



Elections  
Division

**VOTE  
HERE**



## Chapter 10

# Political Campaigns and Elections

### *Elections and voting: Why should they matter to you?*

#### ■ 10.1 Introduction

Does any one person's vote really matter? Some people do not think so. They contend that a single vote can hardly make a difference in an election that involves millions of voters. Even at the local level, a single vote is unlikely to have much impact.

In the presidential election of 2000, however, a relatively small number of votes did matter. That year, Democratic nominee Al Gore ran against Republican candidate George W. Bush. More than 100 million people voted in that election. When the votes were tallied, Gore had won the popular vote by a little more than 500,000 votes. Although a margin of half a million votes sounds like a lot, it represented only about one-half of 1 percent of the total.

Despite Gore's slim lead, Bush became president by winning the Electoral College vote. This was only the third time in U.S. history that a candidate had won in the Electoral College without receiving a **plurality** of the popular vote.

Not surprisingly, Bush's victory in 2000 was controversial. The election was so close that, in the end, it came down to a few contested votes in a single state—Florida. There, George Bush won by a mere 537 votes. Under our **winner-take-all system**, that slim margin of victory gave Bush all, rather than half, of the state's 25 electoral votes—and the presidency.

Voters waiting in line on election day

### Speaking of Politics

#### **plurality**

The largest number of votes in an election. In elections with more than two candidates, the winner by a plurality may receive fewer than 50 percent of the votes cast.

#### **winner-take-all system**

An electoral system that awards offices to the highest vote-getters without ensuring representation for voters in the minority. Under this system a slim majority of voters can control 100 percent of elected offices.

#### **primary election**

An election in which voters determine their political party's nominee for an elective office.

#### **general election**

An election in which voters choose among candidates from different parties to fill an elective office.

#### **caucus**

A meeting of party members to choose party officials or nominees for elective office.

#### **party base**

Political activists who embrace the core values of their party and are more likely to vote in primary elections than are centrist voters.

#### **stump speech**

A candidate's "standard" speech, which is repeated throughout his or her campaign.

#### **coattail effect**

The influence that a popular politician may have on voters, making them more likely to choose other candidates from his or her party.

Of course, 537 votes, the number that effectively put Bush in the White House, is more than 1 vote. If just 269 more Gore supporters had gone to the polls that day, and the same number of Bush supporters had stayed home instead of voting, the result might have been very different.

The Florida tally was not the only close count in the 2000 elections. In New Mexico, Gore beat Bush by just 366 votes. An even tighter race unfolded in Michigan, where congressional candidate Mike Rogers won a seat in the House by a mere 88 votes.

The 2000 elections show that a few votes can, and often do, matter. The importance of voting, however, goes well beyond the vote tally in any one election. Voting is one of the main ways that Americans take part in the political process. An informed voter is likely to be an engaged citizen, and an active citizenry is essential to a healthy democracy. In that sense, every American who votes is helping to keep our democratic system alive and well.

## 10.2 The Right to Vote

Elections are a regular feature of this nation's political system. In fact, Americans hold more elections to elect more officeholders than any other nation in the world. This emphasis on elections stems from the constitutional principle of popular

sovereignty. If political authority comes from the people, what better way to exercise that authority than by voting? In a 2012 opinion survey, the majority felt that voting in an election was crucial.

Yet despite this widespread view, a sizable percentage of Americans do not vote regularly. Furthermore, throughout our history, many Americans have been denied voting rights. In many cases, the right to vote has been won only after years of struggle.

### Who Voted Then: The Gradual Expansion of Suffrage

When the U.S. Constitution was written in 1787, it said very little about elections. The Constitution did establish a procedure for electing the president and vice president. But it left most other details about elections and voting rights to the states.

At that time, **suffrage**, or the right to vote, was limited in the United States. In 1789, only about 6 percent of the population was allowed to vote. Most states restricted suffrage to white males who owned substantial property. John Jay, one of the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, expressed a view common to many of the nation's founders when he said, "those who own the country ought to govern it."

Over time, however, suffrage was gradually extended. During the 1820s, a political movement to eliminate property qualifications for voting swept the country. Propelled by Andrew Jackson, the first

### Expanding Suffrage, 1870–2000

1870

1880

1890

1900

1910

1920

1930

Before the Civil War, only white males could vote in most elections. Since then, laws and constitutional amendments have expanded suffrage for Americans.



1870

Fifteenth Amendment extends the vote to African American males, including former slaves.

1913

Seventeenth Amendment provides for direct election of senators by voters rather than by state legislatures.



1920

Nineteenth Amendment extends the right to vote to women.

1924

Indian Citizenship Act grants citizenship and voting rights to American Indians.

“common man” to become president, states opened their voting rolls to all white males. This political movement also pioneered the use of political parties to mobilize voters and get them to the polls.

After the Civil War, the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment advanced the principle of universal male suffrage. This amendment, ratified in 1870, granted voting rights to all male citizens, including African Americans.

Early in the 20th century, other measures expanded voting rights even more. The Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, provided for the direct election of senators. Previously, senators had been elected by state legislatures. The Nineteenth Amendment, approved in 1920, gave women in all states the right to vote. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 helped extend suffrage to American Indians by granting them citizenship.

### The Civil Rights Movement and Suffrage

For some African Americans, the expansion of suffrage after the Civil War proved short-lived. For nearly a century after the war, many states—especially in the South—found ways to deny suffrage to blacks, despite the Fifteenth Amendment. They erected legal barriers, such as literacy tests and poll taxes, to keep African Americans from the polls.

In the 1950s and 1960s, leaders of the civil rights movement made expansion of voting rights one of

their key goals. They organized mass protests, calling on the federal government to ensure that African Americans could exercise their voting rights, no matter where they lived. They achieved their first victory with the ratification of the Twenty-fourth Amendment in 1964. This amendment banned poll taxes, which had kept many poor African Americans from voting.

A second major advance came with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned literacy tests. In some parts of the South, this law placed **voter registration**, or the process of signing up to vote, under federal authority. In the past, local election officials in these areas had prevented African Americans from registering to vote. As a result of the Voting Rights Act, the number of African American voters increased dramatically in the South.

### Voting Today: Easy Registration and Low Turnout

The next major expansion of suffrage occurred with ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971. This amendment lowered the voting age to 18. Previously, most states had required voters to be at least 21 years old. This amendment was adopted during national debates over the Vietnam War. At the time, many people argued that if 18-year-olds were old enough to be drafted and sent into battle, then they were old enough to vote.

1940                      1950                      1960                      1970                      1980                      1990                      2000

1964

Twenty-fourth Amendment bans the use of poll taxes, which discourage voting.



1965

Voting Rights Act protects the voting rights of African Americans, leading to the election of more black officeholders.

1971

Twenty-sixth Amendment lowers the voting age to 18.

1993

Motor Voter Act eases voter registration.



Many voters believe that their vote does not matter. However, the cumulative effect of non-voting can be substantial. If most Americans fail to vote, then election results do not represent the will of the majority.



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Today, there are four basic requirements to be eligible to vote in the United States. In most states, you must be

- a U.S. citizen.
- at least 18 years old.
- a resident of the state.
- a legally registered voter.

To register to vote, you must fill out a form that asks for such basic information as your address and date of birth. You may also be required to provide the registrar of voters with proof of your identity. In general, voter registration closes a month or so before an election. However, North Dakota does not require residents to register before voting. A few other states allow voters to register at their polling place on Election Day.

