plan. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were, respectively, the presidential and vice presidential candidates advanced by the Democratic-Republican Party, whose supporters controlled a majority of the Electoral College. Accordingly, each Democratic-Republican elector cast one of his two votes for Jefferson and the other one for Burr. Since there was no way under the constitutional arrangements for electors to earmark their votes separately for president and vice president, the presidential election resulted in a tie between Jefferson and Burr. Even though most understood Jefferson to be the actual choice for president, the Constitution mandated that a tie be decided by the House of Representatives, which the Federalists controlled. The controversy was settled in Jefferson's favor, but only after much energy was expended to persuade Federalists not to give Burr the presidency.

The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804 and still the constitutional foundation for presidential elections today, attempted to remedy the confusion between the selection of vice presidents and presidents that beset the election of 1800 by providing for separate elections for each office. In the event of a tie or when no candidate received a majority of the total number of electors, the election still went to the House of



HOW WAS THE 1876 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESOLVED?

This cartoon from the 1876 presidential contest between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden describes the frustration of many Americans with interpreting the constitutional procedures for resolving Electoral College disputes. An electoral commission formed by Congress to decide the matter awarded all disputed electors to Hayes, giving him the victory even though he had lost the popular vote by a 51–48 percent margin.

The Living Constitution

Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be appointed an Elector. —ARTICLE II, SECTION 1, CLAUSE 2

This clause of the Constitution creates what is called the Electoral College, the representative body of citizens formally responsible for choosing the president of the United States. This body was created as a compromise between some Framers who favored allowing citizens to directly choose their president and other Framers who feared that directly electing a president could lead to tyranny. As stipulated in the Constitution, each state has a number of votes in the Electoral College that is equivalent to the number of senators and representatives that state has in the U.S. Congress.

Since the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution in 1824, the Electoral College has remained relatively unchanged, save for the addition of electors as the size of the House of Representatives and Senate grew. However, one major change in the Electoral College occurred when Congress enacted and the states ratified the Twenty-Third Amendment to the Constitution. This amendment gave the District of Columbia, which had evolved from a dismal swampland to a growing metropolitan area, representation in the Electoral College. The amendment set the number of electors representing the District as equal to the number of electors representing the smallest state, regardless of the District's population. Today, the District has three electors, making it equal with small-population states such as Delaware and Wyoming.

This provision could become problematic if the population of the District grows from its present level of 618,000. Then, if the District were to have voting power in the Electoral College equal to its population, it would require at least one additional elector. Republicans in Congress, however, have resisted modifying this provision, as well as giving the District a voting member (or members) of Congress, in part because the District is one of the most heavily Democratic areas of the nation. In 2012, for example, more than 91 percent of the District's residents voted for Barack Obama.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Should the Electoral College continue to play a role in the selection of the president? Why or why not?
2. Should the District of Columbia have representation in the Electoral College equal to its population? Why or why not?

Representatives; now, however, each state delegation would have one vote to cast for one of the three candidates who had received the greatest number of electoral votes.

The Electoral College modified by the Twelfth Amendment has fared better than the College as originally designed, but it has not been problem free. On three occasions during the nineteenth century, the electoral process resulted in the selection of a president who received fewer votes than his opponent. In 1824, neither John Quincy Adams nor Andrew Jackson secured a majority of electoral votes, throwing the election into the House. Although Jackson had more electoral and popular votes than Adams, the House selected the latter as president. In the 1876 contest between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, no candidate received a majority of electoral votes; an electoral commission decided the election in Hayes's favor even though he had 250,000 fewer popular votes than Tilden. In the election of 1888, President Grover Cleveland secured about 100,000 more popular votes than did Benjamin Harrison, yet Harrison won a majority of the Electoral College vote, and with it the presidency.

No further Electoral College crises have occurred. However, the 2000 presidential election once again brought the Electoral College to the forefront of voters' minds. Throughout the 2000 presidential campaign, many analysts foresaw that the election would likely be the closest since the 1960 race between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Few observers realized, however, that the election would be so close that the winner would not be officially declared for more than five weeks after Election Day. And, no one could have predicted that the Electoral College winner, George W. Bush, would lose the popular

vote and become president after the Supreme Court's controversial decision in *Bush* v. *Gore* (2000) stopped a recount of votes cast in Florida. With the margin of the Electoral College results so small (271 for Bush, 267 for Gore), a Gore victory in any number of closely contested states could have given him a majority in the Electoral College.

SHOULD THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE BE REFORMED? Following the 2000 election, many political observers suggested that the system of electing a president needed reform. Two major proposals were put forward and are discussed in this section. To date, however, no changes have been made, and it will likely take another major electoral crisis to reopen the debate.

First, and perhaps most simply, some observers have suggested using the national popular vote to choose the president. While this is the most democratic reform, it is by far the least likely to be enacted, given that the U.S. Constitution would have to be amended to abolish the Electoral College. Even assuming that the House of Representatives could muster the two-thirds majority necessary to pass an amendment, the proposal would almost certainly never pass the Senate. Small states have the same representation in the Senate as populous ones, and the Senate thus serves as a bastion of equal representation for all states, regardless of population—a principle generally reinforced by the existing configuration of the Electoral College, which ensures disproportionate electoral influence for the smallest states.

Another proposed reform is known as the congressional district plan. This plan would retain the Electoral College but give each candidate one electoral vote for each congressional district that he or she wins in a state, and the winner of the overall popular vote in each state would receive two bonus votes (one for each senator) for that state. Two states currently use the congressional district plan: Maine and Nebraska.

One advantage of the congressional district plan is that it can be adopted without constitutional amendment. Any state that wants to split its Electoral College votes need only pass a law to this effect. It may also promote more diffuse political campaigns; instead of campaigning only in states that are "in play" in the Electoral College, candidates might also have to campaign in competitive districts in otherwise safe states.

But, the congressional district plan also has some unintended consequences. First, the winner of the popular vote might still lose the presidency. Under this plan, Richard M. Nixon would have won the 1960 election instead of John F. Kennedy. Second, this reform would further politicize the congressional redistricting process. If electoral votes were at stake, parties would seek to maximize the number of safe electoral districts for their presidential nominee while minimizing the number of competitive districts. Finally, although candidates would not ignore entire states, they would quickly learn to focus their campaigning on competitive districts while ignoring secure districts, thereby eliminating some of the democratizing effect of such a change.

Another proposal to reform the Electoral College was the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which at the time of this writing had been signed by ten states and Washington, D.C. The signatories vowed that they would pledge their electoral votes to the presidential candidate who received the most popular votes in all fifty states and the District of Columbia, regardless of the state's winner. This compact will take effect when jurisdictions with 270 electoral votes—a majority—agree to support its provisions.

