
Voter Behavior and Elections

I. VOTER BEHAVIOR

A. AMENDMENTS AND LEGISLATION AFFECTING VOTING

1. Voting requirements are set by states but are subject to constitutional requirements and federal law.
2. **The Constitution**
 - a. **Fifteenth Amendment:** prohibits states from restricting voting rights on the basis of race
 - b. **Seventeenth Amendment:** requires direct election of senators by the voters of each state, replacing the method of election of senators by state legislatures
 - c. **Nineteenth Amendment:** prohibits states from restricting voting rights based on sex
 - d. **Twenty-fourth Amendment:** prohibits states from charging a poll tax to vote
 - e. **Twenty-sixth Amendment:** guarantees voting rights to persons over 18 years old
3. **Federal Law**
 - a. **Civil Rights Act of 1964:** prohibited racial discrimination in voter qualification requirements
 - b. **Voting Rights Act of 1965:** outlawed literacy testing and all forms of voter qualification that result in racial discrimination. This law also required preclearance for changing voting procedures for certain jurisdictions. *Preclearance* is the term for the legal requirement that jurisdictions with a significant history of racially discriminatory voting laws obtain approval from the Department of Justice before making changes to

voting and election procedures. This provision was struck down in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013).

- c. **National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act):** required states to provide individuals with the opportunity to register to vote at the same time that they apply for a driver's license or seek to renew a driver's license



Remember that the trend in U.S. history and the goal of most legislative efforts has been to expand the franchise, also called suffrage, which is the right to vote.

B. FACTORS AFFECTING VOTER TURNOUT

1. Voter turnout is widely studied as an important metric on the health of a democracy.
2. Voter turnout can be calculated in different ways, including as a percentage of:
 - a. the voting-age population—that is, all persons old enough to vote;
 - b. the voting-eligible population—that is, all persons who meet all legal qualifications for voting, not just age; or
 - c. registered voters.
3. In the United States, numerous personal characteristics have been shown to correlate with the likelihood of an individual voting. It is important to recognize that these factors are associated with voter participation, but they do not necessarily cause it.
 - a. **Socioeconomic status (SES).** This is a measure of education, occupation, income, and wealth. Persons with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to vote and more likely to participate in politics generally.
 - Higher education level is the factor most strongly associated with voting participation. Highly educated people may be less intimidated by the voting process and more likely to feel a sense of political efficacy—the sense that their vote matters.
 - Education, income, and occupation are strongly correlated. For example, persons with a higher level

- of education are more likely to have higher prestige occupations and higher incomes.
- Persons with greater wealth are more likely to bear the cost of belonging to interest groups, which may motivate voter participation.
- b. **Political efficacy.** This is one's belief that voting is an effective way to influence the world. Persons with a strong sense of political efficacy feel that their vote will make an impact and are therefore more likely to vote.
 - c. **Age.** There is a strong correlation between age and voting participation. Older people have the highest turnout, and young people have the lowest turnout.
 - Older people often have escalating concerns about mortgages, children, retirement, social security, and Medicare, and therefore may perceive public policy as having a greater impact on their lives.
 - Younger people may not have developed strong political views or may not perceive that they have a significant personal stake in public policy outcomes.
 - d. **Gender.** Men and women vote at similar rates, although in recent decades women have voted at a rate just slightly higher than men.
 - e. **Race.** Historically, race correlates significantly with voter turnout.
 - Whites have the highest turnout rates.
 - African American voter turnout rates were historically significantly lower than those of whites, but in recent decades the African American turnout rate has risen to within 2 to 3 percentage points of the white turnout rate.
 - Hispanic Americans' and Asian Americans' voting rates are significantly lower than those of whites and African Americans.
4. Many structural barriers affect voter turnout rates. *Structural* in this context is a term used to describe the characteristics of elections themselves.
- a. **Expansion of the franchise.** Historically, voting rights in the United States have expanded as marginalized groups gain access to the ballot. Because these groups face structural and social challenges to voting and have historically voted at

lower rates than more privileged groups, the expansion of the franchise has resulted in lower overall voting rates.