To encourage more people to vote, Congress has tried to make the voter-registration process easier. In 1993, for example, it passed the National Voter Registration Act, better known as the Motor Voter Act. This law requires that states allow residents to register to vote while applying for a driver's license. It also requires states to provide voter-registration forms at social service offices and by mail.

The Motor Voter Act has been quite successful in promoting voter registration. By the 1996 presidential election, 18 million new voters had

registered. Since the act was passed, there has been some increase in registration among voting-age Americans.

Increased voter registration, however, has not translated into high voter turnout on Election Day. Voter turnout is the proportion of the voting-age population that actually votes. Today, the United States has one of the lowest voter turnouts among the world's established democracies. Between 50 and 60 percent of American voters turn out to vote in presidential elections. In contrast, figures for many European democracies exceed 70 percent.

Political scientists point to a number of factors that might explain this difference in voter turnout. For example, ballots in some countries may be simpler, with fewer candidates and issues to vote on than in a typical American election. U.S. elections take place on workdays, which means that many voters must take time off from their jobs to go to the polls. In many other countries, elections are held on weekends or official Election Day holidays.

In some European countries, such as Belgium and Italy, voting is compulsory, not voluntary as in the United States. Voters who do not participate in elections in those countries may face fines or have their right to vote revoked.

Low U.S. turnout rates may also reflect the fact

that a majority of states deny convicted felons voting rights while in jail, on parole, or on probation. Such restrictions deny about 1 adult in 50 the right to vote.

Low voter-turnout rates have fueled concern that Americans are becoming less connected to their communities and see less reason to get involved in politics. Experts say that the 2012 presidential election showed a decrease in voter turnout compared with both the 2004 and 2008 elections.

### 10.3 Choosing Candidates for Public Office: The Nomination Process

Approximately half a million people hold elective office in the United States. Candidates for nonpartisan offices, such as county sheriff, typically face one another in a single election. The candidate with the highest vote totals wins. For most national or state offices, however, candidates must compete for their party's nomination in a **primary election**. If they win this election, they go on to face the nominees of other parties in the **general election**, held later that year.

### Primary Elections: Closed, Open, Blanket, and Nonpartisan

Primary elections, though common in the United States, are rare in the rest of the world. The idea of holding elections to choose a party's nominees was popularized during the Progressive Era in the early 1900s. Before then, nominees were often selected by party leaders who met behind closed doors. Primary elections brought the selection process out into the open and allowed party members to participate. Today, primary elections take several forms.

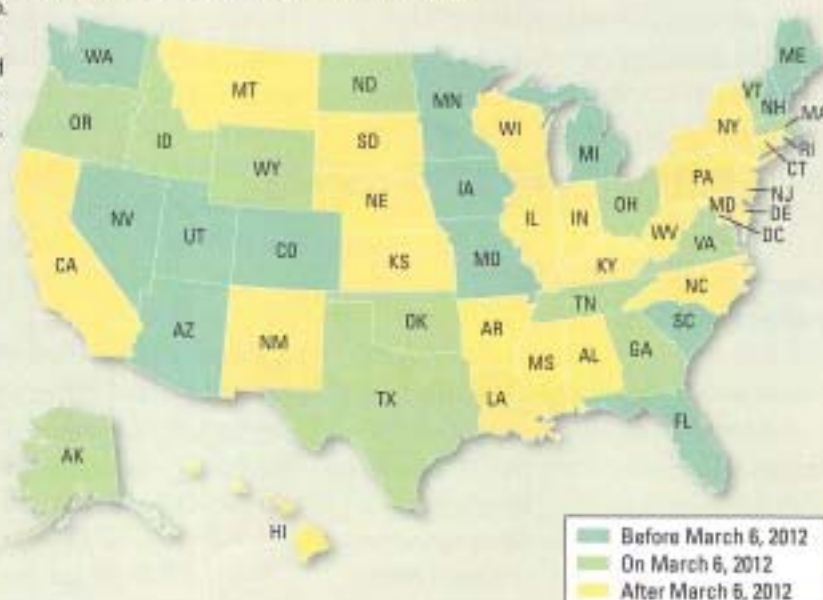
*Closed primaries.* States with a **closed primary** limit voting to registered party members. Independents are not allowed to participate. In some states, voters may declare their party affiliation on Election Day and vote in that party's primary. In general, party leaders prefer a closed primary because it limits voting to the party faithful.

*Open primaries.* States with an **open primary** allow all voters to vote in primary elections. In this system, also known as pick-a-party primaries, voters decide which party primary to vote in on Election Day. Independent voters like this system because it allows them to participate in the primary of their choice.

### The Incredible Shrinking Primary Season

In 2008, nearly two dozen states held their primaries on February 5. This number was much smaller in 2012, when only 13 states held their primaries on March 6, also known as Super Duper Tuesday.

### Presidential Primaries and Caucuses, 2012



\*Some states hold separate primaries or caucuses for Republican and Democrat candidates. This map reflects the date of the first primary or caucus for these states.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures.

## Tossing One's Hat Into the Ring

In April 2011, Barack Obama declared his candidacy by posting a video that asked: "Are you in?" Obama both e-mailed supporters and "tweeted" a link to the video on Twitter, marking the beginning of a social media-centered election. Republican hopeful, Mitt Romney, announced his candidacy in New Hampshire. Later that day he posted a photograph of himself delivering this speech on Facebook with the words "Presidential Announcement" boldly written above it.



However, party leaders worry about "raiding" in open primaries. Raiding occurs when voters cross party lines to vote in the other party's primary. Usually their purpose is to help nominate a weak candidate that their own party nominee can then easily defeat in the general election.

**Blanket primaries.** In a **blanket primary**, voters can pick and choose one candidate for each office from any party's primary list. Today this system is used in only a few states.

**Nonpartisan primaries.** Primaries are sometimes used to narrow the field in nonpartisan contests, such as for school board or city council elections. If one candidate wins a majority in a **nonpartisan primary**, that person takes office. If not, the two top vote-getters face each other in the general election.

### Joining the Race: Self-Announcement, Exploratory Committees, and Drafts

To participate in a primary, the person running for office must become a declared candidate. This can happen in several ways. The most common is **self-announcement**, also known as throwing your hat into the ring. Candidates simply declare their interest in seeking election to a public office. Self-announcement is usually done at a press conference or other public event. In 2007, Hillary Clinton chose to self-announce her candidacy for president on her Web site.

Before making a formal announcement, however, the candidate may form an **exploratory committee**. This is a group of advisers who evaluate the candidate's chances for election. Exploratory committees often take several weeks to test the waters and determine the level of public support for their candidate. If the committee decides that circumstances are favorable, the candidate makes a formal announcement of candidacy.

For presidential candidates, announcements are sometimes made as early as two years before the election. By announcing early, candidates give themselves extra time to raise the funds and the support they will need for the hard primary campaign ahead.

In some cases, candidates do not self-announce. Instead, they wait for a groundswell of public support for their candidacy. In effect, they allow their supporters to draft them into the race.

### Establishing a Campaign Organization

To win elective office, candidates must run a well-organized campaign. In most cases, this requires a campaign organization. These organizations vary in size and complexity, depending on the race.

Running for a city council seat might require a very small, local campaign organization. This group might consist of no more than a volunteer campaign manager and a treasurer. The candidate works with

this small team to write speeches, print posters and flyers, and manage other details of the campaign.