Congressional Elections

12.3 Compare and contrast congressional and presidential elections and explain the incumbency advantage.

Compared with presidential elections, congressional elections receive scant national attention. Unlike major-party presidential contenders, most candidates for Congress labor in relative obscurity. Some nominees for Congress are celebrities—television stars, sports heroes, and even local TV news

incumbency
Already holding an office.

anchors. The vast majority of party nominees for Congress, however, are little-known state legislators and local office holders who receive remarkably limited coverage in many states and communities. For them, just establishing name identification in the electorate is the biggest battle.

The Incumbency Advantage

The current system enhances the advantages of **incumbency,** or already holding an office. Those people in office tend to remain in office. In a "bad" year such as the Republican wave of 2010, "only" 87 percent of House incumbents won reelection. Senatorial reelection rates can be much more mercurial. In 2006, only 79 percent of senators seeking reelection were victorious. In 2012, 90 percent of House members and 91 percent of senators were reelected. To the political novice, these reelection rates might seem surprising, as public trust in government and satisfaction with Congress has remained remarkably low during the very period that reelection rates have been on the rise. To understand the nature of the incumbency advantage, it is necessary to explore its primary causes: staff support, visibility, and the "scare-off" effect.

STAFF SUPPORT Members of the U.S. House of Representatives are permitted to hire eighteen permanent and four nonpermanent aides to work in their Washington and district offices. Senators typically enjoy far larger staffs, with the actual size determined by the number of people in the state they represent. Both House and Senate members also enjoy the additional benefits provided by the scores of unpaid interns

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ADVANTAGES OF INCUMBENCY?

Incumbent office holders enjoy many advantages in their reelection bids because they have greater visibility and recognition. Here, Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) appears with Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) and his wife, former Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, during a rally for his successful 2014 reelection bid to a sixth term. Senator McConnell spent more than $25 million in campaign expenditures, compared to some $15 million spent by his Democratic opponent, Alison Lundergan Grimes. In addition, outside spending on behalf of Senator McConnell reached $20.4 million, more than twice as much spent on behalf of his opponent.

who assist with office duties. Many activities of staff members directly or indirectly promote the legislator through constituency services, the wide array of assistance provided by members of Congress to voters in need. Constituent service may include tracking a lost Social Security check, helping a veteran receive disputed benefits, or finding a summer internship for a college student. Research has shown that if a House incumbent's staff helped to solve a problem for a constituent, that constituent rated the incumbent more favorably than constituents who were not assisted by the incumbent,[11] therefore providing the incumbent a great advantage over any challenger.

VISIBILITY Most incumbents are highly visible in their districts. They have easy access to local media, cut ribbons galore, attend important local funerals, and speak frequently at meetings and community events. Moreover, convenient schedules and generous travel allowances increase the local availability of incumbents. Nearly a fourth of the people in an average congressional district claim to have met their representative, and about half recognize their legislator's name without prompting. This visibility has an electoral payoff, as research shows district attentiveness is at least partly responsible for incumbents' electoral safety.[12]

THE "SCARE-OFF" EFFECT Research also identifies an indirect advantage of incumbency: the ability of the office holder to fend off challenges from quality challengers, something scholars refer to as the "scare-off" effect.[13] Incumbents have the ability to scare off these opponents because of the institutional advantages of office, such as high name recognition, large war chests, free constituent mailings, staffs attached to legislative offices, and overall experience in running a successful campaign. Potential strong challengers facing this initial uphill battle will often wait until the incumbent retires rather than challenge him or her.[14]

Why Incumbents Lose

While most incumbents win reelection, in every election cycle some members of Congress lose their positions to challengers. Members lose their reelection bids for four major reasons: redistricting, scandals, presidential coattails, and mid-term elections.

REDISTRICTING At least every ten years, state legislators redraw congressional district lines to reflect population shifts, both in the state and in the nation at large. This political process itself may be used to secure incumbency advantage by creating "safe" seats for members of the majority party in the state legislature. But, it can also be used to punish incumbents in the out-of-power party. Some incumbents can be put in the same districts as other incumbents, or other representatives' base of political support can be weakened by adding territory favorable to the opposition party. The number of incumbents who actually lose their reelection bids because of redistricting is lessened by the strategic behavior of redistricted members—who often choose to retire rather than wage an expensive reelection battle.[15]

SCANDALS Modern scandals come in many varieties. The old standby of financial impropriety has been supplemented by other forms of career-ending incidents, such as sexual improprieties. Incumbents implicated in scandals typically do not lose reelections—because they simply choose to retire rather than face defeat.[16] Representative Trey Radel (R-FL), for example, resigned from office in 2014 after he was caught buying cocaine from a federal law enforcement agent.

PRESIDENTIAL COATTAILS The defeat of a congressional incumbent can also occur as a result of presidential coattails. Successful presidential candidates usually carry into office congressional candidates of the same party in the year of their election. The strength of the coattail effect has, however, declined in modern times, as party identification has weakened and the powers and perks of incumbency have grown. Whereas Harry S Truman's party gained seventy-six House seats and nine

mid-term election
An election that takes place in the middle of a presidential term.

TABLE 12.1 HOW DOES THE PRESIDENT AFFECT CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS?

Gain (+) or Loss (–) for President's Party					
	Presidential Election Years			Mid-Term Election Years	
President/Year	House	Senate	Year	House	Senate
Truman (D): 1948	+76	+9	1950	–28	–5
Eisenhower (R): 1952	+24	+2	1954	–18	–1
Eisenhower (R): 1956	–2	0	1958	–47	–13
Kennedy (D): 1960	–20	–2	1962	–2	+4
L. Johnson (D): 1964	+38	+2	1966	–47	–3
Nixon (R): 1968	+7	+5	1970	–12	+1
Nixon (R): 1972	+13	–2	*Ford* (R): 1974	–48	–3
Carter (D): 1976	+2	0	1978	–15	–3
Reagan (R): 1980	+33	+12	1982	–26	–1
Reagan (R): 1984	+15	–2	1986	–5	–8
Bush (R): 1988	–3	–1	1990	–10	–1
Clinton (D): 1992	–10	0	1994	–52	–9[a]
Clinton (D): 1996	+10	–2	1998	+3	0
G. W. Bush (R): 2000	–2	–4	2002	+8	+2
G. W. Bush (R): 2004	+3	+4	2006	–30	–6
Obama (D): 2008	+21	+8	2010	–63	–6
Obama (D): 2012	+5	+2	2014[b]	–8 or –9	–12

[a]Includes the switch from Democrat to Republican of Alabama U.S. Senator Richard Shelby one day after the election.
[b]Data as of November 11, 2014.

SOURCE: *Congressional Quarterly Guide to U.S. Elections,* 6th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press: 2010. Updated by the authors.

additional Senate seats in 1948, Barack Obama's party gained only twenty-one House members and eight senators in 2008. The gains can be minimal even in presidential landslide reelection years, such as 1972 (Nixon) and 1984 (Reagan) (see Table 12.1).

