Chapter 08

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Campaigns & Elections

In This Chapter

Chapter Objectives

In a campaign and the election that concludes it, all the actors in the political process come into vigorous interplay. Parties begin selecting and promoting candidates. Interest groups mobilize their forces to ensure that their interests will be remembered. The mass media put politics more clearly and consistently at center stage. As a result, the public, whose interest in political affairs is generally limited, now turns its attention to the candidates vying for public office.

This chapter examines the process from the perspectives of the two principal types of players in the drama: voters and candidates. For voters, the basic questions are whether to vote and how to vote. Candidates, whether presidential or congressional, must devise strategies that will bring voters to the polls and attract their votes. They must pull together the financial resources and organization needed for a credible campaign, obtain the nomination of their parties, and compete against the other party's candidate in the general election campaign.

8.1 The Voter's Perspective: To Vote or Not to Vote

As discussed in Chapter 5, politics is not usually a matter of concern to most citizens. Their interest is most aroused around Election Day—when they begin to take note of the campaign, think about going to the polls to cast their ballots, and sometimes engage in activities related to the campaign. Many begin to follow it on television or in newspapers and talk about it with family and friends; some try to influence the way in which someone else will vote. A somewhat smaller number wear buttons, display stickers or signs on their cars or houses, post about candidates or positions on social media, and attend campaign meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners. A few actually work for or give money to a candidate or party. Even with these other kinds of campaign-related activities, voting remains the most frequent act of political participation and the most meaningful act as well. In a representative democracy, voting forges the essential link between the citizens and their government. In the end, then, it comes down to two basic decisions: whether to vote and how to vote.

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Americans are required to register if they wish to vote. The inconvenience of this alone deters many residents from voting at all; therefore, many states have passed legislation to allow same-day registration.

8.1a Voting Requirements and Eligibility

Not everyone is in a position to decide to vote. The law excludes some people. In fact, for more than one hundred years after the founding of the United States, a majority of the American people were not eligible to vote. During that period the states controlled who could or could not vote, and they typically limited the electorate to white males over the age of twenty-one. Since then the United States has made great strides in eliminating restrictions on voting.

Racial barriers to voting began to fall first. The **Fifteenth Amendment** (1870) outlawed denying the right of citizens to vote on the grounds of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Nevertheless, after the Civil War the South created a new system of inferior status for African Americans, which came to be called "Jim Crow." Jim Crow included several elements limiting African American voting. One element was the white primary. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the one-party South of the post-Reconstruction era, winning the Democratic primary was equivalent to an election because the general election was nearly always a rout of the disfavored Republicans. The Democratic Party routinely excluded African Americans from its primaries, thus effectively barring them from any meaningful role in the electoral process. The Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright* struck down the white primary in 1944.

Another element of Jim Crow was the **poll tax**, which stipulated that in order to vote, citizens had to pay a tax. This tax was often enforced cumulatively, meaning that people had to pay the tax for every previous election in which they had not voted. Because African Americans had not been able to vote in many previous elections, they were confronted

Fifteenth Amendment
Outlawed race-based restrictions on voting

poll tax
A tax on voting, applied discriminatorily to African Americans under "Jim Crow" in the post–Civil War South

with large cumulated poll taxes that they could not pay. Thus, they were excluded from voting. However, the **Twenty-fourth Amendment** prohibited poll taxes in federal elections in 1964, and the Supreme Court's decision in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*, in 1966, prohibited them in state elections.

A third element of Jim Crow was the literacy test. In order to vote, a person had to demonstrate the ability to read. Many African Americans at that time were illiterate, so they were, thereby, excluded. This requirement was prohibited by the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**, which waived literacy tests for anyone with a sixth-grade education. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and subsequent amendments in 1982 and 2006 took other important steps to protect African American voting rights, as discussed in Chapter 3.

While African American participation declined under Jim Crow, political pressures to grant **female suffrage**, the right of women to vote, increased. This movement, stirred to life in the early nineteenth century, achieved its first major success when the territory of Wyoming granted suffrage to women in 1869. Activists first coalesced into two competing organizations with somewhat different styles—the more militant National Woman Suffrage Association led by Susan B. Anthony and the more conservative American Woman Suffrage Association led by Lucy Stone. The two groups joined forces in 1890. Final success was not achieved on the national level until 1920, when the states ratified the **Nineteenth Amendment**, which gave women the right to vote.

The last major broadening of the electorate occurred in 1971, when the **Twenty-sixth Amendment** reduced the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. In the midst of the Vietnam War, the argument that people old enough to die for their country ought to be able to vote in their country's elections was very persuasive. In addition, both Republicans and Democrats hoped to capitalize on the large bloc of new voters. In combination with the coming of age of the post–World War II baby boom generation, the lowering of the voting age produced one of the greatest expansions of the electorate in American history. Although a few municipalities have recently extended voting rights to sixteen-year-olds in local elections, there is not yet widespread support for lowering the national voting age further.[1]

The laws of the United States generally exclude from voting people who are not citizens of this country. Some other voting laws differ widely from state to state. In most states, people who have been convicted of a felony or who are confined in prisons and mental institutions cannot vote. Most jurisdictions also typically exclude citizens who have not resided within their boundaries for a minimum amount of time. This law is intended to ensure that citizens are reasonably permanent residents of the community. Impediments to voting imposed by lengthy **residence requirements** were weakened substantially by the **Voting Rights Act of 1970**, which mandated that states require no more than thirty days' residency to establish eligibility to vote in presidential elections. Today the thirty-day maximum is standard for all elections, even though some states have selected shorter periods.

Beyond meeting the basic qualifications, potential voters in most places in the United States (all states except North Dakota) are required to **register**—that is, to enter their names on the local government's list of those eligible to vote in a particular area, usually by visiting a government office. This requirement poses enough of an inconvenience that many people do not bother. Recent studies have shown, in fact, that the registration requirement may reduce electoral participation by as much as 10 to 15 percent.[2] Because registration reduces voting, it has long been the target of political reformers. Some places now permit registration by mail or via the internet, and a few allow citizens to register on Election Day, even at the same time and place as they vote. Such arrangements seem to make a difference. Twenty-one states have implemented these same-day registration

Twenty-fourth Amendment
Adopted in 1964, forbids the use of poll taxes in federal elections (Since 1966, the Court has applied this proscription to state elections as well.)