Running for president, on the other hand, demands a large, complex organization. A presidential race requires the services of hundreds of people, from unpaid volunteers to highly paid campaign professionals. Included in this staff would be a campaign manager, a public opinion pollster, a media consultant, a fundraising specialist, accountants, lawyers, and a press secretary. A presidential campaign organization would also have offices in every state. Of course, to set up and run such an organization requires money.

### Building a War Chest by Dialing for Dollars

Jesse Unruh, a California politician, once observed, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." Without money, a political campaign cannot survive for long. This is true at all levels, whether a candidate is running for a local office or for president of the United States.

At the start of a campaign, candidates typically spend a great deal of time and energy raising money the old-fashioned way. They "dial for dollars," getting on the phone to ask associates and supporters for money. They hold fundraisers, such as \$1,000-a-plate dinners, to solicit contributions from major donors. They also organize direct-mail campaigns and set up Web sites designed to attract funds from large numbers of small donors. If a candidate's

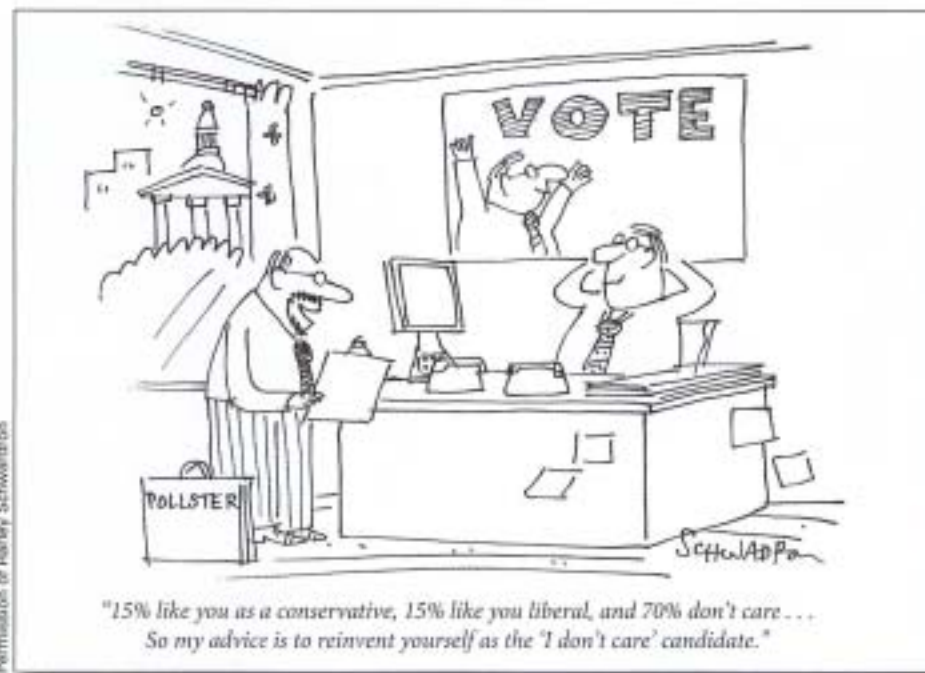
fundraising efforts are successful, the campaign will build up a **war chest**, or funds that can be used to move the campaign forward.

During presidential primary campaigns, the candidate with the largest war chest is often hailed as the front-runner. During the 2000 election, for example, George W. Bush raised a record amount of money early in the campaign and became the leading Republican candidate. A year before the first presidential primaries in 2008, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were declared front-runners in the race for the Democratic nomination, based on their early success at raising record amounts of campaign funds.

### Developing Campaign Strategies and Themes

In most states, the road to nomination in partisan races is the primary election. But some states use a different method: the party **caucus**. A caucus is a closed meeting of people from one political party who will select candidates or delegates.

In a caucus state, small groups of party members meet in their communities to discuss the various candidates. Each caucus then chooses delegates to represent its views at the party's state convention. Approximately a dozen states hold caucuses. The best known are the Iowa caucuses, which take place early in presidential election years. The Iowa caucuses are watched closely, because they provide the



In choosing a campaign theme and message, candidates often consult polls and pollsters. This cartoon takes aim at the kind of advice pollsters may give.



first indications of how well each candidate is doing at winning the support of average voters.

To prepare for caucuses and primaries, candidates must develop a campaign strategy. If this plan of action works well and the candidate wins the nomination, some of that strategy may carry over to the general election. Key elements of a strategy include tone, theme, and targeting.

**Tone.** Candidates must decide whether to adopt a positive or a negative tone for their campaigns. This means determining how much time and money to spend stressing the positive things about their candidacy and how much to spend criticizing their opponents.

**Theme.** Every candidate needs a theme—a simple, appealing idea that gets repeated over and over. A theme helps distinguish a candidate from his or her

opponents in the primaries. It is also critical in the general election, when candidates from different parties compete. When running for reelection in 1984, Ronald Reagan emphasized optimism, as expressed in his slogan, "It's morning again in America." For the 2008 election, Barack Obama organized his campaign around the theme of change with the slogan "Yes we can." Obama continued with this theme for the 2012 presidential election. The slogan for this campaign was "Forward."

**Targeting.** Candidates must also decide whether to target specific groups of voters. Is there any group—blue-collar workers, women, the middle class, the elderly—that is particularly unhappy with the status quo? If so, that group is a likely target for specially designed appeals from candidates.

## The Route to Nomination

To win elective office, candidates must first win their party's nomination. The process is similar for both congressional and presidential candidates. Presidential nominees, however, have the added step of the national convention.



## Wholesale and Retail Politics

Early in the primary season, presidential candidates, like Democratic hopeful Barack Obama, have time to meet and greet voters individually. As the season wears on, retail politics gives way to wholesale methods, designed to reach large numbers of voters. One popular forum is the televised debate. Here, Republican candidates for president debate during the 2011–2012 primary season.



Another aspect of campaign strategy is how to present the candidate's political views during the primaries as opposed to during the general election. For the primaries, candidates tend to couch their message in terms that will appeal to the **party base**. The party base consists of party activists who are more likely to vote in primary elections than less-committed centrists. This base also holds more extreme views than the average middle-of-the-road voter. As a result, candidates often emphasize more liberal or conservative views in the primaries than they would in a general election campaign.

### Reaching the Voters: Retail Politics, Wholesale Politics, and Microtargeting

Candidates for public office try to reach voters in various ways, both during the primaries and in the run-up to the general election. Political scientists have identified three general approaches: **retail politics**, **wholesale politics**, and **microtargeting**.

*Retail politics.* This meet-and-greet style of campaigning relies on direct, personal contact with voters. Candidates take part in parades, dinners, and other local events. They stand outside factories and shopping malls to shake hands and kiss babies. During these face-to-face encounters with voters,

candidates try to present themselves as leaders who are in touch with ordinary people.

*Wholesale politics.* Many voters can be reached only by large-scale mail or media campaigns. Candidates may develop direct-mail campaigns, in which thousands of letters are sent to voters asking for their support. Even more common is the use of both paid and free media. Candidates and their staff prepare television ads and take part in televised town hall meetings and debates. These broadcasts can reach millions of people at a time. The Internet is also being used to reach voters on a large scale. Most candidates have a professional Web site that has an archive of campaign ads and a link that allows voters to directly donate to a campaign. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest are also used to reach out to voters.