MID-TERM ELECTIONS Elections in the middle of presidential terms, called **mid-term elections,** present a threat to incumbents of the president's party. Just as the presidential party usually gains seats in presidential election years, it usually loses seats in off years. The problems and tribulations of governing normally cost a president some popularity, alienate key groups, or cause the public to want to send the president a message of one sort or another. An economic downturn or presidential scandal can underscore and expand this circumstance.

Also apparent is the tendency of voters to punish the president's party more severely in the sixth year of an eight-year presidency. After six years, voters are often restless for change. For example, in what many saw as a repudiation of President Obama's policies, the Republican Party increased its majority in the House of Representatives in the 2014 mid-term election to its highest total since the one it held after the 1928 election, netting at least a dozen additional House seats (as of November 11, 2014).

Senate elections are less inclined to follow these off-year patterns than are House elections. The idiosyncratic nature of Senate contests is due to their intermittent scheduling (only one-third of the seats come up for election every two years) and the existence of well-funded, well-known candidates who can sometimes swim against whatever political tide is rising. When you consider all the sixth year mid-term elections of two-term presidencies since World War II, the president's party has lost an average of five seats. However, in the 2014 mid-term election, President Obama's party lost more than the average, about eight or nine seats (two races undecided as of November 11), making the election look a lot like the sixth year of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

Patterns in Vote Choice

12.4 Identify seven factors that influence voter choice.

conventional political participation
Activism that attempts to influence the political process through commonly accepted forms of persuasion such as voting or letter writing.

unconventional political participation
Activism that attempts to influence the political process through unusual or extreme measures, such as protests, boycotts, and picketing.

The act of voting is the most common form of **conventional political participation,** or activism that attempts to influence the political process through commonly accepted forms of persuasion. Other examples of conventional political participation include writing letters and making campaign contributions. Citizens may also engage in **unconventional political participation,** or activism that attempts to influence the political process through unusual or extreme measures. Examples include participating in protests, boycotts, and picketing.

A number of factors affect citizens' choices about which candidate to support. Party affiliation and ideology stand at the forefront of these predictors. Other important factors are income and education, race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and political issues (see Figure 12.3).

Party Identification

Party identification remains the most powerful predictor of vote choice. Stated simply, self-described Democrats tend to vote for Democratic candidates and self-described Republicans tend to vote for Republican candidates. This trend is particularly obvious

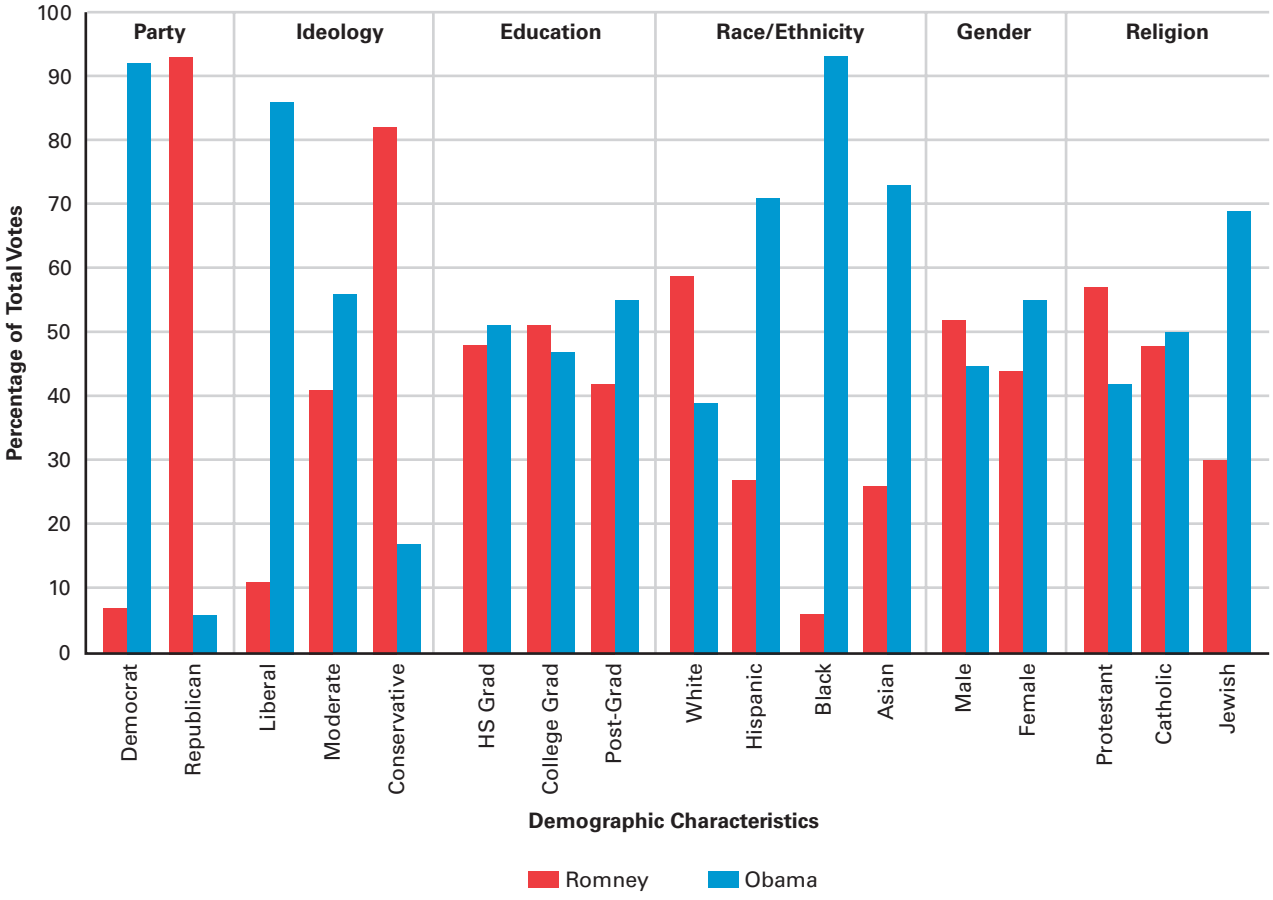


FIGURE 12.3 HOW DO DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AFFECT VOTERS' CHOICES?

Demographic characteristics can be powerful predictors of citizens' choices at the voting booth. Partisanship is the most significant predictor of these decisions. In 2012, for example, 92 percent of Democrats voted for President Barack Obama and 93 percent of Republicans voted for Mitt Romney.

SOURCE: http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/results/race/president#exit-polls.

ticket-splitting
Voting for candidates of different parties for various offices in the same election.

in less-visible elections, where voters may not know anything about the candidates and need a cue to help them cast their ballot. However, even in presidential elections, a high correlation exists between vote choice and party affiliation. In 2012, for example, 92 percent of self-identified Democrats voted for President Barack Obama, and 93 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for Mitt Romney.