Voting Rights Act of 1965
Major legislation designed to overcome racial barriers to voting, primarily in the Southern states—extended in 1982 for twenty-five years and again in 2006

female suffrage
The right of women to vote, which was bestowed nationally by the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920

Nineteenth Amendment
Constitutional amendment of 1920 giving women the right to vote

Twenty-sixth Amendment
Constitutional amendment adopted in 1971 that fixed the minimum voting age at eighteen years

residence requirements
State laws designed to limit the eligible electorate by requiring citizens to have been a resident of the voting district for a fixed period of time prior to an election

Voting Rights Act of 1970
The law that limited residence requirements to thirty days for presidential elections, further ensuring voting rights

register
To place one's name on the list of citizens eligible to vote

laws, with advocates claiming a significant reduction in voters being turned away at the polls for lack of registration.[3]

Recognizing the important role played by registration laws, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the "Motor Voter" law since it required voter registration to be made available at the state departments of motor vehicles. Over fifteen million Americans registered to vote via their state motor vehicle agency in 1997–98. Partly as a result of this new law, registration rates climbed to over 70 percent in 1998, the highest level in a congressional election year since 1970. It is important to note that this piece of legislation was passed during a period of unified Democratic government. Many prior proposals had failed primarily because of Republican opposition. The historical pattern has been for Republicans to oppose such measures and for Democrats to support them. The Democrats generally emphasize the virtues of higher turnout, whereas the Republicans worry about opening the door to fraud.[4] These positions are also consistent with strategic considerations for each party, as demographic data suggest that increased registration and turnout would help Democrats and hurt Republicans. The issue rose to the forefront again in 2020 as Democrats pushed for greater ballot access and expanded vote-by-mail options during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Republicans worried that such access would lead to increased fraud.

8.1b Who Votes?

Voting turnout varies with people's social characteristics and psychological and political attitudes, as well as with the circumstances of voting. Voting participation used to vary dramatically across a wide variety of social groupings in the United States. Whites were much more likely to vote than African Americans, men were more likely to vote than women, and so on. In recent years there has been a general convergence in the voting rates among various groups of citizens. This is partly due to the success of the long struggle to ensure equal access to the voting booth. Just as significant, the broader trend toward social and economic equality has tended to promote political equality.

Two social characteristics show the strongest relation to voting turnout: age and education. (A third important factor is discussed in "Politics and Economics: Turnout, Choice, and Economic Status.") The older a person is, the more likely that person is to vote. One reason is that older people move less often and therefore do not need to re-register as often. Young people are more likely to be away from their place of residence—for example, at college or in the military. Because voting by absentee ballot takes more forethought and is perceived as more difficult than voting in person, young people are more likely to be discouraged from voting. They are also more preoccupied with getting a start in life than with relatively remote political concerns. As people grow older, they have more time and inclination to participate in politics and consequently build a habit of voting.

The more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to vote. Slightly less than 24 percent of US citizens in the voting-age population with less than a high school education reported having voted in the 2016 presidential election, whereas over 71 percent of those with a college degree or graduate-school education reported having voted.[5] Education plays such a big role because it stimulates political interest and provides the information that people need to be effective participants in the political process. Differences in education have undoubtedly contributed to voting differences between social groups in the past. African Americans and women voted less often than white males, in part because they did not enjoy the benefits of education that white males did. With the recent expansion of educational opportunities for minorities and women, levels of voting for these groups have

approached those for white males. In fact, the Census Bureau reported that in the 2016 presidential election women voted at a significantly higher rate than men—58 percent to less than 54 percent.

Psychological influences play a role as well. Not surprisingly, the greater a person's interest in politics, the more likely the person is to vote. The more a citizen thinks he or she can accomplish politically (i.e., the more political efficacy he or she has), the greater the likelihood the person will vote. Partisanship is a powerful motivating force. The stronger a person's attachment to a political party, the more inclined that person will be to vote. Conservatives and liberals are slightly more likely to vote than moderates, probably because they tend to be more interested and partisan. However, some psychological factors thought to have a major impact on turnout really do not. Surprisingly, despite much attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s, trust—defined as reliance on the integrity of public officials—has little effect. Overall, in 2020, almost 67 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot for president.

Finally, primarily as a result of differences in psychological factors, turnout varies substantially across the different types of elections. In elections that the public finds interesting and important, so-called **high-stimulus elections**, turnout is usually relatively high; in less interesting, **low-stimulus elections**, it is usually low.[6] Presidential elections are generally higher stimulus than congressional elections, and general elections are usually higher stimulus than the primary elections that precede them. Turnout in recent presidential elections has averaged between 50 and 60 percent, while turnout in congressional midterm elections has run between 35 and 40 percent. Voting rates in presidential general elections also typically far exceed the turnout rates of 30 percent or less observed in primary elections.

high-stimulus election
Election that the public finds interesting and important

low-stimulus election
Election that the public finds uninteresting or unimportant

Political Controversies

Turnout, Choice, and Economic Status

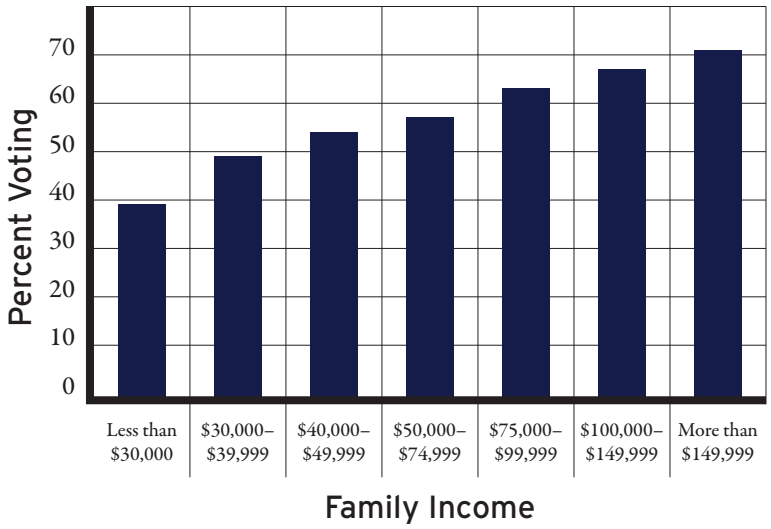
Economic status influences voter turnout. For example, as Figure 8.1 shows, the higher a citizen's family income, the more likely the citizen is to vote. This pattern emerges, in part, because higher income encourages many of the factors that promote voting, particularly education, political interest, and efficacy.