*Microtargeting.* This campaign approach uses databases to target narrow groups of voters and then reach them with carefully crafted messages. According to the *Washington Post*, candidates who adopt this technique "use the latest data-mining technology to vacuum every last scrap of information about voters." Armed with that data, they "churn out custom-tailored messages designed to herd their supporters to the polls." These messages present

National conventions are held after the primary season ends. They used to be part of the nominating process. Today, party gatherings are occasions for raising party spirit and cheering the party's nominee.



the candidate's position on issues of importance to each targeted group. For example, a candidate might target a message on social security to senior citizens.

### Locking Up the Nomination

A few months before the presidential election, the Democratic and Republican parties each hold a national convention in a major American city. In the past, party conventions were a critical step in the nomination process. Party delegates would argue over the candidates, sometimes going through several ballots before picking a nominee. On occasion, an underdog would emerge from the pack to challenge, and even overtake, the leading candidate.

Today, however, presidential nominees are chosen through the primary and caucus process. The winner then announces his or her choice for vice president. The national convention has, as a result, evolved into a ritual to formally announce the party nominees and present them to the nation. The nominees also work with party leaders to frame a platform, laying out the party's position on major issues. In addition, the convention helps unite the party and excite the party base.

### The Other Way to Run for Office: Nomination by Petition

Not all candidates for public office go through the usual nomination process. For independent or third-party candidates, there is another way to get on the ballot: by petition. The petition process involves collecting signatures of a specific number of qualified

voters in support of one's candidacy. The number of signatures needed depends on the office being sought.

The laws governing nomination by petition differ from state to state. In 2008, a candidate running for president needed 1,000 valid signatures to be put on the ballot in Washington state. In contrast, North Carolina required a candidate to gather the number of signatures equal to 2 percent of the votes cast in the previous presidential election, or approximately 70,000 signatures.

These variations can make it difficult for independent and third-party candidates to get on the ballot in all 50 states. In 2000, for example, Ralph Nader, the presidential nominee for the Green Party, appeared on the ballot in 43 states. Four years later, Nader was able to qualify for the ballot in only 34 states.

## 10.4 Campaigning in General Elections

Once the primary season ends, the candidates who have won their party's nomination shift gears to campaign in the general election. Although the Constitution calls for regularly scheduled elections, it does not specify when they should be held. Congress has set the date for presidential and midterm elections as the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years. This is different from parliamentary systems, in which the prime minister can call a national election at any time.

### Presidential, Midterm, and Off-Year Elections

There are three types of general elections in the United States: presidential, midterm, and off-year. **Presidential elections** are held every four years on even-numbered years. **Midterm elections** occur in the even-numbered years between presidential elections. **Off-year elections** are held in odd-numbered years.

Elected officials in the United States hold office for fixed terms. The Constitution sets the terms of the president and members of Congress. The only federal official affected by **term limits** is the president. The Twenty-second Amendment, ratified in 1951, limits the president to two terms in office. The terms for state officeholders are set by state constitutions.

### Building a Winning Coalition: Motivating the Base While Moving Toward the Middle

Candidates gearing up for a general election must make a number of changes in their campaign strategy. One is to shift their attention from winning over fellow party members to taking on the nominee of the other major party.

To appeal to a larger cross-section of voters, many candidates also decide to modify their political message. In the primaries, the ideas and promises that appealed to the party base, with its more extreme views, may need to be moderated to attract centrists and independents. Ideally, however, this move to the

### The Three Types of General Elections

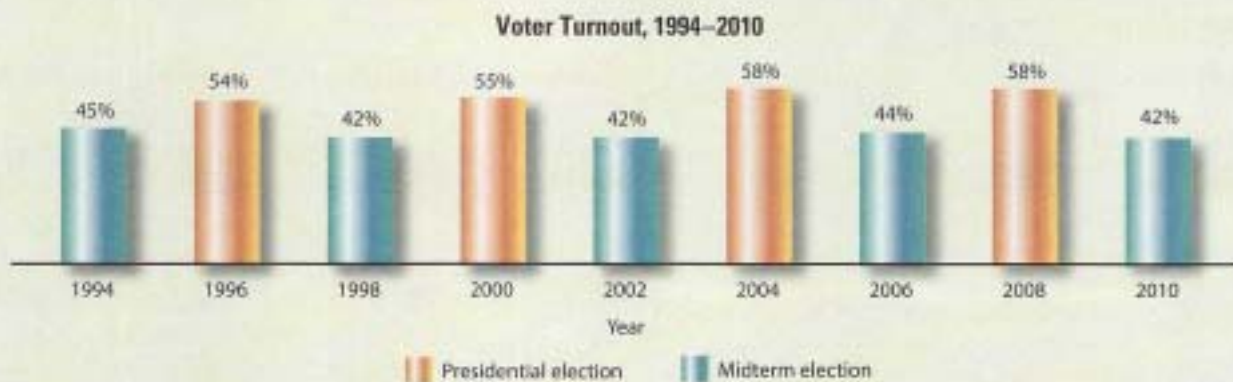
Type of Election	Who Gets Elected
<b>Presidential Election</b> Occurs every four years in even-numbered years	President and vice president One-third of the Senate All members of the House Some state and local officials
<b>Midterm Election</b> Occurs in even-numbered years between presidential elections	One-third of the Senate All members of the House Most state governors Some state and local officials
<b>Off-Year Election</b> Occurs in odd-numbered years	County supervisors City mayors City councils Most boards of special districts

middle should be done in a way that does not upset or alienate the party base.

Democrat John Kerry faced this delicate balancing act during the 2004 election. During the primary season, Kerry presented himself to party voters as an ardent critic of the war in Iraq. He did this, in part, to drain support away from his Democratic opponent, Howard Dean. Dean's strong antiwar views had fired up the party base.

### Voting in General Elections

Voter turnout tends to be lower in midterm elections than in presidential elections, as the graph below indicates. Turnout in off-year elections is usually lower still.



Once Kerry had won the nomination, however, he began moving to the middle. In the run-up to the general election, he tried to soften his antiwar message to win more support from moderate and independent voters. However, his efforts backfired when his Republican opponent, George W. Bush, accused him of being a “flip-flopper” on the war issue. Kerry stuck to his more centrist position for the rest of the campaign, but he lost the election to Bush.

### Issues Versus Image: Stump Speeches, Photo Ops, and Televised Debates

In the weeks leading up to the general election, candidates continue to hone their message and polish their image for voters. They spend increased time on the campaign trail, making public appearances and giving variations of their standard **stump speech**. This term harkens back to the days when candidates would stand on a tree stump to deliver their speeches.

During these final weeks, candidates make every effort to remain in the public eye. One way to do this is to stage photo opportunities, or photo ops, for the media. The hope is that pictures of the event will appear on the nightly news and in the next morning’s newspaper.



Politicians often use photo ops to portray themselves in a positive light. Here, Republican candidate Rick Perry poses with a young boy while campaigning for the Iowa caucus in 2012. Photographs like this one depict candidates as friendly, family-oriented people.

For congressional candidates, a favorite photo op involves joint appearances with the president or with their party’s presidential nominee. The candidate hopes that being seen in public with such a powerful figure will give his or her campaign an extra boost. This boost, known as the **coattail effect**, may help a struggling candidate ride into office on the “coattails” of the next president.

The coattail effect does not always work as hoped. In 1992, Democrat Bill Clinton won the presidential election, but his coattails were too short to help fellow party members. The Democrats lost ten seats in Congress that year. Four years later, however, Clinton won reelection with longer coattails. In the 1996 election, the Democrats won eight seats in Congress. The coattail effect remains unpredictable, working for some candidates in some campaigns while having little effect in others.