In recent years, observers have noted higher levels of **ticket-splitting,** voting for candidates of different parties for various offices in the same election.[17] Scholars have posited several potential explanations for ticket-splitting. One is that voters split their tickets, consciously or not, because they trust neither party to govern. Under this interpretation, ticket-splitters are aware of the differences between the two parties and split their tickets to augment the checks and balances already present in the U.S. Constitution.[18] Alternatively, voters split their tickets possibly because the growth of issue- and candidate-centered politics has made party less important as a voting cue.[19]

Ideology

Ideology represents one of the most significant divisions in contemporary American politics. Liberals, generally speaking, favor government involvement in social programs and are committed to the ideals of tolerance and social justice. Conservatives, on the other hand, are dedicated to the ideals of individualism and market-based competition, and they tend to view government as a necessary evil rather than an agent of social improvement. Moderates lie somewhere between liberals and conservatives on the ideological spectrum; they favor conservative positions on some issues and liberal positions on others.

Not surprisingly, ideology is very closely related to vote choice. Liberals tend to vote for Democrats, and conservatives tend to vote for Republicans. In 2012, 86 percent of self-described liberals voted for President Obama, whereas only 11 percent voted for Romney. Conservatives, on the other hand, voted for Romney over Obama at a rate of 82 to 17 percent.[20]

Income and Education

Over the years, income has been a remarkably stable correlate of vote choice. The poor vote more Democratic; the well-to-do vote heavily Republican.[21] The 2012 election was, to some extent, consistent with these trends. Sizeable majorities of those making less than $50,000 annually supported Obama, with 60 percent of those making less than $50,000 annually leading the way. All other income classes were a virtual toss-up, with Obama and Romney each carrying between 40 and 50 percent of the electorate. It can be said, however, that Romney, as the Republican candidate, performed better with voters in middle-class and high-income brackets than he did with poorer voters.

Since income and education are highly correlated—more educated people tend to make more money—it should be no surprise that education follows a somewhat similar pattern. The most educated and the least educated citizens are more inclined to vote Democratic, and those in the middle—for example, with a bachelor's degree—tend to vote Republican.

Race and Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic groups also are likely to vote in distinct patterns. While whites have shown an increasing tendency to vote Republican, African American voters remain overwhelmingly Democratic in their voting decisions. Despite the best efforts of the Republican Party to garner African American support, this pattern shows no signs of waning. In 2012, Obama's candidacy accentuated this trend, and 93 percent of African Americans voted for him. Romney received a mere 6 percent of the African American vote.[22]

Hispanics also are likely to identify with and vote for Democrats, although not as monolithically as African Americans. In 2012, for example, Obama received 71 percent of the votes cast by Hispanics; Romney received only 27 percent.

HOW DOES GENDER INFLUENCE ELECTORAL OUTCOMES?

The gender gap is one of the most powerful and consistent patterns in American elections. Women are significantly more likely to support Democratic candidates than their male counterparts. Thus, as reflected in this t-shirt, which declares, "Women will decide the election for Obama," female voters received much of the credit for Democrats' victories in 2012.

Asian and Pacific Island Americans are more variable in their voting than either the Hispanic or the African American community. The considerable political diversity within this group is worth noting: Chinese Americans tend to prefer Democratic candidates, but Vietnamese Americans, with strong anti-communist leanings, tend to support Republicans. A typical voting split for the Asian and Pacific Island American community runs about 60 percent Democratic and 40 percent Republican, though it can reach the extreme of a 50–50 split, depending on the election.[23] In the 2012 election, 73 percent of Asian American voters supported Obama and 26 percent of Asian American voters supported Romney.

Gender

Since 1980, the gender gap—the difference between the voting choices of men and women—has become a staple of American politics. In general, women are more likely to support Democratic candidates and men are more likely to support Republicans. The gender gap varies considerably from election to election, though normally it is between 5 and 7 percentage points. That is, women support the average Democrat 5 to 7 percent more than men. In 2012, Obama won 55 percent of the female vote, but only 45 percent of the male vote.[24]

A gender gap in vote choice is confined not only to contests between Democrats and Republicans but is frequently apparent in intraparty contests as well. In the 2012 Republican primaries and caucuses, Republican women were more likely than Republican men to support Mitt Romney. In the Arizona primary, for example, women supported Romney over his competitor, Rick Santorum, by a nearly two to one margin.[25]

Religion

Religious groups also have tended to vote in distinct patterns, but some of these traditional differences have declined considerably in recent years. The most cohesive of religious groups has been Jewish voters, a majority of whom have voted for every Democratic presidential candidate since the New Deal realignment. In 2012, 69 percent of Jewish voters supported Obama.

retrospective judgment
A voter's evaluation of a candidate based on past performance on a particular issue.

prospective judgment
A voter's evaluation of a candidate based on what he or she pledges to do about an issue if elected.

turnout
The proportion of the voting-age public that casts a ballot.

In contrast, Protestants are increasingly Republican in their vote choice. This increased support owes largely to the rise of social conservatives, as well as the Republican emphasis on personal responsibility.[26] In 2012, 57 percent of Protestants supported Romney. Republican support is even stronger among evangelical Protestants. Among those voters who self-identified as "born again," 78 percent supported Romney.

Catholic voters are a much more divided group. Historically, Catholic voters tended to identify with the Democratic Party and its support of social justice issues and anti-poverty programs. But, since the 1970s and the rise of the abortion issue, Catholic voters have cast their votes for Republican candidates in larger numbers. In the past several presidential elections, the Catholic vote has consistently aligned with the winning party. In 2004, 52 percent of Catholic voters supported Republican President George W. Bush. In 2012, 50 percent of Catholic voters supported Democratic President Obama.

Issues

In addition to the underlying influences on vote choice discussed above, individual issues can have important effects in any given election year. One of the most important driving forces is the state of the economy.[27] Voters tend to reward the party in government, usually the president's party, during good economic times and punish that party during periods of economic downturn. When this occurs, the electorate is exercising **retrospective judgment;** that is, voters are rendering judgment on the party in power based on past performance on particular issues, in this case the economy. At other times, voters might use **prospective judgment;** that is, they vote based on what a candidate pledges to do about an issue if elected.

The 2012 election provides an example of how both retrospective and prospective judgments helped voters reach their ballot decisions. Voters in key swing states such as Ohio used retrospective judgment to credit President Barack Obama with bailing out automotive companies and saving American manufacturing jobs. Similarly, many voters, especially women, used prospective judgment to bolster their support for Obama, expressing concern about the future of their access to contraception and other reproductive medicine under a Romney administration. This combination, along with other major issues in the election, helped to deliver a second victory for the president.

Voter Turnout

12.5 Identify six factors that affect voter turnout.

Turnout refers to the proportion of the voting-age public that casts a ballot. In general, all citizens who are age eighteen or older are eligible to vote. States add a number of different regulations to limit the pool of eligible voters, such as restricting felons' participation and requiring voter identification (see Table 12.2).