Voting choice is also influenced by economic status. As Figure 8.2 shows, in 2016, voters in both the lowest and the two highest income categories were more likely to vote for Democrat Hillary Clinton than for Republican Donald Trump. While this meets with expectations for the lowest earners, the highest earners defied expectations in this particular election. The tendency of higher-income people to favor Republican candidates was observed in many previous elections. It results primarily because higher-income people tend to identify with the Republican Party, as discussed in Chapter 7, and because Republican identifiers tend to vote for Republican candidates.

These two factors can combine to hurt Democratic candidates and help Republican candidates. Democratic candidates have a greater following among lower-income people, but those people turn out to vote less often. Republican candidates typically have a greater following among higher-income people, who vote more often. This is one reason the Republicans, even as the minority party in terms of population, have been so successful in getting their candidates elected to public office.

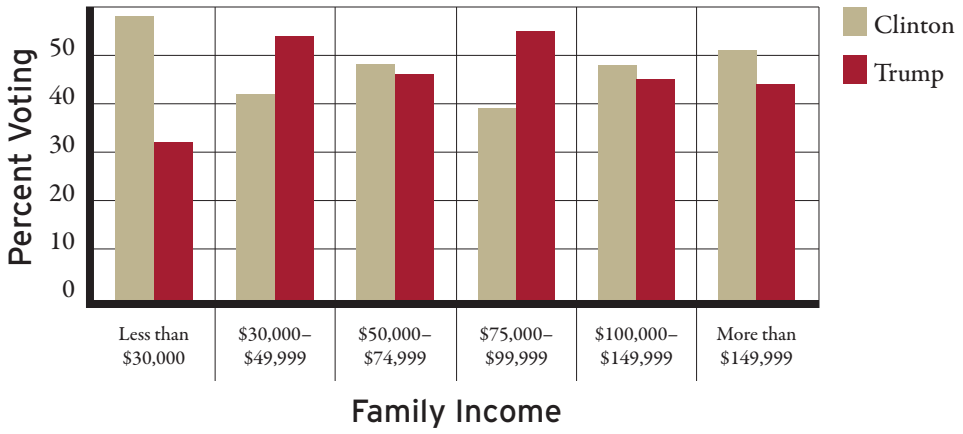
What other reasons are there for the Republicans' success in winning elections, even though they have been in the numerical minority for so long?

Figure 8.1 Voting Turnout by Family Income



DATA SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2018," April 2019

Figure 8.2 Percent Voting for Candidate by Family Income



DATA SOURCE: Pew Research Center, "For Most Trump Voters, 'Very Warm' Feelings for Him Endured," August 8, 2018.

8.1c Declining Turnout

Although presidential voting reached over the 66 percent mark in 2020, the highest level in over a century, there remains a troubling long-term trend toward lower voter turnout in the United States, as shown in Figure 8.3. After an explosion in the early nineteenth century, owing to the expansion of the electorate discussed earlier in this chapter, voter turnout by the 1990s had fallen to one of its lowest points in the last 150 years and had sagged substantially since its post–World War II peak in 1960. Although the long-term trend in turnout is striking, it is not necessarily ominous. The greatest part of the decline took place in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Some theorists attribute this to growing disaffection for the political system,[7] but other factors were probably involved. The widespread imposition of voter registration systems lowered turnout, both by excluding fraudulent votes and by discouraging some honest ones.[8] Moreover, Jim Crow laws in the South wiped out the gains made among African American voters in the years after the Civil War.

The Nineteenth Amendment, which enlarged the electorate by giving women the right to vote, temporarily reduced turnout. Many women had never voted before and did not immediately begin to exercise the right. As women, particularly younger women, got used to the newly opened political world, turnout climbed steadily through the 1930s. World War II disrupted voting interest, but interest bounced back in the 1950s. Demographic and institutional changes reduced voter turnout in the 1960s and 1970s. The maturation of the postwar baby boom and the reduction of the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen added millions of new voters; but because younger citizens are not as likely to vote as older people, this actually decreased the figures for turnout as a percentage of the voting-age population.

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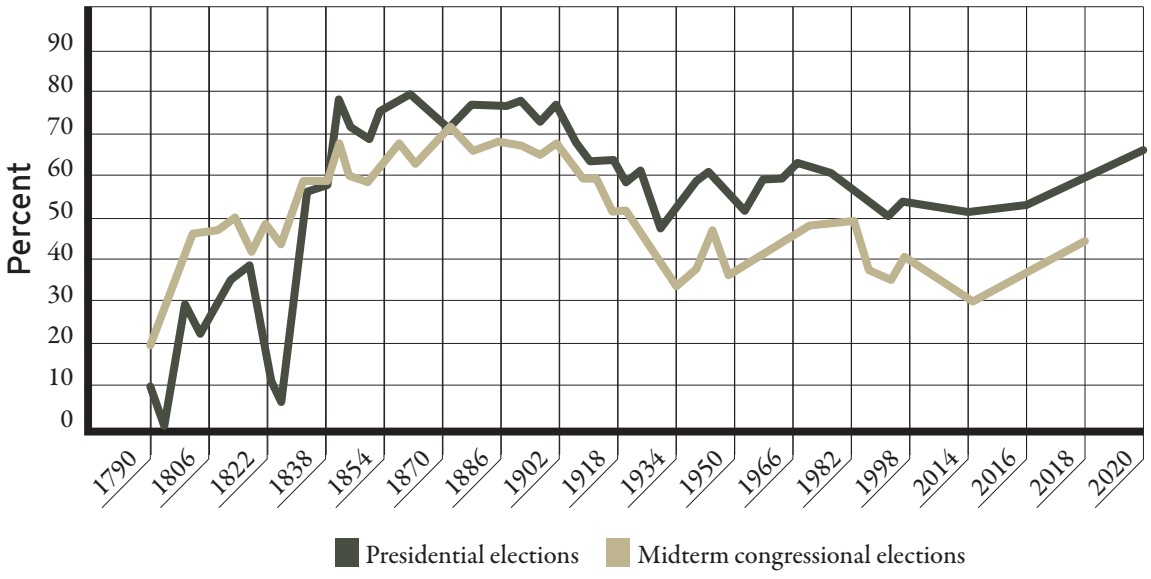
Many Americans are discouraged by the political world and thus decide not to vote. However, democracy's success depends on the enthusiastic participation of all of its citizens.