- b. **Negative campaigning.** Attacking the political opposition, and even the government itself, are effective in influencing voter choices. They also discourage voting by creating negative feelings toward politics in general.
- c. **Declining trust in government.** Political corruption contributes to voter apathy.
- d. **Registration process.** Voting rates are reduced in states with more restrictive registration laws. Voting rates are increased by registration laws that allow:
 - opportunities for registration when applying for or renewing a driver's license (now required by federal law)
 - online registration
 - registration at the polls on election day
 - automatic voter registration, in which voters are automatically registered by the state
- e. **Voter identification requirements.** In recent years, a growing number of states have passed laws requiring voters to prove their identity at the polls.
 - The type of identification acceptable (for example, college ID cards or a Medicare card) varies by state.
 - Stricter voter identification laws reduce voter turnout. Less restrictive requirements are associated with higher voter turnouts.
 - The groups most likely to be impacted by voter identification requirements are the elderly, low-income, and less-educated populations.
- f. **Tuesday elections.** In most democracies, elections take place on weekends. In some countries, election day is a national holiday.
 - Tuesday elections in the United States create barriers to voting by making it more difficult for working people to go to the polls.
 - Expanded early voting and absentee voting options may help to mitigate the burden of in-person, weekday elections.

- g. **Felony disenfranchisement.** States have different rules regarding the eligibility of convicted felons to vote. These rules affect a significant proportion of the population.
- Some states reinstate the right to vote when a felon has finished serving his or her parole, or a fixed period of time thereafter.
 - A small number of states have laws requiring mandatory lifetime disenfranchisement for all felons.
 - A small number of states allow felons, including current prisoners, to vote.
- h. **Federal vs. state elections.** Voter turnout is higher in federal than in state-level elections, and higher in state than in local elections. In general, the more local the election, the lower the turnout rate.
- i. **Presidential vs. midterm elections.** Turnout rates are highest in presidential elections and lower in midterm elections.



Understand how personal characteristics influence voter turnout.

Factors Associated with Increased Voting Participation	Factors Associated with Decreased Voting Participation
more education	less education
greater income/wealth	lower income/wealth
higher occupational status	lower occupational status
older age	younger age
race: white or African American	race: Hispanic or Asian
union membership	non-union member
more religious	less religious
more community involvement	less community involvement
female (slight)	male (slight)

C. FACTORS AFFECTING VOTER PREFERENCES

1. Like turnout, voter preferences correlate with certain demographic characteristics.
 - a. Religious beliefs strongly correlate with voter preferences.
 - Christian Protestants, the largest religious group in the United States, generally support Republicans. This is especially true of its Evangelical Christian subgroup.
 - Catholics, the second-largest religious group, historically favored Democrats, but now appear to split their support evenly between Democrats and Republicans.
 - Jews, who comprise a small percentage of the electorate, have historically favored Democrats by a wide margin.
 - b. There is a gender gap in voting preferences, with women generally preferring Democrats, and men generally preferring Republicans.
 - c. Voter preferences also diverge along racial lines.
 - Whites generally prefer Republicans by a small margin.
 - African Americans prefer Democrats by a large margin.
 - Hispanic and Asian Americans also prefer Democrats by wide margins.
 - d. The gap in voting preferences between non-college-educated voters and those with higher levels of education has increased in recent elections. Beyond college, the tendency to favor Democratic candidates increases as levels of education increase.
 - e. Voter preferences are strongly correlated with rural or urban residence. Urban voters tend to favor Democrats, while rural voters tend to favor Republicans.
 - f. Some voters feel strongly attached to a political party. This is known as party identification. The extent to which voters identify with one party or the other is strongly influenced by one's family, as well as other factors such as education and region of residence.

2. Voter preferences may also be affected by factors specific to candidates and elections.
 - a. Different voters and voting groups may be attracted to a party based on a critical issue in an election, such as immigration or women’s rights.
 - b. Voter preferences are significantly affected by candidate characteristics. For this reason, parties attempt to promote candidates who are attractive, pleasant, and appealing.
 - A candidate’s personal characteristics may resonate with certain groups of voters. John F. Kennedy overwhelmingly won Catholic voters, and Barack Obama overwhelmingly won African American voters.
 - Voters may be drawn to a candidate based on personal charisma or attractiveness.
 - c. Some states have ballots that offer voters the option of straight-ticket voting, or marking only one box that automatically casts their votes for all candidates running on a party’s ticket.
 - Voters with a strong sense of party identification are more likely to vote straight-ticket.
 - Although the percentage of split-ticket voting (in which voters choose certain candidates from one party and certain candidates from the other party) varies from election to election, it is always a significant number of voters.