Another way for candidates to boost their exposure is to take part in televised debates. In presidential elections, these debates offer many voters their first opportunity to see and hear the candidates discuss the issues in any depth. However, the image that candidates project in debates may be just as important as what they have to say. A candidate who is attractive, well-spoken, and relaxed during a debate will probably fare better than one who appears stiff and ill at ease on screen.

The impact of televised debates on voters is hard to assess. What candidates do in debates may sway some voters, while simply confirming for others the choice they have already made. Nonetheless, candidates prepare carefully for these televised events, knowing that even though a good performance may not win them that many votes, a poor showing could lose them the election.

### Getting Out the Vote

In the last days before the election, campaign workers focus on getting out the vote. This means making sure that all voters who are likely to support their candidate actually cast their ballots.

In the past, almost all votes were cast at a designated **polling place** within each precinct. Today, the majority of Americans still go to the polls to vote on Election Day. However, a growing number of voters now cast **absentee ballots**, or mail-in ballots that voters can use instead of going to the polls. Since 2000, for example,

the state of Oregon has conducted all of its elections by mail. A few states also allow early voting at designated voting places in the month before Election Day.

Campaign organizations use various tactics to get out the vote before and on Election Day. Before the election, volunteers talk with voters by phone or by walking through precincts and ringing doorbells to find out who is likely to support their candidate. On Election Day, they set up phone banks staffed by volunteers who call supporters and urge them to vote. The organizations may also offer free rides to voters who have no other way of getting to the polls.

Campaigns may also send **poll watchers** to polling places on Election Day. Poll watchers are volunteers who monitor the voting process. Their main job is to prevent voter fraud or efforts to intimidate voters. Poll watchers may also observe the tallying of ballots to ensure that all votes are properly counted.

Because most voting regulations are set by states and counties, voting methods and types of ballots have varied from one community to the next. In the past, most voters used some form of paper ballots or lever-controlled voting machines. Some paper ballots are relatively easy to use and count, while others are not. The infamous butterfly ballot used in Florida in the 2000 general election confused many voters. As a result, many voted for the wrong candidate by mistake.

Florida also had trouble with punch-card ballots in the 2000 election. Voters mark these ballots by punching out small bits of paper, called chads, beside their choices. Sometimes, however, the chad does not fully detach from the ballot. These "hanging chads" make it almost impossible for the machines used to count ballots to complete an accurate tally. Every time such ballots are fed through the vote-counting machine, it comes up with a different count.

Florida was not alone in having problems. Across the country in the 2000 elections, almost 2 million votes were not properly counted by vote-counting machines. To solve this problem, Congress enacted the Help America Vote Act of 2002. The goal of this act is to help states replace their old voting machines and punch-card ballots with more accurate voting technology, such as optical scanners and touch-screen machines. Progress, however, has been slow, in part because of questions raised about the accuracy and reliability of the newer electronic voting systems.



In Columbus, Ohio, these voters are using an electronic voting machine during an election. However, each voting method has some risk involved. Electronic voting, for example, is susceptible to technological "glitches" or malfunctions.

### Who Wins?

Once the votes are counted, the winners are declared. In most presidential elections, the winner receives a majority of the popular vote. That was the case in 2004, when George W. Bush received 51 percent of the votes cast.

When three or more candidates are competing, the winner sometimes receives less than 50 percent of the vote. This occurred in both the 1992 and the 1996 elections, when Bill Clinton won the presidency with 43 percent and 49 percent of the popular vote, respectively. In both cases, a third-party candidate, Ross Perot, captured enough votes to prevent either of the major party candidates from winning a majority.

Our nation's winner-take-all system has a major effect on presidential elections. In most states, the candidate winning the popular vote captures all of that state's Electoral College votes. Nebraska and Maine, however, use a different system. They allot Electoral College votes based on the popular vote in each of the states' congressional districts.

Critics point out that the Electoral College system encourages candidates to focus on populous states with the largest number of electors. In theory, a candidate can win the presidency by capturing the 11 largest states and losing the other 39.

In general, candidates pay the most attention to a few **battleground states**, where the vote is likely to be close, and ignore states where the outcome is

more predictable. For example, a Republican presidential candidate can expect to win Texas and other conservative southern states. Similarly, a Democratic candidate can expect to win Massachusetts and other liberal New England states. For that reason, both sides target states such as Ohio, Florida, and New Mexico, which can be won by either candidate.

Our winner-take-all-system tends to reinforce the nation's two-party system. Most public offices go to candidates of the two major parties because one or the other is likely to win the popular vote. Third parties, which usually have a narrower appeal, have much less hope of winning seats in Congress or state legislatures. Although the winner-take-all system promotes stability in government, it tends to exclude less-mainstream candidates from public office.

In contrast, many European democracies have adopted a **proportional representation** system. In these countries, citizens usually vote for parties rather than for individual candidates. A party wins seats in parliament based on its proportion of the popular vote. For example, if a party wins one-third of the vote in an election, it is awarded approximately one-third of the seats in parliament. Proportional representation thus gives smaller parties a chance to take part in government.

## The Electoral College Debate

As important as the popular vote may seem, it is the Electoral College vote that decides presidential elections. The framers of the Constitution devised the Electoral College system because they did not trust voters who were spread out over 13 states to choose the head of the executive branch. Instead, they gave that responsibility to a group of electors who might better know who was best suited for that job.

At first, each state legislature chose its own electors. In 1789, all 69 electors who had been chosen this way cast their ballots for George Washington as president. A majority cast their votes for John Adams as vice president. After 1800, states began allowing voters to choose electors. When you vote for president in the next election, you will actually be voting for electors who have promised to support your candidate.

The number of electors from each state equals the number of that state's representatives in Congress. For example, Virginia has 2 senators and 11 House members, giving it a total of 13 electoral votes. Washington, D.C., has 3 electoral votes. There are 538 electors in all, which means that a candidate must win at least 270 electoral votes to become president. If no candidate wins a majority of elec-

## States Up for Grabs

This map highlights the nine battleground states targeted by both major candidates in the 2012 presidential election. These states are so evenly divided between Democratic and Republican voters that they could swing either way, thereby adding crucial electoral votes to the winner's tally. Presidential campaigns spend far more time and money in battleground states than in states that already appear committed to one candidate or the other.

Battleground States, 2012



Source: CNN News, as of November 2012.

toral votes, the House of Representatives selects the president, with each state casting one vote.

Not surprisingly, the Electoral College system has provoked controversy over the years. The chief criticism is that it is undemocratic. Critics point to three elections in U.S. history—in 1876, 1888, and 2000—in which the candidate who won the popular vote failed to win the Electoral College. The most recent example was Al Gore's loss to George W. Bush in 2000.

For years, critics have called for a reform of the Electoral College. Most advocate electing the president by direct popular vote. This change would require a constitutional amendment.

However, many Americans also support the Electoral College system. Some states, especially smaller ones, fear that a reform would reduce their influence in presidential elections. Under the popular vote system, candidates might be motivated to only campaign in large states.

An alternative option is the congressional district method. Under this method, now used in Maine and Nebraska, the candidate who wins the popular vote in each congressional district gets that district's electoral vote. The overall winner in the state receives the two additional electoral votes that represent the state's senators. The consequence of this method is that if it was widespread, candidates might only focus on campaigning in specific districts rather than in entire states.