Yet many observers still believe that deep-seated psychological inclinations account for some of the contemporary decrease. Some blame political alienation or distrust. They argue that the American people are discouraged by what they see going on in politics and are increasingly inclined, therefore, not to vote. However, as noted earlier, trust does not

Figure 8.3 Turnout in Presidential and Congressional Elections, 1790–2020

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the long-term historical trend for voter turnout has been downward. Turnout for midterm congressional elections is lower than in presidential elections.



DATA SOURCES: Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, Vital Statistics on American Politics (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1990); Federal Election Commission; United States Election Project, http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data (December 21, 2020).

seem to have much effect on voting; so an increase in distrust does not necessarily imply a decrease in voting. In fact, many of the new voters in the 2000s seem to have been motivated more by the emergence of national campaigns by the Green Party and Libertarian Party than anything else. On the other hand, decreasing partisanship and external political efficacy clearly relate to voting turnout.[9] Young people are less partisan, and less partisan people are less likely to vote. It may be, therefore, that weakening partisanship is due to the influx of young people into the electorate, resulting in a decline in voting.

Some commentators view the long-term decline in voter turnout with alarm. The success of democracy, they argue, depends on the enthusiastic participation of its citizens; thus, declining electoral involvement is not a good sign. However, other commentators believe that less than total participation may be desirable because it can give a democracy room for compromise and flexibility.[10] Nonvoting may not imply a lack of trust or support for the political system but is perhaps a passive nonvote of confidence. In other words, staying home on Election Day may just be a way of saying that everything is all right.

Politics and Ideas

Campaign and Electoral Reform: A Comparative Perspective

Opponents of campaign and electoral reform often contend that changing the current system will upset the finely tuned balance of the American political system and impair the functioning of democracy. Proponents point, however, to other countries with different systems that work just fine.

One criticism of American presidential campaigns is that they go on too long, close to two years, counting the run-up to the primaries and then the general election campaign. Congressional campaigns, in a sense, never stop. As soon as members of Congress take office in January, they must begin to look to the next election "only" twenty-two months away. Clearly other nations, particularly those with parliamentary systems, accomplish the process much more quickly. The best example is Great Britain, where the span from the announcement of an election to the new government's taking office is little more than a month.

Another area of comparison is in campaign finance. The United States has partial public funding of presidential campaigns and no public funding of congressional campaigns. Acceptance of public funding binds presidential candidates to some limits, but there are no limits on what congressional candidates can spend. Even the effort to limit presidential spending, however, can be partially circumvented by a wealthy candidate who can decline public funds—such as George W. Bush in the 2000 and 2004 election cycles—or a well-funded one like Barack Obama in 2008. Both of those factors were at play when the two major party candidates declined to accept public funding during the last three election cycles. Britain, Israel, and Japan have no public funding whatsoever. Britain and Japan do impose limits on spending while Israel does not. Denmark, France, Italy, and Germany all have public funding based on strength in the previous election or a reimbursement according to strength in the current election.

A third point of comparison is in the use of television in campaigns. Of the eight countries just mentioned, the United States is the only one that does not provide free television time to candidates for public office (apart from debates between candidates, which broadcasters cover, at their discretion, as news events). Most of the countries above provide free and equal time in proportion to the parties' strength in the previous election.

Do the successes of other countries with shorter campaigns and different arrangements for campaign finance and television use mean that such reforms would work well in the United States? What differences between the United States and these other countries might make the impact of such reforms differ?

8.2 The Voter's Perspective: How to Vote

Just as various political, social, and psychological factors contribute to citizens' decisions about whether to exercise their voting rights, different elements help determine for whom they cast their ballots. Analysts have identified three major factors that seem to influence how people vote: parties, candidates, and issues.

8.2a Parties

For many years, affiliation with a political party was regarded as the mainstay of voting decisions in the United States. For some people, all that mattered was that a candidate belonged to "their" party. However, voter allegiance was not the only impact of strong party affiliation. In many instances party identification colored the way in which a voter looked at the pivotal elements of a presidential election. Party continues to play an important role in American electoral behavior. The 2016 presidential race illustrates the strong relationship between how people vote and their sense of partisanship. Eighty-nine percent of Democrats voted for the candidate of their party, while only 9 percent crossed party lines to vote for Trump, according to exit polls. Moreover, 90 percent of Republicans voted for the candidate of their party, while only 7 percent reported defecting to vote for Clinton.[11] In the 2020 election, Trump was again on the ballot, this time as the incumbent, and Republicans voted for him at a rate of 94 percent, with 6 percent choosing Biden. Similarly 94 percent of Democrats voted for Biden and 5 percent chose Trump.[12]

As established in Chapter 7, there can be little doubt that party has weakened as a reference point for many American voters in recent years. As party has become less important to voters, it has become a less important determinant of their voting decisions, which has left more room for candidate characteristics and issues to have an influence, as can be seen in the results described above.

