

Campaigns and Elections Summary

Political campaigns in the United States last much longer than in other countries, and are far more expensive, as well. Critics point out that the amount of campaigning that is required to remain in office has a negative impact on governing. Politicians are less likely to make difficult votes, attempt to solve controversial problems, or think long-term.

There are two types of campaigns, one for the party nomination and one for elected office. The **nomination campaign** concludes with the **primary election**, and the **election campaign** concludes with the **general election**. Success in the nomination campaign requires lots of money, media attention, and support from voters. The “**invisible primary**” is the process of securing enough support to run in the primary. A candidate needs to know beforehand that they will have money and support from those who already hold elected office. Senators and governors will pledge their support to boost the candidacy of their preferred candidate.

Campaign strategy is the way a candidate communicates their policy positions and achieves their party’s nomination. In regards to the presidency, the **national party convention** officially nominates the candidate and writes the **party platform**. The presidential candidate is officially selected by the party’s **delegates**. The delegates used to be selected by party bosses and elected officials, which made the selection of presidential nominees an elite activity. The **McGovern-Fraser Commission** proposed reforms in how delegates were chosen, which made the selection process open to everyone. Delegates were chosen by the people, and effectively voted at the national party convention according to the popular vote in their state or district. **Super-delegates** are delegates who automatically receive their position due to the fact that they hold public office or have a high-ranking position within the party organization. If two candidates are close in the primary election, super-delegates could decide the winner. Delegates to the national party convention are won in **caucuses** and **popular votes** from January to June. **Iowa** is the first caucus, and **New Hampshire** is the first popular vote. A caucus is an actual meeting of voters to pledge their support for their candidate. Democrats require states to allocate delegates proportionally. Republicans allow states to allocate delegates in three ways: winner-take-all states, winner-take-all districts, or proportional.

In a presidential election, once the voters have cast their ballots, it is the Electoral College that actually decides the winner of the election. The **Electoral College** is a unique American institution, created by the Constitution. Many political scientists and most voters oppose the continued use of it because it is undemocratic. Since the election of 1828, the vote of members of the Electoral College has been responsive to popular majorities. Today the electors almost always vote for the candidate who won their state’s popular vote. States have as many electoral votes as it has U.S. senators and representatives. The process is undemocratic because smaller states are overrepresented. As a result of the winner-take-all system, candidates spend most of their time trying to win a small number of **battleground states**, those states where either candidate could win. The states that are perceived to be “safe” for either Republicans or Democrats do not receive any attention, and their voters do not really matter (especially those in the minority party).

Abolishing the Electoral College and creating **direct election** of the president via the **national popular vote** would change the incentives for presidential campaigns. Candidates would no longer confine their efforts to just a relatively small number of battleground states and would instead campaign everywhere for every vote they could get because each vote would be equal. Direct election of the president would promote **political equality** because a Democratic vote in Texas (safe Republican state) would count just as much as a Democratic vote in Florida (battleground state). Voter turnout would most likely increase because the parties would have an

incentive to organize in each state. Critics of direct election argue that it would result in urban areas receiving more attention than rural areas.

George W. Bush won the 2000 election despite the fact that over 500,000 more Americans voted for Al Gore. The election was decided in Florida, where Bush won the state's popular vote by only 537 votes. Due to the **winner-take-all system**, Bush then received all 25 of Florida's electoral votes to defeat Gore 271 to 266. If Florida had allocated its electoral votes based on congressional districts, Gore would have won with 8 of the 25 electoral votes. The 2000 election led to a renewed debate about the Electoral College. Two basic questions can be asked about the 2000 election: 1) Why should Bush have won when he received less votes? 2) Why should Bush receive all 25 of Florida's electoral votes when he only won the state by 537 votes? It is a fact that the Electoral College is undemocratic, but tradition is a powerful force and we have not decided to change how presidential elections work.

Political commentators and political scientists criticize the primary campaign process by arguing that the early states such as Iowa and New Hampshire have a disproportionate amount of influence over the nomination process. The participation in primary elections and caucuses is very low, and large sums of money from a small number of donors can effectively dominate the process. Critics also argue that the media has too much control over the primary campaign process by its ability to shape the public's perception of the candidates. Perhaps most importantly, some argue that the constant campaigning conflicts with the responsibility that elected officials have to govern. The Internet has enabled candidates to more effectively communicate and fundraise. Supporters can easily access the candidate's policy positions and donate money through the candidate's website.