Another option is the national popular vote. Under this plan, states would cast their electoral votes for the winner of the national popular vote. This change can be implemented by state legislatures, thereby avoiding the need for a constitutional amendment. In 2007, Maryland became the first state to adopt this Electoral College reform. The reform will not go into effect, however, unless approved by enough states to constitute a majority of the Electoral College vote. Critics claim that there is little benefit to this method and argue that it diminishes federalism since it reduces the states' role in elections.

## 10.5 Financing Election Campaigns

In the United States today, elections are centered more on candidates than on political parties. This



Many Americans find the Electoral College system confusing at best—and at worst, undemocratic. Some would like to replace it with a system based on the popular vote. However, many highlight the benefits of this system, such as protecting the interests of smaller states and less populated areas.

was not always the case. At one time, candidates relied heavily on their parties to help them win elections. Today, however, candidates behave more like independent political actors than party representatives. They depend mainly on their own political skills and the efforts of their campaign organizations to get elected.

### The High Cost of Running for Office

Money has played a large part in this shift from party-centered to candidate-centered elections. As campaigns have grown more expensive, candidates have come to rely increasingly on their own fundraising abilities or personal fortunes to win public office. For example, about \$6 billion was spent on the 2012 presidential election campaigns. On average, winning candidates for a seat in the House of Representatives spent \$1.5 million each. Winners of each Senate seat spent an average of \$9.7 million. In future elections, the cost will likely be even higher.

The high cost of running for office is a concern for various reasons. Candidates with limited resources



American election campaigns center on candidates rather than on parties. Note the absence of party names on these campaign posters. In many other countries, the party affiliations of candidates play a much larger role in campaigns.



may find it hard to compete with those who are well funded. This lack of a level playing field inevitably excludes some people from running for office. In addition, officeholders must spend considerable time and energy building up their war chests for the next race, rather than focusing on the work of governing.

The main issue, however, is whether campaign contributions corrupt elected officials. When candidates win public office, do they use their positions to benefit big campaign donors? In other words, do politicians always “dance with the ones who bring them,” as the old saying goes? Lawmakers generally say no, but the public is not so sure.

### Two Strategies Guide Campaign Donations

Political scientists have observed that individuals and groups donating to campaigns choose from two basic strategies. The first is the electoral strategy. Donors that follow this strategy use their money to help elect candidates who support their views and to defeat those who do not. The goal is to increase the likelihood that Congress, their state legislature, or their city council will vote as the donor wishes it would vote.

The second is the access strategy. Donors following this approach give money to the most likely winner in a race, regardless of party. If the race looks close, the donor might even contribute to both campaigns. The goal is to gain access to whichever party wins the election. Donors using this strategy expect to be able to meet with the official they supported and present their views on issues of interest to them.

Political scientist Michael Smith points out that neither strategy involves trading money for a prom-

ise to vote a certain way on a piece of legislation. Indeed, offering money for votes is considered bribery and is clearly illegal. Donors found guilty of offering bribes—and lawmakers found guilty of accepting them—face prison sentences, not to mention ruined careers.

There have been well-publicized examples of such corruption. Nonetheless, political scientists find that most elected officials act according to their political principles, no matter who donates to their campaigns. Donors who make large contributions to campaigns might enjoy greater access to officeholders. But that access may or may not translate into influence over the actions of those officials.

### Where Campaign Money Comes From

Almost all of the money used to fund election campaigns comes from private sources. A few wealthy candidates have been able to fund some or all of their campaigns from their own assets. In 2010, for example, Linda McMahon of Connecticut spent \$50 million of her own money on an unsuccessful bid for a seat in the U.S. Senate. The great majority of candidates, however, must reach out to their supporters for funding.

Most campaign funds come from individual citizens. These donations are often raised through direct-mail or Internet fundraising campaigns. And they are typically fairly small, in the \$25 to \$100 range. Candidates also host fundraisers to raise money from large donors. In 2011–2012, the amount of money an individual could donate to a single candidate was limited by law to \$2,500 for the primary campaign and another \$2,500 for the gen-



Public funds come with a catch. Candidates who receive public money must agree to limit their campaign spending. As a result, politicians are often hesitant about accepting public funds.

The future of public funding for presidential elections looks uncertain for two reasons. One is a drop-off in taxpayer donations for this purpose. The other is a growing reluctance among presidential hopefuls to accept public funds and to limit their campaign spending.

### Reining in Soft Money and Issue Ads

In 1974, Congress created the Federal Election Commission to enforce laws that limit campaign contributions. The FEC requires candidates to keep accurate records of donations to their campaigns and to make those records available to the public. This public disclosure allows voters to see the names of all donors who contribute \$200 or more to any candidate running for office.

Some Americans question if campaign contributions give some individuals and groups more influence than others. Research has failed to prove that members of Congress sell their votes in exchange for campaign contributions. However, despite this lack of evidence, the potential influence of campaign contributions has led to some regulation.

Despite FEC oversight, campaign spending spiraled upward during the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the money came from interest groups who had found loop-holes in existing campaign finance laws. Calls for reform led to the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002, also known as the McCain-Feingold Act.

The new law attempted to solve two problems. The first was the use of **soft money** to fund election campaigns. Soft money is unregulated money donated to a political party for such purposes as voter education. In theory, soft money was not to be used to support campaigns. For this reason, it was not limited by campaign funding laws. In practice, however, parties used soft money to help candidates fund their election bids, thus boosting campaign spending.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act bans the use of soft money in individual election campaigns. It also limits how much soft money an individual can contribute to a party. Furthermore, parties can use soft money only to encourage voter registration and voter turnout.

The second problem was the use of **issue ads** in campaigns. Issue ads are political ads that are funded and produced by interest groups rather than by election campaigns. In theory, these ads focus on issues rather than on candidates. Thus, like soft money, they were not regulated by campaign finance laws. In practice, however, many issue ads were barely disguised campaign ads. For example, such an ad might discuss a pollution problem and then suggest that "Bill Jones," a lawmaker up for reelection, is "a friend of polluters." Even though the ad did not say, "Vote against Bill Jones," its intention would be to influence how voters viewed the lawmaker.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act bans the broadcast of such thinly disguised campaign ads in the 60 days leading up to an election. This part of the law has been challenged in court, however, by groups that see the ban as an unconstitutional limit on their First Amendment right to free speech. In 2007, the Supreme Court ruled in *Federal Election Commission v. Wisconsin Right to Life* that such ads could be banned "only if the ad is susceptible of no reasonable interpretation other than as an appeal to vote for or against a specific candidate."

Finally, the act contains a "stand by your ad" rule that requires candidates to take responsibility for their campaign commercials. Beginning in the 2004 elections, candidates were required to appear in their own ads and explicitly endorse the content.

One side effect of the reform act has been the growth of groups known as **527 committees**. These organizations are formed under Section 527 of the tax code. Because they are not tied to a political party or candidate, they are allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts to support or oppose candidates. In effect, 527 committees and their donors have found a loophole that allows the continued use of unregulated soft money in political campaigns. As Senator John McCain, one of the sponsors of the 2002 reform law, pointed out, "Money, like water, will look for ways to leak back into the system."

Super PACs have also emerged as significant backers of political candidates. Unlike PACs, Super PACs may accept unlimited donations for political spending. However, they cannot coordinate with candidates or directly fund campaigns.