8.2b Candidates

Opinions about the candidates themselves play a powerful role in influencing how voters ultimately vote. Because partisanship is fairly stable, assessments of the candidates are major contributors to changes in presidential voting from one election to the next.[13] When it comes to qualities of the candidate, voters seem to put the greatest weight on three factors:

- **Experience** The public shows a marked preference for someone with substantial political experience. Hence, the public leans very much toward incumbent presidents, vice presidents, senators, and governors from large states. The only recent presidents without substantial national political experience prior to taking office were Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961), who had extensive military experience, and Jimmy Carter (1977–1981), the governor of a smaller state, Georgia. Although Bill Clinton (1993–2001) was the governor of a small southern state, he had been active on the national scene for many years as a leader in the National Governors Association and the Democratic Leadership Council. In the 2008 campaign, many of John McCain's advertisements focused on the candidate's long tenure in the Senate as compared to his opponent's much shorter tenure. By 2012, however, President Obama could

point to four years in the White House, so lack of experience was no longer an issue. Having served as governor of a populous state, Mitt Romney could boast of political experience as well. Election year 2016 had great contrasts in experience. On the one hand, Hillary Clinton had been a figure in national politics for a quarter of a century, having served as a senator from New York and as US secretary of state, not to mention eight years in the White House as first lady during the Bill Clinton administration. Donald Trump, on the other hand, had no political experience whatsoever, making him the least experienced major party candidate since Wendell Willkie in 1940. As a result, twice as many Americans said Hillary Clinton had the necessary experience to be president as said so about Donald Trump.[14] Yet, when the dust settled on Election Day, Trump emerged victorious, becoming the least experienced president in American history. Whether this was the beginning of a trend or merely an exception that proves the rule remains to be seen. By 2020 Trump had four years as president under his belt, but his challenger, Joe Biden, had served for eight years as vice president and for thirty-six years in the U.S. Senate. Thus, both could claim valuable experience.

- **Leadership** The public is partial to candidates who seem able to take command of a situation, who do not wallow in pessimism or indecision, and who act when the time is right. President Carter suffered in the 1980 campaign because in the face of economic problems and the Iran hostage crisis, he was not seen as taking decisive and effective action. Twelve years later, in 1992, George H. W. Bush was hurt by the widespread public perception that he had no plan for addressing the economic problems besieging the country. His son must have learned a lesson from this as his efforts to project the image of a strong, decisive leader consistently resulted in high marks on this quality in opinion polls. In 2016, Donald Trump presented himself as a strong business leader, making the case that his skills in the boardroom would translate into the political arena. But by 2020 President Trump had a track record of presidential leadership, which challenger Biden summarily attacked on issues ranging from racial injustice to his handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

- **Personal qualities** At the same time that voters want someone who will be a strong leader, they are also inclined to want an attractive and "nice" person in the White House. Eisenhower, Kennedy (1961–1963), and Reagan (1981–1989) all benefited from attractive personalities. Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992 mounted a major effort to offset early perceptions of him as dishonest and untrustworthy—"Slick Willy"—with an image-rebuilding effort that campaign insiders dubbed the "Manhattan Project" after the World War II program to develop the atomic bomb.[15] Not only did Bill Clinton overcome negative public perception to win the election in 1992 and reelection in 1996, but when he left office in January 2001, despite eight years of investigation that ultimately led to his impeachment, 65 percent of the American public approved of the way he handled his job as president.[16] In 2008, Barack Obama struck millions of Americans as an inspiring source of positive change, and his powerful speeches created the biggest stir about personality since the Reagan era. In a mid-2012 poll, 81 percent of respondents found Barack Obama "likable," and only 64 percent found Mitt Romney to be so.[17] In 2016, voters were less enamored of their choices. Only 46 percent of Americans said Hillary Clinton was "likable," and just 36 percent said Donald Trump was.[18] Trump's likability continued to remain low, still registering at just 37 percent well into his presidency, and only 36 percent found him "honest and trustworthy" in 2020.[19] Joe Biden, on the other hand, while also facing a very partisan America, had the confidence of 52 percent of the public in his ability to address race relations—an important issue in the 2020 race, and a rating 12 percent higher than his opponent.[20]

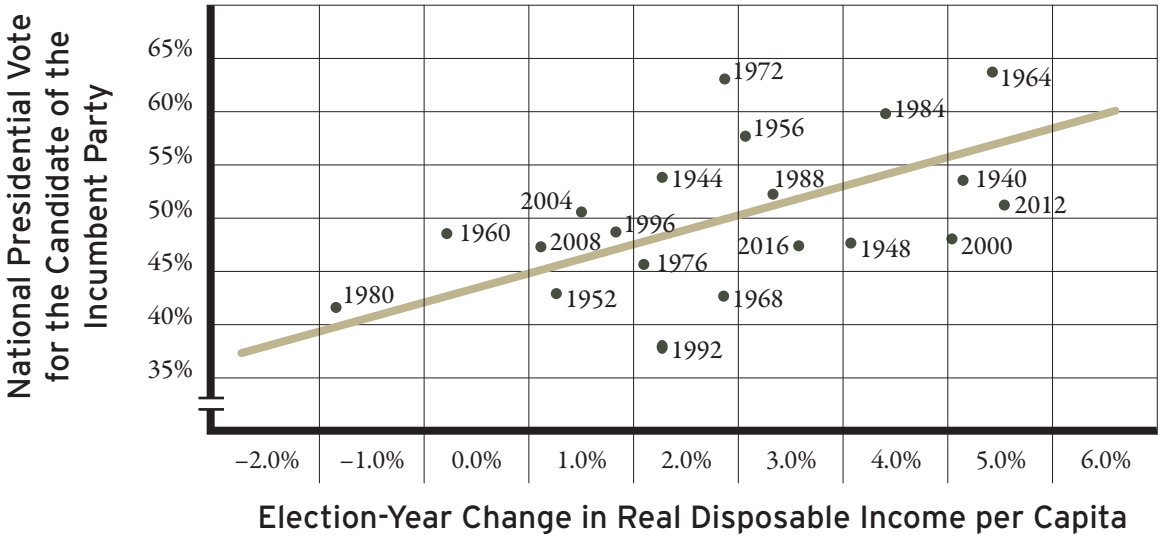
8.2c Issues

Today more than ever, issues seem to drive the public toward a particular electoral choice. A 2004 poll suggested that voters saw whether or not a candidate shared their values as the defining issue in the presidential race between Kerry and Bush.[21] In 2012, voters gave that edge to Obama over Romney by a margin of 53 to 45 percent.[22] Even observers who have previously minimized the importance of issues now concede that issues can make a difference when the public knows and cares about them and when the candidates differentiate themselves on issues. Single-issue groups, described in Chapter 7, play a big role in emphasizing particular concerns. Opponents of gun control or tax increases, for example, can "target" an official for defeat. Even without the participation of single-issue groups, social issues such as crime control and foreign policy issues such as military intervention in the Middle East usually receive considerable attention in a campaign.