Although about 58 percent of eligible voters turned out in 2012, average voter turnout in general elections in the United States is much lower than in other industrialized democracies: approximately 40 percent. An additional 25 percent are occasional voters, and 35 percent rarely or never vote. Some factors known to influence voter turnout include income and education, race and ethnicity, gender, age, civic engagement, and interest in politics.

Income and Education

A considerably higher percentage of citizens with annual incomes over $65,000 vote than do citizens with incomes under $35,000. Wealthy citizens are more likely than poor ones to think that the system works for them and that their votes make a difference.

TABLE 12.2 HOW DO STATES REGULATE VOTER ELIGIBILITY?

Restrict felons' ability to vote after completion of their sentence	12 states
Allow incarcerated felons to vote from prison	2 states
Require all voters to show some form of identification to vote	30 states
Require all voters to show photo identification to vote	12 states
Require no voter registration	1 state
Allow Election Day registration	10 states and DC
Require voters to register to vote at least 30 days prior to an election	14 states and DC
Allow no-excuse absentee balloting	27 states and DC
Allow early voting	32 states and DC

SOURCES: Pew Center on the States, www.pewcenteronthestates.org, National Council on State Legislatures, www.ncsl.org, and CIRCLE, www.civicyouth.org.

People with higher incomes are also more likely to recognize their direct financial stake in the decisions of the government, thus spurring them into action.[28] In contrast, lower-income citizens often feel alienated from politics, possibly believing that conditions will remain the same no matter who holds office. As a result, these people are less likely to believe that their vote will make a difference and are more reluctant to expend the effort to turn out and vote.

As with vote choice, income and education are highly correlated; a higher income is often the result of greater educational attainment. Thus, all other things being equal, college graduates are much more likely to vote than those with less education, and people with advanced degrees are the most likely to vote. People with more education tend to learn more about politics, are less hindered by registration requirements, and are more self-confident about their ability to affect public life.[29]

Race and Ethnicity

Despite substantial gains in voting rates among minority groups, race remains an important factor in voter participation. Whites still tend to vote more regularly than do African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups (see Figure 12.4).

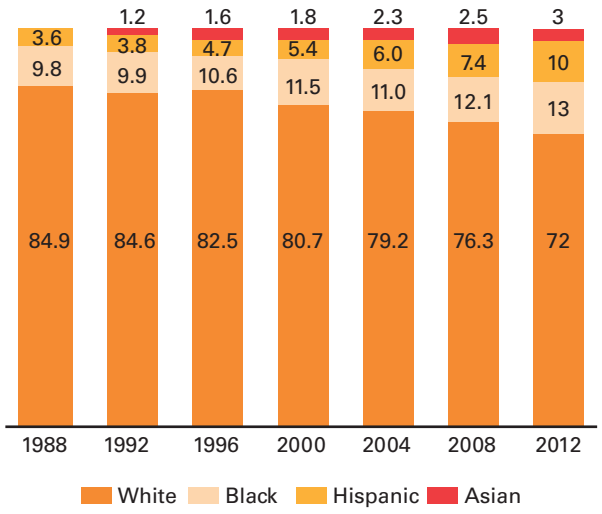


FIGURE 12.4 HOW HAS THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF VOTERS CHANGED?

Although white Americans continue to constitute a majority of the U.S. electorate, black, Hispanic, and Asian voters have accounted for significant percentages of the electorate during recent campaigns. This diversity alters both the voices heard from the voting booth and the demands placed on government.

SOURCE: Data from Pew Research Center, "Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History," April 30, 2009. www.pewresearch.org; and http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-568.pdf.

Take a Closer Look

Political scientists have observed a number of discernible patterns in voter turnout and vote choice. Many of these patterns are affected by individuals' demographic characteristics. Examine the voters waiting in line to cast their ballot in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and consider what we might predict about how each of these people will vote based on what we can observe from this photo.

Politically engaged individuals, such as those who volunteer on behalf of candidates, are more likely than other citizens to turn out to vote.

Women, particularly married ones, are more likely to turn out to vote than men. Although women in general favor Democratic candidates, married women are more likely than their single counterparts to vote for Republicans.

Young people, both male and female, have historically been less likely to turn out to vote. More young people vote for Democrats than Republicans.

African Americans and other minority groups vote at lower rates than their white counterparts. African Americans overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How might you predict that other individuals shown in this photo would vote based on their demographic characteristics?
2. What other demographic characteristics might help you to better understand the voter turnout and vote choices of the people shown in this photo?
3. How do voter turnout and vote choices affect the policy priorities of American political institutions? How might altering the composition of the voting population alter the government's agenda?

Several factors help to explain these persistent differences. One reason is the relative income and educational levels of the two racial groups. Many racial and ethnic minorities tend to be poorer and to have less formal education than whites; as mentioned earlier, both of these factors affect voter turnout. Significantly, though, highly educated and wealthier African Americans are more likely to vote than whites of similar background.[30]

Another explanation focuses on the long-term consequences of the voting barriers that African Americans historically faced in the United States, especially in areas of the Deep South. In the wake of Reconstruction, the southern states made voter registration extremely difficult for African Americans, and only a small percentage of the eligible African American population was registered throughout the South until the 1960s. The Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 helped change this situation by prohibiting racial discrimination in voting. The act bans any voting device or procedure that interferes with a minority citizen's right to vote, such as literacy tests and similar devices that were historically used to disenfranchise racial minorities. It also prohibits any state or local government from imposing any voting law that results in discrimination against racial or language minorities. As a result of the VRA and other civil rights reforms, turnout among African Americans has increased dramatically.

The Hispanic community in the United States is now slightly larger than the African American community; thus, Hispanics have the potential to wield enormous political power. In California, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New York, five key electoral states, Hispanic voters have emerged as powerful allies for candidates seeking office. Moreover, their increasing presence in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Nevada,—the latter two of which were key battleground states in the 2012 presidential election, has forced candidates of both parties to place more emphasis on issues that affect Hispanics. However, turnout among Hispanics is much lower than that among whites and African Americans. In 2012, Hispanics accounted for almost 12 percent of the U.S. population but 10 percent of those who turned out to vote.

Gender

With passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women gained the right to vote in the United States. While early polling numbers are not reliable enough to shed light on the voting rate among women in the period immediately following ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, it is generally accepted that women voted at a lower rate than men. Recent polls suggest that today women vote at a slightly higher rate than their male counterparts. Since women constitute slightly more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, they now account for a majority of the American electorate.