Factors Influencing Political Preferences

Voter Demographics Favoring Democrats	Voter Demographics Favoring Republicans
minority	white
female	male
Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, unaffiliated with a religion	Protestant/evangelical, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
urban	rural
Northwest and coastal regions	South and Midwest regions

Note: Catholics historically favored Democrats but recently are split between Republicans and Democrats.



Understand the distinction between voter turnout (whether people vote) and voter preferences (who people vote for) and how these are affected by the structural and personal factors described in the text. Also, be aware that correlations between voter characteristics and voter behavior are generalizations and do not necessarily apply to individual group members.

D. THEORIES OF VOTER BEHAVIOR

1. Voting is the primary method by which citizens direct the activities of government.
2. Political scientists have suggested several theories of how citizens in democracies make voting decisions. Each of the following theories attempts to explain the process through which citizens decide which candidates to vote for in an election.
 - a. **Rational-Choice Voting.** Voters seek out information about candidates and issues and vote for the person they believe will advance their policy preferences.
 - b. **Retrospective Voting.** Voters consider the track record of each candidate and party to determine how effectively that party or candidate has governed.
 - c. **Prospective Voting.** Voters evaluate promises and proposals made by candidates and predict how their own priorities will be affected.
 - d. **Party-Line Voting.** Partisans (voters with a strong sense of party identification) are likely to make voting decisions based on the party affiliation of the candidates.

II. ELECTIONS

A. ELECTIONS GENERALLY

1. Elections (along with political parties, interest groups, and the media) are an important linkage institution through which voters interact with government officials to produce public policy.
2. Federal elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years.
3. Presidential elections are held every four years.

4. Americans also regularly elect members of state governments, including governors, state legislatures, and state judges. (Judges in the federal system are appointed for life terms.)
5. Additionally, elections encompass the selection of officials at the local level, including county, city, and school board offices, among others.
6. As a result of democratic reforms at the state level, state and local elections feature several types of ballot questions not found in federal elections. These reforms reflect a trend toward placing greater political power in the hands of voters.
 - a. An initiative is a procedure that allows voters to bypass their legislatures to propose laws or (state) constitutional amendments that may be placed on the ballot.
 - b. A referendum is a policy question placed on a ballot by a state legislature for voters to accept or reject, thus allowing voters to make policy choices directly.
 - c. A recall allows voters to hold an election to remove and replace an elected official before his or her term in office is finished.



Initiatives and referenda are often difficult to distinguish. Initiatives are laws proposed by citizens using petitions. These proposed laws may be placed on the ballot or submitted to the legislature, depending on state law. Referenda (plural of referendum) are placed on the ballot by the state legislature.

B. NOMINATING CANDIDATES FOR OFFICE

1. Most candidates for political office at the state and federal levels are nominated by political parties.
2. Nominees were historically selected by party leaders, but reforms have granted this power to the regular party members.
 - a. Voters now select nominees through direct primaries.
 - b. The direct primary resulted in
 - ▶ a loss of power by the party leadership and increased influence for voters.

- ▶ increased responsibility on candidates for fundraising and managing campaigns.
 - ▶ a focus on candidate characteristics and qualities.
3. Parties select a nominee from among declared candidates for each office within the party.
 4. Each party then supports and promotes its nominees in the general election.
 5. Some candidates run as independents in the general election.



Keep in mind that candidates who are most popular with a party's base of core voters are often ideologically pure or extreme. This is generally the type of candidate who will resonate with politically engaged partisans early on in the election process. In the general election, however, moderate candidates will draw more support from nonpartisan, middle-of-the-road voters. For this reason, moderates have historically been more electable. The choice of nominees for office demonstrates the tension between a more partisan candidate who will motivate the party's voter base in a general election, versus a moderate candidate who will draw votes from the middle.

C. PRIMARIES

1. Most states hold primary elections in which voters choose each party's nominees for each office on the ballot.
 - a. In an open primary, voters may choose at their polling places to vote in either the Democratic or Republican contest.
 - b. In a closed primary, voters must be registered as Republicans or Democrats in order to receive their party's ballot.
2. In presidential primaries, held every four years, parties select their presidential and vice presidential nominees.
 - a. The parties have systems for choosing a candidate on the national level.
 - b. In the presidential primaries, the voters are selecting delegates who will vote for the chosen nominee at the party's nominating convention.