More often, though, the voter's focus is on economic issues. Year in and year out, the mainspring issue driving most electoral decisions seems to be the economy. Even the earliest voting studies that discovered issues to be relatively unimportant found that bread-and-butter economic issues did make a difference. Personal economic well-being seems to influence how Americans vote. Figure 8.4 relates the percentage of the popular vote for president received by the incumbent party to an indicator of how much a citizen's disposable income had increased during the election year. Clearly, the better off people are during an election year, the more likely they are to vote for the party holding the White House.

Figure 8.4 The Economy and Presidential Voting

The better the economy, the better the candidate of the incumbent party does in the presidential election. The diagonal line shows the basic trend in the relationship—that is, how much, on average, voting is related to improvements in the economy. Of course, in some years, other issues trump the economy, as in 2016, when the incumbent's party lost despite improving economic conditions.



Data Sources: Federal Election Commission, retrieved at https://www.fec.gov/introduction-campaign-finance/election-and-voting-information/; The Cook Political Report, retrieved at https://cookpolitical.com/2020-national-popular-vote-tracker, Copyright 2020 by Cook Political Report, All Rights Reserved; Bureau of Economic Analysis, retrieved at https://www.bea.gov/data/income-saving/disposable-personal-income; Edward Tufte, Political Control of the Economy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 123.

(chrisdorney / Shutterstock)

Single-issue groups hold great sway over whether a candidate will gain a citizen's vote. It doesn't matter if a candidate supports or opposes the use of nuclear weapons, abortion, gun control, or other controversial issues; he or she can still be dropped from the race for office.

Some political commentators pointed to Ronald Reagan's celebrated question near the end of his 1980 election debate with Jimmy Carter—"Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"—as the symbolic turning point of that campaign. The statistical evidence suggests that the Reagan campaign may have been right in emphasizing the role of the economy. The same was true for the 1992 presidential election—exit polls showed Bush running far ahead of Bill Clinton (62 percent to 24 percent) among voters who thought their family's financial situation had improved over the preceding four years, and the two candidates were dead even (at 41 percent each) among those who thought things had stayed the same. Clinton outpolled Bush 61 percent to 14 percent among those who felt they were worse off; and fortunately for Clinton, those voters outnumbered by a margin of four to three voters who felt they were better off—enough to give Clinton the victory. Clinton benefited from an economic upturn during his first administration, and the fact that a majority of Americans in the fall of 1996 believed that national economic conditions were improving helped him retain office. However, although an even higher percentage of Americans thought the economy was getting better in fall 2000, Al Gore was unable to translate his connection to the incumbent Democratic administration into electoral victory.[23] In 2008, a national recession allowed Barack Obama to gain ground by distancing himself from the Bush administration in a way that his Republican opponent could not. When the economy began to rebound by 2012, the incumbent Obama was able to take advantage of that change, as well. This is not to say that economics is the only issue that sways voters. Other issues have some impact. No doubt the candidates' differences on gun control, immigration, and foreign policy influenced some voters to opt for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in 2016. The 2020 contest featured an economy in recession and a country reeling from racial tensions and a severe pandemic. All of these factors likely weighed heavily on the minds of voters.

(damann / Shutterstock)

"Keep America Great" hats for sale supporting President Trump with gun display in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on November 9, 2019.

In talking about parties, candidates, and issues separately, this discussion runs the risk of oversimplification. In reality, the relationship among parties, issues, and candidates as influences on the vote is complex. Voters may take a position on an issue because it is the position of their party, or they may choose their party on the basis of its position on issues. Voters may tend to prefer certain candidates because they are the candidates of their party and reject other candidates because they are candidates of the other party; or they may judge a party according to how much they like its candidates. Finally, voters may like candidates because they agree with their positions on certain issues, or voters may adopt certain positions on issues because they like the candidates who advocate them. Thus, voter decision-making is based on the interplay of a number of factors—and not just on those factors alone.

8.3 The Candidate's Perspective: Running for President

While voters need to decide whether and how to vote, a more complicated set of choices confronts candidates. Their basic decisions include whether or not to run and how to attract enough votes to win. To achieve the latter, contemporary presidential candidates must make scores of strategic decisions, carve out a clear position as a serious contender early on, raise large amounts of money, choose the right campaign consultant, decide which issues to raise, select the primaries and caucuses on which to concentrate, garner enough delegates in the national convention to secure the nomination, choose a running mate, and win states with enough electoral votes to win the electoral college. These tasks are compounded by the fact that a candidate must also outmaneuver opponents who are working equally hard to attract voters.

8.3a Who Runs for President?

In American political folklore, anyone can grow up to be president whether they have humble beginnings, like Abraham Lincoln, or high social and economic status, like Franklin Roosevelt. Is such folklore actually true? In fact, the Constitution lays down few requirements. The person must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, a resident of the United States for at least fourteen years, and at least thirty-five years of age. The **Twenty-second Amendment** (1951), ratified in the aftermath of Franklin Roosevelt's unprecedented four elections to the presidency, imposes one more restriction: An individual cannot be elected to the presidency more than twice, or more than once if the individual has completed more than two years of another president's term.