Age

A strong correlation exists between age and voter turnout. The Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1971, lowered the voting age to eighteen. While this amendment obviously increased the number of eligible voters, it did so by enfranchising the group that is least likely to vote. A much higher percentage of citizens age thirty and older vote than do citizens younger than thirty, although voter turnout decreases over the age of seventy, primarily due to the difficulties some older voters experience in getting to their polling locations. Regrettably, only about 50 percent of eligible eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds are even registered to vote.[31] The most plausible reason is that younger people are more mobile; they have not put down roots in a community. Because voter registration is not automatic, people who relocate have to make an effort to register. As young people marry, have children, and settle down in a community, the likelihood that they will vote increases.[32]

Civic Engagement

Individuals who are members of civic organizations, trade and professional organizations, and labor unions are more likely to vote and participate in politics than those who are not members of these or similar types of groups. People who more frequently attend church or other religious services, moreover, also are more inclined to vote than people who rarely attend or do not belong to religious institutions.

Many of these organizations emphasize community involvement, which often encourages voting and exposes members to requests for support from political parties and candidates. These groups also encourage participation by providing opportunities for members to develop organizational and communication skills relevant to political activity. Union membership is particularly likely to increase voting turnout among people who, on the basis of their education or income, are less likely to vote.[33]

Interest in Politics

People who are highly interested in politics constitute only a small minority of the U.S. population. The most politically active Americans—party and issue-group activists—make up less than 5 percent of the country's more than 313 million people. Those who contribute time or money to a party or a candidate during a campaign make up only about 10 percent of the total adult population. Although these percentages appear low, they translate into millions of Americans who are reliable voters and also contribute more than just votes to the system.

Toward Reform: Problems with Voter Turnout

12.6 Explain why voter turnout is low, and evaluate methods for improving voter turnout.

Inspiring citizens to turn out to vote is particularly important in the United States because of the winner-take-all electoral system. In theory, in such a system, any one vote could decide the outcome of the election. Although the importance of individual votes has been showcased in close elections such as the 2008 Minnesota race for the U.S. Senate, which was decided by only 312 votes, voter turnout in the United States remains quite low. In mid-term elections, only 40 to 45 percent of the eligible electorate turns out to vote; that amount rises to 50 or 60 percent in presidential elections. The following sections discuss the causes of, and potential remedies for, low voter turnout in the United States.

Why Don't Americans Turn Out?

People may choose not to participate in elections for many reasons. Nonparticipation may be rooted in something as complicated as an individual's political philosophy or something as simple as the weather—voter turnout tends to be lower on rainy Election Days. Here, we discuss some of the most common reasons for nonvoting: other commitments, difficulty of registration, difficulty of voting, the number of elections, voter attitudes, and the weakened influence of political parties (see Figure 12.5).

OTHER COMMITMENTS According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 17.5 percent of registered nonvoters reported in 2008 that they did not vote because they were too busy or had conflicting work or school schedules. Another 14.9 percent said they did not vote because they were ill or disabled, or had a family emergency. While these

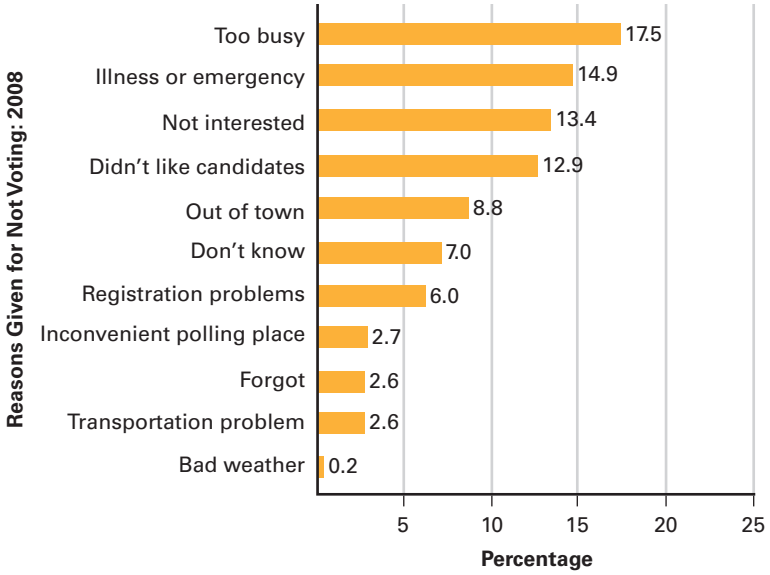


FIGURE 12.5 WHY DON'T PEOPLE VOTE?

During November of each federal election year, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts a Current Population Survey that asks a series of questions related to voting and registration. In the November 2008 survey, respondents were asked whether they voted in the 2008 election and, if not, what their reasons were for not voting. The most common reason for not voting was being too busy.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2008.

reasons account for a large portion of the people surveyed, they also reflect the respondents' desire not to seem uneducated about the candidates and issues or apathetic about the political process. Although some would-be voters are undoubtedly busy, infirm, or otherwise unable to make it to the polls, it is likely that many of these nonvoters are offering an easy excuse and have another reason for failing to vote.

DIFFICULTY OF REGISTRATION A major reason for lack of participation in the United States remains the relatively low percentage of the adult population that is registered to vote. Requiring citizens to take the initiative to register is an American invention; nearly every other democratic country places the burden of registration on the government rather than on the individual. Thus, the cost (in terms of time and effort) of registering to vote is higher in the United States than in other industrialized democracies.

The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, commonly known as the Motor Voter Act, was a significant national attempt to ease the bureaucratic hurdles associated with registering to vote. The law requires states to provide the opportunity to register through driver's license agencies, public assistance agencies, and the mail. Researchers estimate that this law has increased voter registration by 5 to 9 percent, and some scholars hypothesize that the law is at least partially responsible for the increases in voter participation experienced in recent elections.

Eleven states now also allow online voter registration. Although some critics have expressed concerns about the security of this process, it has proved an effective way to increase registration. In Arizona, the first state to implement the online option in 2003, voter registration increased by almost 10 percent as a result of the law.[34]

DIFFICULTY OF VOTING Stringent ballot access laws are another factor affecting voter turnout in the United States. Voters in thirty states, for example, must provide some form of identification to cast a ballot. In twelve of these states, that identification must include a photo. Though supporters charge that voter identification laws are simply intended to prevent voter fraud, opponents argue that this legislation may disproportionately limit the ballot access of a number of groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, the elderly, and the disabled.[35] As a result of concerns

about the constitutionality of these laws, courts in some states, including Pennsylvania, stopped enforcement of the provisions for the 2012 election. Similar laws in other states, particularly the South, continue to be reviewed by the courts.

Citizens who plan to be out of state on Election Day or who are physically unable to go to the polls may also face challenges in casting an absentee ballot. Many states, for instance, require citizens to apply in person for absentee ballots, a burdensome requirement given that a person's inability to be present in his or her home state is often the reason for absentee balloting in the first place. Recent literature in political science links liberalized absentee voting rules and higher turnout.[36]

NUMBER OF ELECTIONS Another explanation for low voter turnout in the United States is the sheer number and frequency of elections. According to a study by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the United States typically holds twice as many national elections as other Western democracies, a consequence of the relatively short two-year term of office for members of the House of Representatives.[37] American federalism, with its separate elections at the local, state, and national levels, and its use of primary elections for the selection of candidates, also contributes to the number of elections in which Americans are called on to participate. With so many elections, even the most active political participants may skip part of the electoral process from time to time.