The term caucus has two distinct political meanings. In the discussion below, caucus refers to a meeting of party members within a state to participate in the presidential nomination process. Caucus can also refer to voting blocks of legislators who are associated based on party membership, demographics, or ideology, such as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus.

D. CAUCUSES

1. About one-fifth of the states hold caucuses, rather than primary elections, to select delegates to the presidential nominating conventions.
2. Caucuses are local meetings of party members held in precincts across the state.
3. Voters discuss and debate the merits of their party's candidates for the presidential nomination and vote publicly by grouping themselves according to candidate.
4. The process is complicated and time-consuming and results in delegate selection by only the most committed voters in a state.

E. OPEN PRIMARIES, CLOSED PRIMARIES, AND CAUCUSES

1. The differences among primaries and caucuses are significant because they involve different sets of participants and result in different candidate selection patterns.
2. Primary turnout runs low overall, at about half that of the general election. Caucus turnout is even lower.
3. The more limited the nominating procedure, the more partisan and motivated the voters are, and the more ideologically intense the nominee is likely to be. This can be a problem in the general election when the more moderate elements of the electorate are more likely to participate.
4. Closed primaries and caucuses tend to produce more extreme candidates than open primaries because participation is limited to the most dedicated partisans.

5. Although open primaries encourage the most participation, they also allow the opportunity for voters to use their votes to strategically impact the other party's nomination. In other words, voters may vote as members of the party they oppose to support a candidate who would be a weak challenger in the general election.

F. DELEGATES

1. The selection of a state's delegates to the presidential nominating convention is determined by the primary or convention process in the state.
2. A state's delegates may be awarded in proportion to the outcome of the election or caucus, or on a winner-take-all basis. The method depends on state and party rules.
3. Delegates that are awarded through primary elections or caucuses are called pledged delegates because they are committed to voting for a particular candidate.
4. Both parties' systems also include delegates who are unpledged.
5. The Republican process includes three unpledged delegates from each state, usually the top officials in the state party leadership.
6. The Democratic system includes hundreds of superdelegates, including members of Congress and party leaders, who are free to vote for any candidate.

G. FRONT-LOADING

1. The practice of front-loading, or holding a primary or caucus early in the election cycle, confers political and economic advantages on a state.
2. States with early candidate selection processes have a disproportionate impact on the selection of the nominee and are the focus of attention by candidates and the media.
3. Early primaries and caucuses bring attention, advertising dollars, and media coverage to the state. For this reason, states may engage in front-loading, which involves moving up their primary contests to be among the first.
4. Both major parties have implemented guidelines and sanctions to discourage front-loading by states.
5. Iowa holds the first caucuses, and New Hampshire holds the first primary.

H. NATIONAL NOMINATING CONVENTIONS

1. Following the primary contests, in the summer of presidential election years, each of the major political parties holds a national convention, also called a nominating convention.
2. Party conventions serve several functions:
 - a. Conventions include the formal adoption of the party platform, which is a statement of the party's positions on political issues.
 - b. Formal selection of the presidential nominee takes place at the convention as the delegates cast their votes.
 - c. The vice-presidential nominee is selected.
 - d. Parties attempt to unify behind the platform and the nominee. This is important, as the supporters of losing candidates may be dissatisfied and must be encouraged to support the party nominee.
 - e. Modern conventions are glamorous, staged, and televised events. They serve as advertising spectacles, promoting the party's message and candidate to the general public.
3. Although the nominee is generally known long before the convention, it is possible that no single candidate wins a majority of the delegates, resulting in a brokered, or contested, convention. Multiple rounds of votes may be taken until a winner is determined.

III.

THE GENERAL ELECTION: CONGRESS

A. CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

1. Congressional elections are held every two years.
2. Winners are determined using the single-member plurality system, also called the first-past-the-post system. This means that the candidate with the most votes wins the election, even if no candidate wins a majority of votes.
3. In each congressional election, voters in the states select all (435) members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate seats.
4. In presidential election years, the politics of the presidential election impact congressional candidates.