Despite the relatively small set of formal qualifications, however, evidence suggests that the path to power is fairly steep and narrow. The key to attaining the highest political office in the United States is to have held other reasonably high political offices. Consider the twenty-seven individuals who have run for the presidency under the banner of the major parties in the last nineteen elections. Eight of them had been governors of their states, nine had previously served as vice president, and fifteen had served in the U.S. Senate. Only two, Dwight Eisenhower and Donald Trump—had never held an elective office. However, the best assurance of being elected president is to already *be* president. In the thirty-one elections in which an incumbent president sought reelection, the incumbent was successful in twenty-one, or 68 percent of the time. This statistic probably stems in part from the incumbent president's unique ability to manipulate events in his favor and the high visibility and name recognition a president enjoys.

What other qualities put an individual in line to be considered for the highest office in the land? Recent history suggests several qualities are prevalent. For one, the presidency was historically a white, male preserve. This was not seriously challenged until 2008, when the Democratic primary elections ensured change by presenting a Caucasian woman (Hillary Clinton) and an African American–identified man (Barack Obama, whose father was a black man from Kenya) as their top two contenders. Obama winning the presidency in 2008 and 2012 and Hillary Clinton winning the popular vote (though not the presidency) in 2016 made it clear that the office is no longer a white men's club in the twenty-first century. In addition, most presidents in recent times have been from at least reasonably well-off, Protestant backgrounds and have been reasonably well educated. Not until 1960, with the election of John F. Kennedy, did a Catholic become president;

Twenty-second Amendment
Ratified in 1951, this amendment restricts the president to two terms in office

and there was not another Catholic on a major party ticket until John Kerry in 2004. Joe Biden became the first Catholic elected vice president in 2008, and the Republican nomination of Paul Ryan in 2012 meant both vice-presidential candidates were Catholic that year. Democratic vice-presidential nominee Tim Kaine continued that trend in 2016. No Jew has ever been elected president, and Joe Lieberman became the first Jewish vice-presidential candidate of a major party in 2000. Mitt Romney's 2012 Republican nomination was the first of a Mormon. This growing diversity in nominees for the nation's highest offices reflects changes in both the demographics and the cultural acceptance of diversity in America.

In this age of media politics, an attractive image is clearly an important asset; perhaps, however, the most important quality of all is determination. Securing a major party's presidential nomination nowadays typically takes months, even years, of grinding work. In some cases candidates start campaigning in January of the year before the presidential election year and continue nonstop for almost the next two years. Presidential hopeful Gary Hart vividly illustrated the kind of ordeal that a modern presidential candidate has to endure when he revealed that some mornings, during his 1984 campaign, he would awaken in a strange hotel room and have to reach for the phone book in order to remember what city he was in.

Political Controversies

An Election Gone Wrong?

The Constitution charges the American states with the responsibility of regulating the time, place, and manner of elections. Traditionally, this has meant that each state establishes its own rules and designs its own ballots. Since the presidential election is combined with state and local races, county election boards often end up designing ballots of their own, following state guidelines. Typically this is not an issue of concern; but controversy arose on November 7, 2000, when one county's choice of ballot design seemed to determine the outcome of an extremely close presidential election.

Palm Beach County, Florida, voters were confronted with a "butterfly ballot" (so called because the pages on either side of the center punch card resemble wings) that listed presidential candidate names alternately on both the left and right sides of the holes. The Republican Party candidates were listed first on the left side, and the Democratic Party candidates second; but in between the two, the Reform Party candidates were listed on the *right* side. Many voters claimed to be confused as a result of this ballot—a claim that seemed well-supported by the election results. In Palm Beach County, 5,330 voters punched holes for both Democratic candidate Al Gore and Reform candidate Pat Buchanan. Did some, or even most, of these voters intend to select Al Gore? We will never know for certain. But after careful analysis of the Florida vote, it seems possible that this ballot irregularity cost Al Gore the presidency.

A study commissioned by *USA Today* and several other papers concluded that George W. Bush still would have been victorious even if a hand recount of all the Florida votes had taken place. The study also noted, however, that a majority of Florida voters probably intended to vote for Al Gore. In an election as close as the presidential race in 2000, a poorly designed ballot in a single county can have an enormous effect. As a result of these complications, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act in 2002, which provided funds to states so that they could update and streamline voting and ballot counting procedures.

Should the federal government regulate ballots? Should it provide suggested guidelines to the states? What standards are needed to guarantee a fair and accurate election? What do ballots look like in your county? Do you find them confusing or easy to use?

8.3b The Media Campaign

The primary determinant of the shape of the modern political campaign is the mass media. Candidates used to be concerned primarily with mobilizing the party organization behind their efforts. Now their principal concern is mobilizing the media, particularly television, to bring their name and "image" before the public. Such efforts assume three principal forms. The first form is the expenditure of most of the campaign treasury on political advertisements. Precious paid television time is generally devoted to short advertisements that focus on simple images and issues, rather than longer speeches that focus on in-depth discussions of public policy. Campaign debates waged in one-minute, thirty-second, and even fifteen-second spots have drawn considerable criticism for oversimplifying campaign issues. Ross Perot's 1992 and 1996 campaigns defied traditional practice by spending millions of dollars on half-hour blocks devoted to detailed discussions of economic problems and solutions—and defied conventional wisdom by drawing large viewing audiences.

(Andrew Cline / Shutterstock)

Former Vice President Joe Biden takes a selfie with voters during a town hall campaign stop in Hampton, N.H., on February 9, 2020.

Another way candidates bring their names before the media is to structure traditional campaign events—such as speeches, rallies, and news conferences—in order to get media attention. These activities, once the core of the traditional political campaign, are now used mainly as "media events," or opportunities to attract coverage by the news media. Republican candidate Donald Trump seemed to have mastered this concept in 2016, when his unconventional candidacy and his ability to make controversial statements attracted media attention almost constantly. According to one study, he had received the equivalent of $2 billion in free media exposure before the primary season even ended.[24]

A third strategy is for candidates to try to get as much free television time as possible on regular news and interview broadcasts. Extended nationally televised appearances on the nightly network news broadcasts, traditional news interview programs such as *Nightline*, and, more recently, the "softer" interview shows such as *The View* are the candidate's dream—but these coveted appearances are hard to come by.