In 2010, two federal court cases paved the way for Super PACs. The first was *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. In 2008, Citizens United, a conservative group, created a documentary of democratic candidate Hillary Clinton after FEC advertised a documentary that criticized the Bush Administration. FEC prevented Citizens United from running ads promoting the film in 2009. The case came to the Supreme Court that same year. In 2010, the Court held that under the First Amendment, the Government cannot limit corporate political spending in candidate elections.

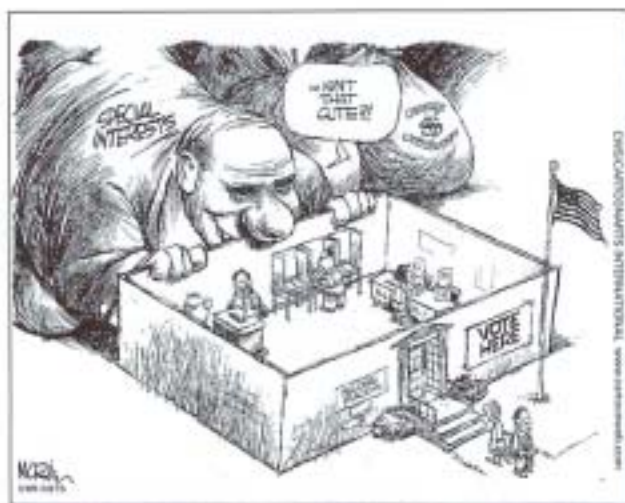
The second case is *Speechnow.org v. FEC*. The 527 committee Speechnow gathered funds from individuals, not corporations, to endorse the election or defeat of federal candidates. In 2007, FEC informed Speechnow that it must register as a PAC if within one year it raised or spent over \$1,000 for federal elections. As a result, Speechnow and other individuals disputed the constitutionality of the FEC Act. They argued that by requiring a group to register as a PAC and limiting the amount an individual could donate to a PAC, it violated a person's freedom of speech. The case reached the U.S. Court of Appeals. In 2010, the court ruled that the government cannot limit contributions of groups that do not directly contribute to candidates.

## 10.6 Voter Behavior

Elections are important in a democracy. They allow citizens to participate in government. They also serve to check the power of elected officials. When voters go to the polls, they hold officials accountable for their actions. In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison observed that elections compel leaders

*to anticipate the moment when their power is to cease, when their exercise of it is to be reviewed, and when they must descend to the level from which they were raised; there forever to remain unless a faithful discharge of their trust shall have established their title to a renewal of it.*

—James Madison,  
*The Federalist* No. 57, 1788



Many people believe that major donors to campaigns have too much influence in U.S. politics. Campaign finance laws have had some success in limiting special interest donations to candidates. In addition, Americans can still vote leaders out of office if the leaders do a poor job.

Elections are one of the things that distinguish a democracy from a dictatorship. Nevertheless, many Americans do not vote.

### Who Does and Does Not Vote

In any given election, as many as two-thirds of all Americans who could vote do not do so. When asked, nonvoters offer a number of reasons for not going to the polls. Many say they are just too busy. Others cite illness or lack of interest. Political scientists who study voting point to three differences between voters and nonvoters: age, education, and income.

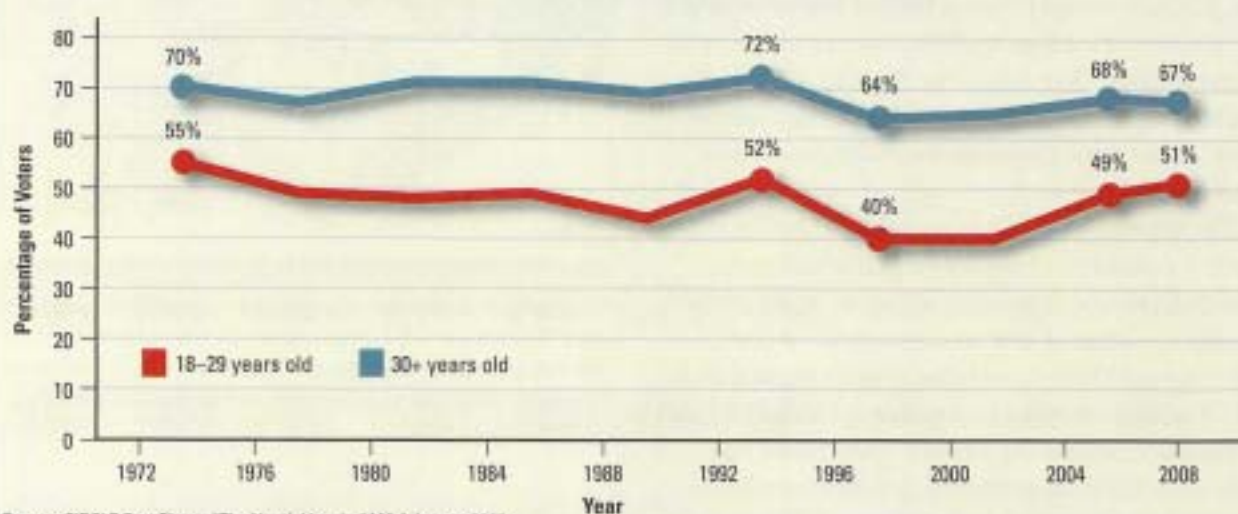
**Age.** The percentage of people voting varies among different age groups. Most voters are over the age of 30, and voting tends to increase with age. Once voters reach 75, however, turnout begins to decline, mostly due to ill health. The younger a person is, the less likely he or she is to vote. In the 2008 presidential election, slightly under half of all those in the 18 to 24 age group went to the polls. In contrast, over 72 percent of those in the 64 to 75 age group voted that year.

**Education.** Voting also varies by level of education. Americans with college educations vote in much higher numbers than do high school dropouts. Over three-fourths of all eligible voters with Bachelor's degrees voted in 2008. Less than one-third of

## Voting Rates of Older and Younger Americans

Young adults do not vote at the rate that older Americans do. The result may be an age bias among lawmakers, who are more responsive to the voters who elected them.

Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1972–2008



Source: CIRCLE Fact Sheet, "The Youth Vote in 2008," August 2008.

those who left high school without graduating cast ballots.

**Income.** Voting also varies with income group. Middle-class and wealthy Americans are much more likely to vote than are those living in poverty. This difference may, in part, reflect the fact that income and education are closely intertwined. However, there may be other barriers to voting among the poor. People working at low-wage jobs, for example, may find it difficult to get time off work or to find transportation to the polls on Election Day.

### How Voters Choose Among Candidates

When deciding how to vote, Americans tend to look at three things: the candidate's party affiliation, the candidate's position on issues raised in the campaign, and the candidate's characteristics.

**Party affiliation.** The party a candidate belongs to is the most critical factor that voters consider when choosing who to vote for. Most Americans still align themselves with a party and vote for its candidates. This is particularly true when voters are not familiar with the candidates' views or experience.

**Issues.** The issues raised in a campaign are a

second factor that voters consider when evaluating candidates. This is particularly true of independent or **swing voters**, who do not have a strong party affiliation. These voters tend to look for candidates who hold positions on the issues that are similar to their own positions.

**Candidate characteristics.** Voters also choose candidates based on the candidate's personal characteristics. These characteristics can be superficial, such as the candidate's image or appearance. Voters may be drawn to candidates who seem friendly, trustworthy, or "presidential." A candidate's characteristics also include his or her skills and experience. For example, a candidate might have a long record of public service that gives voters confidence in that person's ability to govern.