Campaign contributions are important because television ads account for at least half of the campaign's budget. The role of the Internet and television has made campaigns very image-based and at times superficial. The media tends to cover the details and drama of the campaign itself, called the **"horse race"**, rather than the policy issues and the policy positions of the candidates. Between the media's coverage of the campaign's superficial aspects and the fact that the campaign itself may present the candidate in a superficial manner, it can be difficult for voters to know what the candidate's positions are on important issues or what issues really matter.

Campaign Finance

Contributions can be made in two ways: 1) campaign contributions to the candidate's campaign or to the political party itself; 2) donations to groups such as political action committees (PACs) that make independent expenditures to express political views independent of the actual campaigns.

In the early 1970s, campaign finance reform began when Congress passed the **Federal Election Campaign Act** (1974), which required campaigns to disclose who had contributed to their campaign, and how the contributions had been spent. The reform opened campaign finance to public scrutiny. The reform also instituted limits on campaign contributions for the first time. Congress limited individual contributions to presidential and congressional candidates to \$1,000 per person after public outrage that some wealthy individuals had contributed \$1 million to Nixon's 1972 campaign. *The assumption, at the time, was that wealthy individuals were having a disproportionate influence on candidates due to their disproportionate contributions.* The **McCain-Feingold Act** (2002) later increased the limit to \$2,600 per person. The reform limited individual contributions to PACs to \$5,000 per year, and limited the amount of money a PAC could contribute to a campaign to \$5,000 each election.

The Federal Election Campaign Act also created the **Federal Election Commission (FEC)**. Individual donations to a campaign or political party must be reported to the Federal Election Commission. PACs must register with the FEC and report their donations, as well. The reform also created mechanisms for the **public financing** of presidential campaigns, but contributing to the fund is *optional* and only 7 percent of taxpayers contribute to the fund. However, if candidates take public money they have to agree to overall spending limits for their campaign, and presidential candidates do not want to be limited in how much money they can spend.

In 1976, in *Buckley v. Valeo*, the Supreme Court ruled that individuals could not be limited in how much money they contributed to their own campaigns. This ruling enabled wealthy individuals to finance their own campaigns. This ruling introduced the precedent that money is speech. Presidential candidates such as Ross Perot (\$60 million) and Mitt Romney (\$44 million) have taken advantage of the ruling by contributing significantly to their own campaigns. In 1979, an amendment to the original 1974 legislation made it easier for political parties to raise money by removing the contribution limits on **soft money** donations, money that was used for party organizing and advertising. The result was a sharp increase in the amount of money donated to the national party organizations, reaching a peak in the 2000 election. **The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (McCain-Feingold Act) of 2002** limited the amount of soft money that could be donated at \$32,400. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled in *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* (yes, that McConnell, the new majority leader in the Senate, who was *opposed* to the McCain-Feingold Act), that the new restrictions on soft money were *justified* by the government's *legitimate* interest in preventing actual and perceived corruption.

After the Supreme Court upheld the McCain-Feingold Act, individuals who wanted to spend big money found a loophole through **independent political expenditures**. The authors of the McCain-Feingold Act intended to remove big money from politics, but wealthy individuals on both sides of the political spectrum soon found that they could make unlimited contributions to what are known as **527 groups**. A 527 is created specifically for the purpose of political advocacy (campaigns) and exists to influence elections. The Federal Election Commission declined to subject 527 groups to contribution restrictions as long as their political messages did not make explicit endorsements of candidates. In the 2004 election, 527 groups such as the anti-Kerry group **Swift Boat Veterans for Truth** and the anti-Bush group **MoveOn.org** received significant amounts of money from individuals who previously would have made soft money contributions. Both groups ran extremely negative ads that many argue poisoned the political environment. Some restrictions on 527s did exist. For example, corporations and unions could not finance political advertisements through 527s in the last 60 days of a campaign. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, that this was an unconstitutional restriction of free speech. What the ruling effectively did was further enable corporations and unions to donate as much money as they wanted to 527s in order to influence elections.