VOTER ATTITUDES Voter attitudes also affect the low rates of voter turnout observed in the United States. Some voters are alienated, and others are just plain

HOW DO CITIZENS VOTE BY ABSENTEE BALLOT?

Citizens who will be unable to make it to the polls on Election Day may file an application to vote by absentee ballot. Local Boards of Elections mail ballots to these individuals; citizens fill out the ballot and return them by mail. Here, election officials sort and organize completed absentee ballots.

apathetic, possibly because of a lack of pressing issues in a particular year, satisfaction with the status quo, or uncompetitive elections. Furthermore, many citizens may be turned off by the quality of campaigns in a time when petty issues and personal mudslinging are more prevalent than ever. In 2008, 12.4 percent of registered nonvoters reported they were not interested in the election. Another 12.9 percent said they did not like the issues or candidates.

WEAKENED INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES Political parties today are not as effective as they once were in mobilizing voters, ensuring they are registered, and getting them to the polls. The parties at one time were grassroots organizations that forged strong party–group links with their supporters. Today, candidate- and issue-centered campaigns and the growth of expansive party bureaucracies have resulted in somewhat more distant parties with which fewer people identify very strongly. While efforts have been made in recent elections to bolster the influence of parties—in particular, through sophisticated get-out-the-vote efforts—the parties' modern grassroots activities still pale in comparison to their earlier efforts.

Improving Voter Turnout

Reformers have proposed many ideas to increase voter turnout in the United States. Always on the list is raising the political awareness of young citizens, a reform that inevitably must involve our nation's schools. The rise in formal education levels among Americans has had a significant effect on voter turnout.[38] No less important, and perhaps simpler to achieve, are institutional reforms such as making Election Day a holiday, easing constraints on voter registration, allowing mail and online voting, modernizing the ballot, and strengthening political parties.

MAKE ELECTION DAY A HOLIDAY Since elections traditionally are held on Tuesdays, the busy workday is an obstacle for many would-be voters. Some reformers have, therefore, proposed that Election Day should be a national holiday. This strategy could backfire if people used the day off to extend vacations or long weekends. The tradition of Tuesday elections, however, should reduce this risk.

ENABLE EARLY VOTING In an attempt to make voting more convenient for citizens who may have other commitments on Election Day, thirty-two states (largely in the West, Midwest, and South) currently allow voters to engage in a practice known as early voting. Several additional states allow voters with a valid excuse to cast a ballot early. Early voting allows citizens to cast their ballot up to a month before the election—the time frame varies by state—either by mail or at a designated polling location. Many citizens have found early voting to be a preferable way to cast their ballot; during the 2012 election, approximately 25 percent of eligible voters took advantage of early voting.

Critics of early voting, however, charge that the method decreases the importance of the campaign. They also fear that voters who cast early ballots may later come to regret their choices. It is possible, for example, that a voter could change his or her mind after hearing new information about candidates just prior to Election Day, or that a voter could cast a ballot for a candidate who subsequently withdraws from the race.

PERMIT MAIL AND ONLINE VOTING Reformers have also proposed several ways that citizens could vote from their own homes. For example, citizens of Oregon, Washington, and some California counties vote almost entirely by mail-in ballots. These systems have been credited with increasing voter turnout rates in those states. But, voting by mail has its downside: concerns about decreased ballot security and increased potential for fraud with mail-in elections. Another problem is that it may delay election results as the Board of Elections waits to receive all ballots.

Internet voting may be a more instantaneous way to tally votes. Some states, including Arizona and Michigan, have already experimented with using this

Explore Your World

The act of casting a secret ballot to choose a political leader is something that many Americans take for granted. However, many people around the world have never experienced the privilege of expressing their views on who should govern. Even citizens who have won the right to vote may cast their ballots in ways that are fundamentally different from those we use in the United States.

All voters in the United States are given the opportunity to cast a secret ballot and vote for the candidate of their choice without threat or intimidation. The method of voting varies, though an increasing number of jurisdictions use computers to tabulate the results of each election.

Afghanistan held its first presidential elections in 2004; allowing women to vote in these elections marked a sea change for the largely Islamic nation. Voters cast secret ballots that were hand tabulated by election officials.

In some states, or cantons, in Switzerland, citizens still vote in person in town meetings. Other Swiss citizens vote by mail, at traditional polling locations, or online.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How might the type of ballot used in an election affect voters who turn out to cast a ballot? The results of the election?
2. Should all voters be allowed to cast a secret ballot? Why or why not?
3. What steps should be taken to ensure that all citizens have access to the ballot?

method to cast ballots in primary elections. In addition, military members and their families from thirty-two states and Washington, D.C., used Internet voting to cast absentee ballots in the 2012 elections.[39] However, Internet voting booths have been slow to catch on with the general public because many voters are wary of the security of this method and worry about online hackers and an inability to prevent voter fraud. Other observers fear that an all-online system could unintentionally disenfranchise poor voters, who may be less likely to have access to an Internet connection.

MAKE REGISTRATION EASIER Registration laws vary by state, but in most states, people must register prior to Election Day. Among the eleven states that permit Election Day registration, turnout is generally higher. Five of the ten states with the highest turnout in 2012 (Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin) have some form of Election Day registration. In 2012, voter turnout in states with Election Day registration was 12 points higher than in those without that option, a turnout advantage that has been consistent over the last six national elections, supporting the long-held claim by reformers that voter turnout could be increased if registering to vote were made simpler for citizens.[40] Better yet, all U.S. citizens could be registered automatically at the age of eighteen. Critics, however, argue that such automatic registration could breed even greater voter apathy and complacency.

Increasing voter registration drives in areas where many citizens are not registered to vote may also increase voter turnout. One recent study of college students, for example, demonstrated that students who registered to vote in on-campus voter registration drives were much more likely to turn out to vote than other Americans age eighteen to twenty-four.[41]

MODERNIZE THE BALLOT Following the 2000 election, when the outcome of the presidential election in Florida, and by extension the nation, hinged on "hanging chads"—punch-card ballots that had not been fully separated—legislators and other observers called for reforms to modernize the ballot. The federal government even enacted the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to aid states in upgrading voting equipment. Reformers hoped that these changes would make the process of voting easier, more approachable, and more reliable.