This last point touches on another important factor for many voters: whether a candidate is an **incumbent** already holding office. Unless incumbents have performed poorly, voters tend to regard them as more reliable and experienced than their opponents. As a result, voters are much more likely to vote for an incumbent over an untested challenger.

## Is Nonvoting a Serious Problem?

Obviously, it is desirable for citizens in a democracy to participate in elections. But how serious a problem is nonvoting? Does nonvoting behavior mean that people have lost hope in their ability to make a difference? Political scientists present two opposing views on these questions.

One view is that nonvoting has negative effects on American society. When groups, such as poorer or younger Americans, do not vote, they are effectively denied representation in government. This situation can set up a vicious cycle in which certain people do not vote because government does not serve their needs, and government does not serve their needs because those people do not vote.

Another, more positive view is that nonvoting represents a basic level of satisfaction among the population. According to this theory, many people do not vote because they are happy with the way things are. If they were not, they would make the effort to vote.

## Why Don't People Vote?

### Reasons for Not Voting

Too busy, conflicting schedule	17.5%
Illness or disability (own or family's)	14.9%
Not interested	13.4%
Did not like candidates or campaign issues	12.9%
Out of town	8.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008.

The U.S. Census Bureau surveys nonvoters after each election to find out why they did not vote. This table shows some of the reasons offered for not voting in the 2008 election.

## Summary

Elections play a major role in American politics. We have more elections and elected officials than most other democracies. At the same time, the electoral process is complicated and expensive, and many voters do not participate.

**Suffrage** Early in our nation's history, suffrage was limited to white males. As a result of laws and constitutional amendments, almost all citizens 18 and older now enjoy the right to vote.

**Primaries and caucuses** Most candidates for public office must first win the nomination of their party. To do so, they compete in primary elections and caucuses for the support of party members.

**General elections** The nominees of each party face each other in general elections. There are three types of general elections: presidential, midterm, and off-year.

**Campaign finance** Money is a key factor in elections. Congress set up the Federal Election Commission to regulate fundraising and spending by candidates in federal elections. Nonetheless, the amount of money raised for and spent on elections continues to rise.

**Voter behavior** Voting varies with age, education, and income. Voters make choices based on party, issues, and candidate characteristics. Experts differ on whether nonvoting represents a serious problem or reflects a level of satisfaction with U.S. politics.

## Should voting be voluntary?

Whether or not you agree that low voter turnout is a serious problem, it seems clear that our government would be more representative if more people voted. Low turnout is especially common among younger voters. Would you be more likely to turn out to vote if voting were no longer voluntary? Or if you might be fined or even jailed for not voting? Think about this as you read about other countries that have transformed voting from a civic responsibility to a legal duty.

## Compulsory Voting

by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

Most democratic governments consider participating in national elections a right of citizenship. Some consider that participation at elections is also a citizen's civic responsibility. In some countries, where voting is considered a duty, voting at elections has been made compulsory and has been regulated in the national constitutions and electoral laws. Some countries go as far as to impose sanctions on nonvoters.

Compulsory voting is not a new concept. Some of the first countries that introduced mandatory voting laws were Belgium in 1892, Argentina in 1914, and Australia in 1924. There are also examples of countries such as Venezuela and the Netherlands, which at one time in their history practiced compulsory voting but have since abolished it.

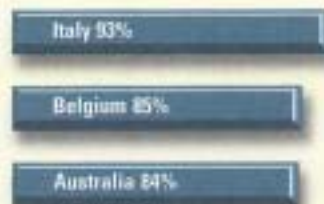
### Arguments for Compulsory Voting

Advocates of compulsory voting argue that decisions made by democratically elected governments are more legitimate when higher proportions of the popu-

lation participate. They argue further that voting, voluntarily or otherwise, has an educational effect upon the citizens. Political parties can derive financial benefits from compulsory voting, since they do not have to spend resources convincing the electorate that it should in general turn out to vote. Lastly, if democracy is government by the people, presumably this includes all people. Then it is every citizen's responsibility to elect their representatives.

### Average Voter Turnout in Selected Countries

#### Compulsory voting

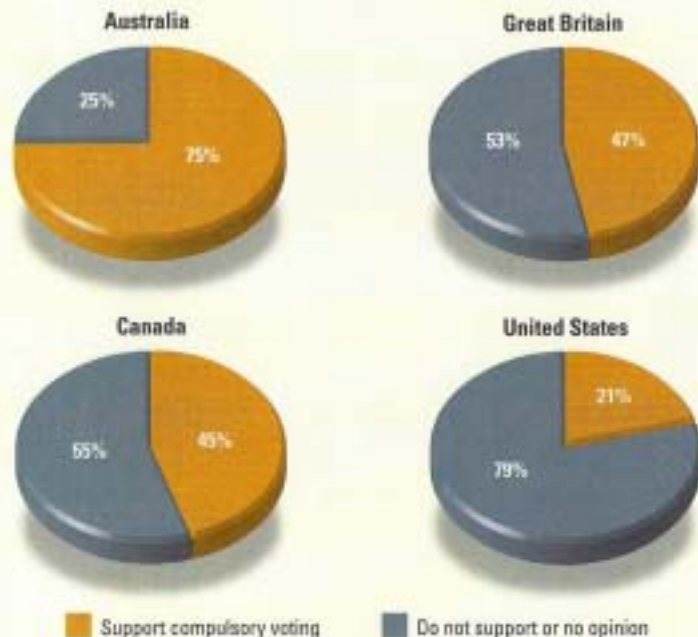


#### Noncompulsory voting



### Views on Compulsory Voting

Support for compulsory voting varies from country to country. It is high in Australia, where voting has been compulsory for almost a century. It is lower in other democracies where voting has always been voluntary. When asked in 2004 whether they would support a law requiring citizens to vote in national elections, only about one American in five answered yes. When compulsory voting was discussed at the National Commission on Federal Election Reform, former U.S. attorney general Griffin Bell summed up the sentiment of many Americans when he said, "This is not a free country when you are doing things like that."



Source: Martin P. Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?*, New York: Pearson Education, 2007. Attributed to 2004 Australian Election Study, 2001 MORI survey for UK Electoral Commission, Elections Canada 2002 survey, and June 2004 ABC News survey.

### Arguments Against Compulsory Voting

The leading argument against compulsory voting is that it is not consistent with the freedom associated with democracy. Voting is not an intrinsic obligation, and the enforcement of the law would be an infringement of the citizens' freedom . . . [Compulsory voting] may discourage the political education of the electorate because people forced to participate will react against the perceived source of oppression.

Is a government really more legitimate if the high voter

turnout is against the will of the voters? Many countries with limited financial capacity may not be able to justify the expenditures of maintaining and enforcing compulsory voting laws. It has been proved that forcing the population to vote results in an increased number of invalid and blank votes compared to countries that have no compulsory voting laws.

Another consequence of mandatory voting is the possible high number of "random votes." Voters who are voting against their free will may check off a candidate at random, particu-

larly the top candidate on the ballot. The voter does not care whom they vote for as long as the government is satisfied that they fulfilled their civic duty. What effect does this unmeasurable category of random votes have on the legitimacy of the democratically elected government? . . .

*The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance is an intergovernmental organization based in Sweden. Its objective is to strengthen democratic institutions and processes around the world.*