After the *Citizens United* ruling, independent expenditures (donations) to **501c (4) groups** increased. A 501c (4) is a non-profit group that can spend up to half of its revenue on political advocacy. A 501c (4) is not required to disclose where their money comes from or how it was spent, whereas 527s have to report to the FEC. In what seemed to many to be a reversal of the Court's view in 2003, the *Citizens United* decision stated that independent political expenditures do not lead to, or create the appearance of, *quid pro quo* corruption. Thus, unlimited contributions to 501c (4) groups are protected as free speech. Whereas previous PACs made contributions to campaigns and were limited in how much they could donate, PACs that only express their views *independent* of any campaign can now spend as much money as they want. These independent-expenditure only PACs are called **Super PACs**. In 2012, Super PACs made that year's

presidential election the most expensive in American history. The 2014 midterm election was the most expensive congressional election in American history. Wealthy individuals who could only donate \$2,500 to a candidate's campaign could donate millions of dollars to a Super PAC that would run TV ads on behalf of that same candidate. Super PACs are controversial; some people see them as a vehicle for freedom of expression and as a means to inform the public about political issues, while critics argue that wealthy individuals will be able to influence candidates more than the average voter. **Public financing** of federal campaigns has long been suggested as a possible solution to the problem, but it will be very difficult to get Congress to consent to equal financing for the people who will challenge them for their seats. Public financing would effectively undermine the incumbents fundraising advantage, but many argue that would not be such a bad thing.

Campaigns, Participation, and Voting

Traditional political participation (conventional) refers to a wide range of activities designed to influence government, politics, and policy. For most citizens, voting is the most common form of participation in politics. Other forms of traditional political participation include attending campaign events, political party meetings, volunteering for a campaign, contacting an elected official, contributing financially to a campaign, displaying political signs, writing letters to the editor, signing petitions, joining interest groups, or even running for office. The Internet has created a new form of political participation: digital participation. **Digital politics** has changed the way in which individuals participate by altering what it means to support a candidate or contribute to their campaign. Money can now be donated online, voters can communicate with candidates on their websites, and supporters can campaign for a candidate in a digital manner through social media such as Facebook and Twitter. **Non-traditional political participation (unconventional)** includes peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and violence. All three have been part of America's political history. The most common form of political participation is voting, which roughly 80% of the population has done. Only 25% have attended a political party meeting or signed a petition, 10% have donated money to a political campaign, 6% have attended a political rally or speech or participated in a protest or demonstration.

Arguably, voting is the most important form of participation. The right to vote, or **suffrage**, is a legal right. Historically, suffrage has been restricted to white males over the age of 21. States could further restrict the vote based on property qualifications, as well. The Framers gave the *state legislatures* the authority to regulate elections, a decision that would have profound long-term consequences. States used **poll taxes** (fees to vote) and **literacy tests** designed to prevent immigrants in the North and blacks in the South from voting. Voter eligibility requirements differed from state to state. Over time, suffrage was extended to previously excluded groups through the Fifteenth Amendment, Nineteenth Amendment, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Twenty-Sixth Amendment. Despite the gradual expansion of voting rights, America's actual rate of voting participation, or **turnout**, is generally low. The percentage of *eligible* voters (includes non-registered) that vote in presidential elections is typically 50% to 60%, while the percentage declines to 30% to 40% for midterm elections. There is hope that online participation will increase offline participation. In 2012, every major presidential candidate had a Facebook page, 61% of Americans obtained information about a candidate online, and 40% of Americans engaged in political activity using social media.

Campaigns have three effects on voters: **reinforcement**, **activation**, and **conversion**. Campaigns can *reinforce* voters' preferences for candidates; they can *activate* voters by getting them to volunteer for the campaign as opposed to merely voting; and they can *convert* by changing voters' minds. Research shows that campaigns mostly reinforce and activate; only rarely do they

convert. Campaigns have little impact because many people vote according to party identification, because the incumbent has significant advantages, and because people have a capacity for selective perception – paying attention to things they already agree with. In other words, most Democrats are going to vote for the Democratic candidate, the candidate challenging the incumbent will have difficulty getting their message to the voters, and most people do not approach the political process hoping to “learn something” or “change their mind” on issues. The amount of voters who are up for grabs is typically small and a campaign will often highlight **wedge issues** – issues on which the other party’s coalition is divided – in an attempt to draw new supporters from the other party.