- a. Both the popularity of the presidential nominees and the level of opposition to them may impact voter turnout.
 - b. An extremely unpopular presidential candidate of the opposite party may help a congressional candidate's performance at the polls.
 - c. Likewise, a popular presidential candidate may boost votes for other "down-ballot" candidates from his or her party in what is called the *coattail effect*.
5. Congressional elections that do not coincide with presidential elections are called midterm or off-year elections.
- a. Voter turnout rates are normally significantly lower in midterm than in presidential elections.
 - b. Another notable phenomenon associated with midterm elections is that the president's party tends to lose seats in Congress.
 - This loss of seats occurs regardless of which party holds the White House and has been remarkably consistent since the first election of FDR. In only two elections since then has the incumbent president's party gained seats in a midterm election.
 - The reasons for seat loss appear to be structural, in part because the opposition base (set of core voters) is more likely to be motivated and energized in off-year elections.
 - Losing seats can weaken the president's ability to enact his or her agenda in the second two years of the presidential term.
6. In addition to presidential and congressional races, ballots in federal election years include state and local races.
- a. Voters who vote exclusively for one party's candidates are said to be voting straight-ticket. A few states' ballots still allow voters to efficiently vote straight-ticket by marking a single box, but the practice has been eliminated in most states.
 - b. Voters may vote for candidates of both parties for different offices. For example, a voter may vote for the Democratic candidate for president, the Republican candidate for the Senate, and so on. The practice of voting for candidates of both parties is called split-ticket voting.
 - c. In most elections, about half of voters split their votes, and about half vote straight-ticket.

B. CAMPAIGNING FOR CONGRESS

1. As party power has receded, campaigns have become more candidate-centered, creating both advantages and disadvantages for candidates.
 - a. Candidates must raise more of their own funds.
 - The fundraising aspect of campaigns creates pressure for all candidates, but is more acute for members of the House, who must campaign every two years to hold their seats.
 - Senators, with a longer interval between elections, spend more per campaign than members of the House, but have to run for re-election only once every six years.
 - b. Candidates hire professional campaign management staff who create advertising campaigns, speak to the press, conduct polls, and develop strategy independent of party preferences.
 - c. Individual campaigns must efficiently use funds and target voters for messaging.
 - d. Candidates are more independent of political party control.
2. A candidate may be running for office for the first time or re-election. The person currently holding an office is called the incumbent. (Remember: **in**cumbent = **in** office.)
3. The incumbent holds a number of strategic advantages called *the incumbency advantage*.
 - a. **Name recognition.** Incumbents receive free publicity, both through the media and as a function of their role in government. Voters have heard incumbents' names many times, while the names of challengers may be unfamiliar. Research shows that recognition of a candidate's name, by itself, is likely to positively affect voters.
 - b. **Casework.** Members of Congress provide personal assistance to constituents (voters in their states or districts) with problems involving the federal government. Members have staff dedicated to providing this type of assistance, which produces a favorable impression on voters and increases voter support. Examples of casework types include:
 - assistance in applying for Social Security, veterans' benefits, and educational benefits; or in tracking lost payments

- assistance in immigration matters or passport applications
- applying to a military academy
- c. **Franking privilege.** The franking privilege allows lawmakers to send materials to citizens within their states or districts at taxpayer expense (no cost to Congress members). Challengers must fund their own mailings.
 - This privilege is intended to facilitate legislators' communication with constituents. Informative materials, however, generally include the incumbent's smiling face and plenty of information about all that he or she has done for the district or state.
 - The effect of the franking privilege may be somewhat reduced with the proliferation of electronic communications. It still provides a unique advantage, however, as it may be more difficult to dispose of paper found in a mailbox without glancing at the content, than it is to delete or ignore electronic messages.
- d. **Committee assignments.** All members of Congress serve on one or more committees, allowing them to develop relationships with specific, often powerful constituencies.
- e. **Interest group support.** Interest groups favor incumbents in terms of donations and support.
 - These groups have often developed relationships with incumbents with whom they have worked on issues. (This may relate to committee assignments.)
 - Interest groups recognize that incumbents are likely to win re-election and often direct their support toward current members to ensure access to those legislators. Supporting incumbents is perceived as a safer investment.
 - Note that groups often support both candidates for a single office in order to ensure that they will have access to and the goodwill of the office holder.
- f. **Gerrymandering.** Gerrymandered districts have created hundreds of safe seats for particular parties, which translates to strongly advantaged elections for individual office holders.
- g. **Paid budgets.** Incumbents have staffing, administrative, and travel budgets paid for by taxpayers. These may technically not be used for campaign purposes, but they support