States and localities have made significant upgrades to the types of ballots they use as a result of the HAVA. Traditional, hand-counted, paper ballots are now used in fewer than 10 percent of jurisdictions. In thirty-two states, citizens mark paper ballots, but their votes are computer tabulated. In another eleven states, and large percentages of other states, voting is entirely electronic, often done on touch-screen voting machines.[42] States have also experimented with other new technologies for casting ballots. In Oregon, for example, disabled residents were able to vote with iPads; several other states are exploring expanded use of this technology.[43]

Supporters of electronic voting believe that training poll workers, administrators, and voters on how to effectively use the new equipment is vital. Critics maintain that lack of a paper trail leaves electronic machines vulnerable to fraud and worry that the machines could crash during an election. Still other critics cite the expense of the machines. All, however, agree that updating election equipment and ensuring fair elections across the country should be a legislative priority. As Charles M. Vest, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, noted, "A nation that can send a man to the moon, that can put a reliable ATM machine on every corner, has no excuse not to deploy a reliable, affordable, easy-to-use voting system."[44]

STRENGTHEN PARTIES Reformers have long argued that strengthening political parties would increase voter turnout, because parties have historically been the most successful at mobilizing citizens to vote in the United States. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the country's "Golden Age" of powerful political parties, one of their

primary activities was getting out the vote on Election Day. Even today, the parties' Election Day get-out-the-vote drives increase voter turnout by several million people in national contests. The challenge is how to go about enacting reforms that strengthen parties. One way would be to allow political parties to raise and spend greater sums of money during the campaign process. Such a reform, however, raises ethical questions about the role and influence of money in politics. Another potential change would be to enact broader systemic reforms that allow for a multiparty system and facilitate greater party competition. But, these reforms would be very difficult to pass into law.

Ultimately, the solution to ensuring greater voter turnout may lie in encouraging the parties to enhance their get-out-the-vote efforts. Additional voter education programs, too, may show voters what is at stake in elections and thereby inspire higher turnout in future elections.

Review the Chapter

Roots of American Elections

12.1 Trace the roots of American elections, and distinguish among the four different types of elections, p. 334.

Elections are responsible for most political changes in the United States. Regular elections guarantee mass political action, create governmental accountability, and confer legitimacy on regimes. Elections in the United States are of four major types: primary elections, general elections, initiatives and referenda, and recall elections.

Presidential Elections

12.2 Outline the electoral procedures for presidential and general elections, p. 337.

No U.S. election can compare to the presidential contest, held every four years. The parties select presidential candidates through either primary elections or caucuses, with the primary process culminating in each party's national convention, after which the general election campaign begins. The American political system uses indirect electoral representation in the form of the Electoral College.

Congressional Elections

12.3 Compare and contrast congressional and presidential elections, and explain the incumbency advantage, p. 343.

In congressional elections, incumbents have a strong advantage over their challengers because of staff support, the visibility they get from being in office, and the "scare-off" effect. Redistricting, scandals, presidential coattails, and mid-term elections serve as countervailing forces to the incumbency advantage and are the main sources of turnover in Congress.

Patterns in Vote Choice

12.4 Identify seven factors that influence voter choice, p. 347.

Seven factors that affect vote choice are party identification, ideology, income and education, race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and issues. Democrats, liberals, those who are poor or uneducated, African Americans, women, younger Americans, and Jews tend to vote Democratic. Republicans, conservatives, those who are wealthy and moderately educated, whites, men, older Americans, and Protestants tend to vote Republican.

Voter Turnout

12.5 Identify six factors that affect voter turnout, p. 350.

Voter turnout in the United States is much lower than in other industrialized democracies. It is higher, however, among citizens who are white, older, more educated, have higher incomes, belong to civic organizations, and attend religious services more frequently. Whether they are casting ballots in congressional or presidential elections, partisan identification is the most powerful predictor of voter choice.

Toward Reform: Problems with Voter Turnout

12.6 Explain why voter turnout is low, and evaluate methods for improving voter turnout, p. 354.

Americans do not vote for several reasons, including other commitments, difficulty registering to vote, difficulty voting, the number of elections, voter attitudes, and the weakened influence of political parties. Suggestions for improving voter turnout include making Election Day a holiday, enabling early voting, allowing for mail and online voting, making the registration process easier, modernizing the ballot, and strengthening political parties. Each of these suggested reforms has both pros and cons associated with it.

Learn the Terms

Study and **Review** the **Flashcards**

closed primary, p. 335
conventional political participation, p. 347
crossover voting, p. 335
elector, p. 340
Electoral College, p. 340
electorate, p. 334
front-loading, p. 339
general election, p. 335
incumbency, p. 344
initiative, p. 335
mandate, p. 335
mid-term election, p. 346
open primary, p. 335
primary election, p. 335
prospective judgment, p. 350
reapportionment, p. 340
recall, p. 337
referendum, p. 336
retrospective judgment, p. 350
runoff primary, p. 335
ticket-splitting, p. 348
turnout, p. 350
unconventional political participation, p. 347

Test Yourself

Study and **Review** the **Practice Tests**

1. In what type of election do candidates run against members of their own party?

a. General
b. Initiative
c. Referendum
d. Primary
e. Mid-term

2. Which of the following is true of primary elections?

a. Primaries nominate more moderate candidates than do caucuses.
b. Political parties have historically preferred primary elections to caucuses.
c. Primary election voters usually know more about the candidates than do caucus participants.
d. Primary elections involve a greater time commitment on behalf of voters than do caucuses.
e. Scheduling an early primary lessens a state's impact on the process of selecting a presidential nominee.

3. Abolishing the Electoral College

a. has been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.
b. would require a constitutional amendment.
c. is supported by the Republican Party.
d. would be likely to pass the Senate but not the House.
e. receives significant support from smaller states.

4. Which of the following is NOT a reason for why many incumbents lose reelection?

a. Redistricting
b. Scandals
c. Partisanship
d. Presidential coattails
e. Mid-term elections

5. Which of the following is true of mid-term elections?

a. Mid-term elections have higher voter turnout than presidential elections.
b. The president's party usually loses seats in a mid-term election year.
c. Issues rarely affect the outcome of mid-term elections.
d. Senate elections are more affected by mid-term election forces than are House elections.
e. Campaign spending is higher in mid-term elections than presidential elections.

6. The most powerful predictor of vote choice is:

a. age.
b. party identification.
c. gender.
d. race.
e. ethnicity.

7. Which of the following is NOT a major predictor of a person's vote choice?

a. Gender
b. Income
c. Education
d. Type of ballot
e. Party

8. In general, voter turnout is higher among those who are

a. older and wealthier.
b. less educated with a moderate income.
c. male.
d. African American.
e. age eighteen to twenty-four.

9. The most common reason why people don't vote is:

a. they were not contacted by a political party.
b. they experienced difficulties with absentee voting.
c. they are too busy.
d. they are uninterested.
e. they are disabled or ill.

10. Which of the following is NOT a way to improve voter turnout?

a. Make Election Day a holiday
b. Enable early voting
c. Permit online voting
d. Make registration easier
e. Weaken political parties