One theme of American political history has been the gradual expansion of **suffrage** – the legal right to vote. Virtually everyone over the age of 18 now has the right to vote except noncitizens and convicted criminals. Interestingly, there is no federal requirement stating that voters must be citizens, and it was quite common in the 19th century for *immigrants to vote prior to attaining citizenship*. Currently, no states permit residents who are not citizens to vote. Ironically, as the right to vote has been extended, proportionately fewer of those eligible to vote have chosen to exercise that right. The highest electoral participation was 80% in the 1896 presidential election, while only 36% voted in the 2014 midterm election. Many people choose not to vote because it is time-consuming, which has led to early voting and the proposals to move Election Day to Saturday or to make it a national holiday, as in many other countries. Research shows that rational people vote if they believe that the policies of one party will bring more benefits than the policies of the other party. If an individual perceives that neither party will have a positive impact; nor that there is a difference between them, they may rationally choose to abstain. Many people vote because they have a sense of **political efficacy** – the belief that one’s vote makes a difference. Some people who lack political efficacy still choose to vote out of a sense of **civic duty**. They may not support either party very much, but they believe in democracy and vote in order to preserve it.

State voting laws can also impact turnout. Around 1900, states began adopting **voter registration** laws, which require individuals to first place their name on an electoral roll in order to be allowed to vote. America’s registration system is, in part, to blame for why Americans are significantly less likely to go to the polls than citizens of other democratic nations. The United States has a patchwork of registration rules that differ from state to state. In the United States, people are eligible to vote must **register** to vote before they can vote. In most countries citizens are automatically registered to vote. Registration procedures currently differ from state to state. Registration requirements particularly reduce voting by the young, those with less education, and the less affluent. The result of registration requirements is that the size of the electorate is smaller, better educated, more affluent, and composed of fewer young people and minorities. In some states voters can register on Election Day, but many states have detailed requirements and deadlines. The **Motor Voter Act of 1993** aimed to make voter registration easier by requiring states to allow eligible voters to register when they renewed or received their driver’s license.

The United States has one of the lowest voter turnout rates. One reason is that in America the *responsibility for voter registration lies solely with the individual*. In many other democracies, the government assumes the responsibility for making sure voters are eligible (imagine if you received a voter registration card in the mail without having to register). Another reason why Americans vote less is because the United States has a **two-party system** that restricts voter choice. In countries with parliamentary systems voters can choose from religious, conservative, liberal, socialist, environmentalist, and nationalist parties. However, the two-party system is not going anywhere and is a central aspect of our political system so we should not use it as an excuse for low turnout. A third reason why Americans vote less is because Election Day is mid-

week when most people are working. It seems highly unlikely that turnout would not increase if Election Day were on Saturday or made a national holiday. The question is whether everyone actually wants to increase voter turnout. Unfortunately, our political rhetoric and laws show evidence that some do not desire more political participation if it would hurt their party's chances to win the election. It seems uncontroversial to suggest that if you believe in democracy then you should want people to vote, and be able to vote without much difficulty. Turnout in the United States peaks at around 60% during presidential elections and falls to around 40% during midterm elections, while Australia has a consistent turnout of around 90%. How does Australia do it? They have **compulsory voting**. Individuals who are eligible to vote are required to do so by law, and if they do not vote they are fined.