- a candidate's ability to travel and function in ways that challengers lack.
- h. **Staff support.** Party leaders, popular politicians, and party structures help incumbents campaign and win elections.
 - i. **Donor support.** Those currently in office have a significant fundraising advantage because individual and institutional donors seeking access are more likely to contribute to incumbents, who are more likely to win than challengers.
4. Although most congressional elections involve an incumbent facing off against a challenger, candidates sometimes find themselves competing for an open seat.
- a. An open seat happens when the incumbent does not seek re-election. This may occur when the incumbent dies, retires, faces criminal or ethical allegations, or seeks a higher office.
 - b. In an open election, the popularity of the outgoing incumbent may be a factor, but it is not as substantial as the incumbency advantage.

IV. THE GENERAL ELECTION: THE PRESIDENCY

A. CAMPAIGNING IN THE GENERAL ELECTION

1. The convention is over. The delegates have cast their votes, and a presidential nominee has been selected. As the party turns toward the general election, decisions must be made and a course charted to win the general election.
2. The candidate at this point must devise a strategy to address his or her change in audience. He or she must appeal to moderate voters in addition to the party base. These voters are less likely to be strongly partisan or to vote in primary elections or caucuses.
 - a. At this point, candidates often "pivot" on issues or soften their views to appeal to moderate voters.
 - b. The challenge for candidates during the general election is to maintain the enthusiasm of base voters while moving toward the middle in terms of policy.
3. The likelihood of one of the presidential candidates being an incumbent is lower than in congressional races. This is due to the fact that presidents are limited by the Twenty-second Amendment to two four-year terms, or, in the case of having succeeded to the

presidency (due to the death or disability of the president), a total of 10 years. (Remember: 22 is 2 terms or 10 years.)

- a. Presidential races are often for open seats due to term limits.
 - b. For incumbent presidents, the election is a judgment by the public of their first-term performance.
4. An early decision that must be made by the candidate is the selection of a running mate.
- a. A flaw in the original Constitution created an electoral balloting system that chose the president and vice president separately, so that the candidate with the most votes became president, and the candidate with the second-most votes became vice president.
 - b. This system resulted in two problems: First, it could result in the election of a president and vice president of different parties. Second, because electors each cast two ballots, which did not specify whether the ballot was being cast for president or vice president, it could result in a tied electoral vote between the presidential and vice presidential candidates of the same party. This happened when presidential candidate Thomas Jefferson and vice presidential candidate Aaron Burr received the same number of electoral votes. (Burr then unsuccessfully lobbied the House of Representatives to elect him president.)
 - c. The Twelfth Amendment provides for presidential and vice presidential candidates to run together on a ticket.
5. The choice of a running mate is a strategic decision made by the presidential candidate and his or her leadership team. The selection involves several important considerations, most importantly, how to add support or compensate for weaknesses of the presidential candidate.
- a. A running mate may be selected to draw support from a populous state with a large number of electoral votes.
 - b. A presidential candidate from one geographic area, for example, the Northeast, may draw support from another geographic area, such as the South or West, by selecting a popular politician from that region as a running mate.
 - c. Candidates may choose running mates to broaden their appeal to minority groups, such as African Americans, Hispanics, or women.

- d. A running mate may also be chosen to balance the ticket ideologically, as when a more partisan candidate chooses a more moderate running mate, or with other political considerations in mind.
6. Finally, an important part of general election strategy involves how to allocate time and resources among states. In presidential politics, all states are definitely not equal.
- a. Certain categories of states receive disproportionate amounts of time and money from presidential campaigns.
 - States with early primary elections or caucuses are often frequent campaign stops for candidates because an early lead or disadvantage in delegates may impact the trajectory of the campaign.
 - Candidates generally focus on swing states, states in which both parties have a strong base and history of winning elections, and battleground states where polls show close races.
 - All other things being equal, states with more electoral votes are likely to draw more attention from candidates.
 - b. Certain categories of states are likely to receive less attention from candidates.
 - Safe states are those in which one party has a lock on presidential elections. Illinois, for example, is reliably won by the Democratic candidate, while Alabama is reliably won by the Republican candidate. Because campaigning in these states will not affect the outcome of that state's vote, safe states are generally ignored by both candidates.
 - States with smaller populations and fewer electoral votes are less important in the scheme of presidential campaign strategies.

B. THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

1. The United States chooses its presidents not by direct popular election, but according to a system known as the Electoral College. Although the system of electors is described in Article II, Section 1, the term *Electoral College* is not found in the Constitution.
2. The Electoral College system is best understood as 51 separate contests, each with a different-sized prize.

- a. Each state has a total number of electoral votes equal to its number of seats in Congress (Senate seats + House seats). The number of Senate seats is always two, but the number of House seats varies by state population. (Recall that House seats are reapportioned every 10 years based on the decennial census.)
- b. In 1961, ratification of the Twenty-third Amendment granted Washington, D.C., a number of electoral votes equal to that of the least populous state (currently 3, as the smallest states have only one House seat). (Remember: 23 is 3 for DC.)
- c. The winner of each contest receives all of that state's electoral votes (the winner-take-all system), except in Maine and Nebraska. Maine and Nebraska are unique because in those states, the popular vote winner within the state wins the two electoral votes associated with Senate seats, and each of the remaining electoral votes are divided according to the popular vote winner in each of the states' congressional districts.
- d. Winning a state means that the winning candidate's electors will be eligible to cast their votes for president.
 - Electors are dedicated party members chosen to fill this honorary roll who have pledged, or promised, to vote for their party's nominee should that person win the popular vote within their state.
 - Although electors almost always vote as promised, they may occasionally vote for someone other than the candidate they have promised to vote for. Cases of faithless electors are infrequent and have never affected the outcome of a presidential election, although this is certainly possible.
- e. There are 538 electors in total (435 total House seats + 100 total Senate seats + 3 votes for the District of Columbia = 538).
 - A majority of 270 votes or more is required to win the presidency. (A plurality is not sufficient.)
 - If no candidate captures a majority of electoral votes, the winner of the presidential election is chosen by the House of Representatives, with each state having one vote. The vice president is chosen by the Senate following a similar procedure.

3. Proponents of the Electoral College have made several arguments in its support.
 - a. The founders disliked the idea of direct popular election, primarily because they feared the ascent of a tyrant who might win the presidency by misinforming and inflaming the passions of the common people. Hamilton wrote in “Federalist No. 68” (not a required document):

It was equally desirable, that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station, and acting under circumstances favorable to deliberation, and to a judicious combination of all the reasons and inducements which were proper to govern their choice. A small number of persons, selected by their fellow-citizens from the general mass, will be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations. It was also peculiarly desirable to afford as little opportunity as possible to tumult and disorder.
 - b. Hamilton’s quotation also reflects a confidence in elites, whom he and others felt could be better trusted than less educated, unsophisticated common people to elect the president. Common people at the time were also frequently rural dwellers with limited means of obtaining political information. It is important to keep in mind that the Electoral College has evolved from a system of largely independent electors to one in which parties choose electors who reliably vote for the party’s nominee.
 - c. The Electoral College is often defended because it protects the interests of less populous, more rural states, which would have little political influence under a system of direct popular election. In such a system, the argument goes, politicians would concern themselves primarily with urban states to the detriment of rural areas.
4. There are also numerous criticisms of the Electoral College, some of which have been highlighted by the failures of recent elections. These assessments point out that the Electoral College is undemocratic in various ways including the following:
 - a. The popular vote winner may not win the presidency.
 - This can occur because state populations are not proportionate to their voting power in the Electoral College. The combined effect of disproportionate

electoral voting strength and the winner-take-all system of vote allocation sometimes leads to the popular vote winner failing to win the presidency.

- ▶ The popular vote winner failed to win the presidential election five times in American history, notably in 2000 and 2016.
 - ▶ Winning the popular vote but losing the election has occurred more often as population differences between more and less populous states have increased.
- b. Because the votes of minority party voters in safe states have negligible impact, the Electoral College system negates the value of these votes and depresses turnout.
 - c. Finally, it has been argued that the Electoral College is a vestige of the slave system that gave disproportionate power to slave states as a way to incentivize ratification of the Constitution.



The argument for direct popular election of the president reflects a preference for majoritarian democracy, whereas the Electoral College system reflects the concept of elite democracy. Pluralist democracy can be most easily seen in multi-party parliamentary systems that rely on government by coalition.