While voter registration may be improving, the process of voting has recently become more difficult as some states have reduced early voting opportunities and passed **voter ID laws** that require specific forms of photo ID. In 2013, the Supreme Court invalidated portions of the **Voting Rights Act of 1965** that required states with a history of discrimination to receive federal approval for proposed changes in voting procedures. The Court's decision allowed southern states to pass voter ID laws prior to the 2014 midterm election. In the summer of 2016, the Supreme Court overturned numerous voter ID laws, including the one in Texas, as having the "effect" of discrimination. The Court decision affirmed what critics of the laws had long claimed: Voter ID requirements would disproportionately prevent specific groups from being able to vote. Voter turnout is generally low in the United States compared to other modern democracies that have **automatic voter registration**. Recently, some states have created even more barriers to voting by passing **Voter ID laws**, which they claim are intended to reduce in-person voter fraud (which is virtually non-existent). State laws that now require a specific form of photo ID have resulted in lower overall voter turnout, particularly among minorities, the elderly, and the poor. Research has demonstrated that the states most likely to pass Voter ID laws are states with Republican legislatures and large minority populations. Another restriction on voting concerns those with a **felony record**. 48 states prohibit prison inmates who are serving a felony sentence from voting, while 11 states have a lifetime ban on voting for felons even after they have served their sentence. As the incarceration rate dramatically increased in the 1980s and 1990s, this resulted in many citizens becoming disenfranchised, particularly African Americans and Latinos. Some argue that felons should retain the right to vote either in prison or once they are out. They argue that disenfranchising people is a disincentive to become a productive member of society. Since 1997, 19 states have reduced voting restrictions for people with a felony record. Other forms of voting and registration reform that have the intention of increasing voter turnout includes **early voting**, Election Day registration (**EDR**), and **absentee** (mail-in) voting. Early voting gives voters the option in some states to cast their vote prior to Election Day, which has proven to increase turnout amongst the upper-middle class and the elderly. Election Day registration (EDR) combines the two-step process of voting – registering to vote and casting a ballot on Election Day – into one. 10 states currently have EDR and there is disagreement about whether EDR is beneficial or not. States that do have EDR have higher turnout rates, especially amongst younger and less affluent voters. Absentee ballots also tend to increase participation in the political process. Most western states now cast votes using mail-in ballots. In 2012, 77% of votes cast in Colorado were absentee ballots. While early voting and absentee ballots make it easier and more convenient to vote, the overall turnout rate does not necessarily increase. The real effect of state election reforms may be in altering *who* turns out to vote, rather than *how many* turn out.

Socioeconomic status has a direct impact on voting. Americans with higher levels of education and income are *more likely* to vote than those with less education and income. People who are more affluent have the money, time, and capacity to participate effectively in the political

process. In 2012, 72% of college graduates voted, while 49% of those with only a high school diploma voted. Other factors such as age, race, gender, and religion impact voter turnout, as well. Older people have *much higher* rates of participation than young people. In 2008, 70% of voters 65 and over voted, while only 44% of voters between 18 and 24 voted (highest young turnout in decades). 66% of young voters supported Obama in 2008. Older voters are better organized than young voters. The **American Association of Retired People (AARP)** has 40 million members that can be mobilized during an election. Despite all of the attention that the Baby Boomers receive from the media, the **Millennial** generation is actually larger and could have a significant impact of public policy if it decided to actually vote. African Americans and Latinos are less likely to vote than whites. Political Scientists refer to the Latino vote as “**the sleeping giant**” because if Latinos did actually vote they would have a significant impact as the largest minority group. Both African Americans and Latinos tend to vote Democrat. In 2012, Obama won 70% of the Latino vote, which prompted Republicans to begin re-strategizing about how to appeal to Latino voters (let’s just say Donald Trump wasn’t part of their plan!). Both African Americans and Latinos have a higher turnout rate in districts where they have **descriptive representation**, that is, someone of their same race or ethnicity. Asian Americans tend to vote less than other minorities, but they also vote Democrat. In 2012, Obama won 73% of the Asian American vote. Women have a slightly higher turnout rate than men, and women are more likely than men to vote Democrat. The **gender gap** during presidential elections is typically 10 points. Women are more likely than men to support increases in social spending. Whereas 79% of men supported the Iraq War in 2003, 65% of women supported the war. Women, like minorities, have been enjoying increases in descriptive representation. In 2009, women held 17% of the seats in the House of Representatives and Nancy Pelosi (D-California) became the first female Speaker of the House. In 2014, the number of female senators rose to 20, which is the highest in American history. Women are just as likely to win an election as men, but are less likely to run for office. More women are being encouraged to run for office because they are typically more supported of women’s rights, education, health care, and children’s issues. Evangelical (rather than Mainline) Protestants are more likely to vote Republican. They became a unified political force in 1980 as the **Moral Majority**. 80% of evangelical Protestants voted for Reagan in 1984. Evangelicals were again a significant influence in 2004. Catholics are split between voting Republican and Democrat, while Jews tend to vote Democrat. People with higher-than-average educational levels have a *higher* rate of voting because they are more capable of discerning the differences between candidates and navigating the bureaucratic hurdles imposed by registration requirements. The younger a person is, the *less* likely they are to vote. Minorities are *less* likely to vote. Women are *more* likely to vote. People who are married are *more* likely to vote. Public employees are *more* likely to vote. Politicians listen far more carefully to groups with high turnout rates, as they know their fate may well be in their hands. Who votes does matter.

A common explanation of how Americans vote is that they vote for the candidate whose policy views they prefer. Starting from this premise, many journalists and politicians claim that the election winner has a mandate from the people to carry out the proposed policies. This view is called the **mandate theory of elections**. Journalists are attracted to this theory because it enables them to discuss election results with a clear narrative. Politicians are attracted to this theory because it allows them to justify what they want to do by claiming public support for their policies. Political scientists, however, think very little of the mandate theory of elections. It is difficult to determine if the voters actually want a specific policy based on an election because a variety of policies are discussed during a campaign and many factors beyond policy preferences influence voting patterns.

Once established, **party identification** is a label that people often adhere to for a long period of time. Party identification simplifies the political world for many voters and provides a reliable cue as to who is on their side. Individuals voting based on party would probably come to the same decision that they would reach if they were to study each issue in detail. In the 1950s, scholars identified party affiliation as the best single predictor of a voter's decision. However, following the emergence of television and **candidate-centered** politics, the parties' hold on voters eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s and then stabilized at a new and lower level (increase in the number of independents, especially among young voters). Candidate-centered campaigns have led to an increase in **image-construction** wherein campaigns constantly attempt to manipulate the candidate's image that is projected to the voters. Research shows that the three most important dimensions of candidate image are **integrity**, **reliability**, and **competence**. George W. Bush had higher integrity and reliability ratings during the 2000 and 2004 elections, while Barack Obama had higher competence ratings during the 2008 election. **Policy voting** occurs when people base their choices in an election on their own issue preferences. Many people have contradictory policy preferences that do not clearly align them with one candidate, and candidates often decide that the best way to handle a controversial issue is to cloud their position in rhetoric. The media often report more on the "**horse race**" aspects of a campaign than on the policy positions of the candidates. Voters thus often have to work fairly hard just to be informed enough to potentially engage in policy voting.

Elections **socialize** and **institutionalize** political activity, making it possible for most political participation to be channeled through the electoral process rather than through demonstrations, riots, or revolutions. Because elections provide regular access to political power, leaders can be replaced without being overthrown. Elections give **legitimacy** to political leaders and are seen as a fair method of selecting political leaders. America has an entrepreneurial system in which the people play a crucial role at every stage, from nomination to election. By appealing directly to the people, a candidate can emerge from outside the party establishment. The chance to win the presidency is open to almost any highly skilled politician with a small electoral base. Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama were not national figures prior to their presidential campaigns. While the process of selecting American leaders is an open one, it has been criticized as "**the permanent campaign**" due to how long it lasts. Some scholars argue that people could more effectively participate and follow campaigns if they were shorter.

Whether elections in fact make the government pay attention to what the people think is at the center of debate concerning how well democracy works in America. It is most accurate to describe the connection between elections and public policy as a two-way street: elections, to some degree, affect public policy, and public policy decisions partly affect electoral outcomes. Today's long and expensive campaigns involve much more communication between candidates and voters than America's Founders ever could have imagined. In their view, the presidency was to be an office responsible for tending to the public interest as a whole. They wished to avoid a contest between individuals who would make specific promises to the people in exchange for their support. As the electorate has expanded, as candidate-centered campaigns have developed, and as battle-ground states make specific demands, the promises made by candidates have increased the role of government in society.