The bread and butter of free television time comes in two forms: the "sound bite" on the national network news broadcasts and the daily stream of interviews on local TV stations as candidates travel around the country. Sound bites are short, taped excerpts from statements that a candidate makes. Candidates hope to get at least one sound bite on the national news broadcasts every night during the course of the campaign and thus attempt to say things in ways that are "sound biteable" to the TV crews covering them.

Another major development of recent years has been the rise of the professional **media consultant**. In the past, candidates tended to rely on party leaders or a personal coterie to plan and execute their campaign strategy. The current trend, however, is toward reliance on professional campaign consultants. Such individuals, while certainly oriented more toward one party or philosophy than another, make themselves available for hire to candidates able to pay for their services. One of the best known and most successful media consultants in recent years is James Carville, who led Bill Clinton's media campaign in 1992 and then served as senior political adviser to President Clinton.

media consultant
An expert hired by a political candidate to give advice on the use of the mass media, particularly television and direct mail, in a campaign for public office

The media typically concentrate not on the issues of the campaign but on the strategies, tactics, and likely outcome of the campaign. Politicians and commentators call such a focus the *horse race.* Poll results are tracked throughout the campaign to see who is in the lead and to test the potential effect of various moves by the candidates. Some critics have argued that the emphasis placed on the polls in the mass media serves to make polls the makers, rather than the measurers, of public opinion. Polling results showing a candidate doing better than expected tend to increase that candidate's credibility, and thereby contribute to further gains in the polls. Polling results showing a candidate lagging far behind may lead the public to write off that candidate as a wasted vote. Also, a poor showing in the polls can cause potential contributors to cut the flow of money to a candidate. Politicians, particularly those trailing in the polls, like to say, "The only poll that counts is the one on Election Day"; yet preelection polls may encourage shifts in opinion that are translated into shifts in voting on Election Day. In 1992, interest in the election was heightened as public opinion polls showed the race between Bush and Clinton tightening in the last two weeks of the campaign, only to have the drama diminish as the apparent Bush surge fell back in the last few days before the voting. In 2000, the race was tight right down to the wire; opinion polls during the last two weeks before the election consistently found the race too close to call. In this case the polls were right. The election turned out to be one of the tightest in recent history, with only a few hundred votes separating Bush and Gore in some key states.

(George Bush: White House photo by Eric Draper, via Wikimedia, 2001)

(Al Gore: White House photo via Wikimedia, 1994)

The 2000 race for the presidency between George W. Bush and Al Gore came down to only a few hundred votes. The news media risked its credibility when it inaccurately claimed Gore to have won Florida's votes. A recount named Bush the winner of the votes in Florida.

In recent years, the media and the polls have become controversial even on Election Day itself. Modern sampling techniques and **exit polls** (interviews with voters leaving the polls) often enable analysts to predict the winner long before polls everywhere have closed. For example, in 1988 CBS and ABC projected George Bush as the victor over Michael Dukakis at 9:20 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, well before many voters in Western states had voted. Do early predictions about who is winning or losing dissuade those who have not yet voted from doing so, create a "bandwagon" effect for the projected winner, or do they incur sympathy votes for the projected loser? The evidence on these questions is mixed, but there are some signs that early projections do reduce turnout. In the 2000 election, the media caused an even bigger uproar, first by declaring Al Gore the winner of Florida's twenty-five electoral votes, then by retracting and declaring Bush the winner of both Florida and the national election, and then—finally—by admitting that the race was too close to call. In its race to break an important story, the news media risked its credibility with the public.

exit poll

A poll of voters taken as they leave a polling place and usually conducted by the media to get an advance indication of voting trends and facilitate analysis of the reasons behind the outcome of the election

As the media have come more and more to shape the modern presidential campaign, and as dissatisfaction with modern campaigns has grown, the media have become the object of blame for the problems and the target of reform. As reasonable and laudable as the proposed media reforms sound, many of them collide with the First Amendment principles of freedom of the press and speech, potentially infringing on broadcasters' rights as journalists and the candidates' rights to express themselves freely. Below are some of the specific proposals that have been advanced in recent years.

- Requiring broadcasters to give more free time to candidates, thus reducing the candidates' need for money to spend on advertising
- Establishing rules for political advertising on television, thus possibly forcing broadcasters and candidates to present only spots of one minute or more and prohibiting any unfair or negative elements
- Conditioning federal campaign funding for presidential candidates on their agreement to participate in at least four televised debates
- Challenging television news organizations to devote more time to the substance of the campaign and less to the horse race
- Prohibiting television news organizations from projecting winners before all polls have closed, or creating, as an alternative, a uniform national poll-closing time

Political Controversies

Low Voter Turnout: A Comparative Perspective

The public debate about low voter turnout in the United States and what to do about it takes place against an international backdrop that offers some unflattering comparisons. As Figure 8.5 shows, the United States ranks near the bottom of democratic countries in the percentage of its voting-age population that actually votes.

All kinds of explanations relating to distrust of government and lack of confidence in American political institutions have been offered to account for the low rate of turnout in the United States. The evidence shows, however, that these factors have little impact and that, in any case, trust and confidence in government are higher in the United States than in many other countries.

Turnout is lower in the United States than elsewhere primarily because there are more obstacles and fewer incentives to vote than elsewhere. The primary obstacle is, of course, the American system of voter registration. In fact, in many other democratic countries, registration is automatic. In Germany, Italy, and Sweden, for example, citizens who move are required to report their new address to the government. Once they do this, their voting rights are automatically canceled at their old polling place and reinstated at their new one. Other countries (for example, Australia, Belgium, Greece, and Spain) have given people an incentive to vote by establishing penalties for nonvoting that, even if rarely enforced, seem to boost turnout by 10 percent. Perhaps the most effective sanctions are found in Italy. Italian citizens who fail to vote have "DID NOT VOTE" stamped on their identification papers, which can be a significant embarrassment and disadvantage in dealing with government officials.[1]

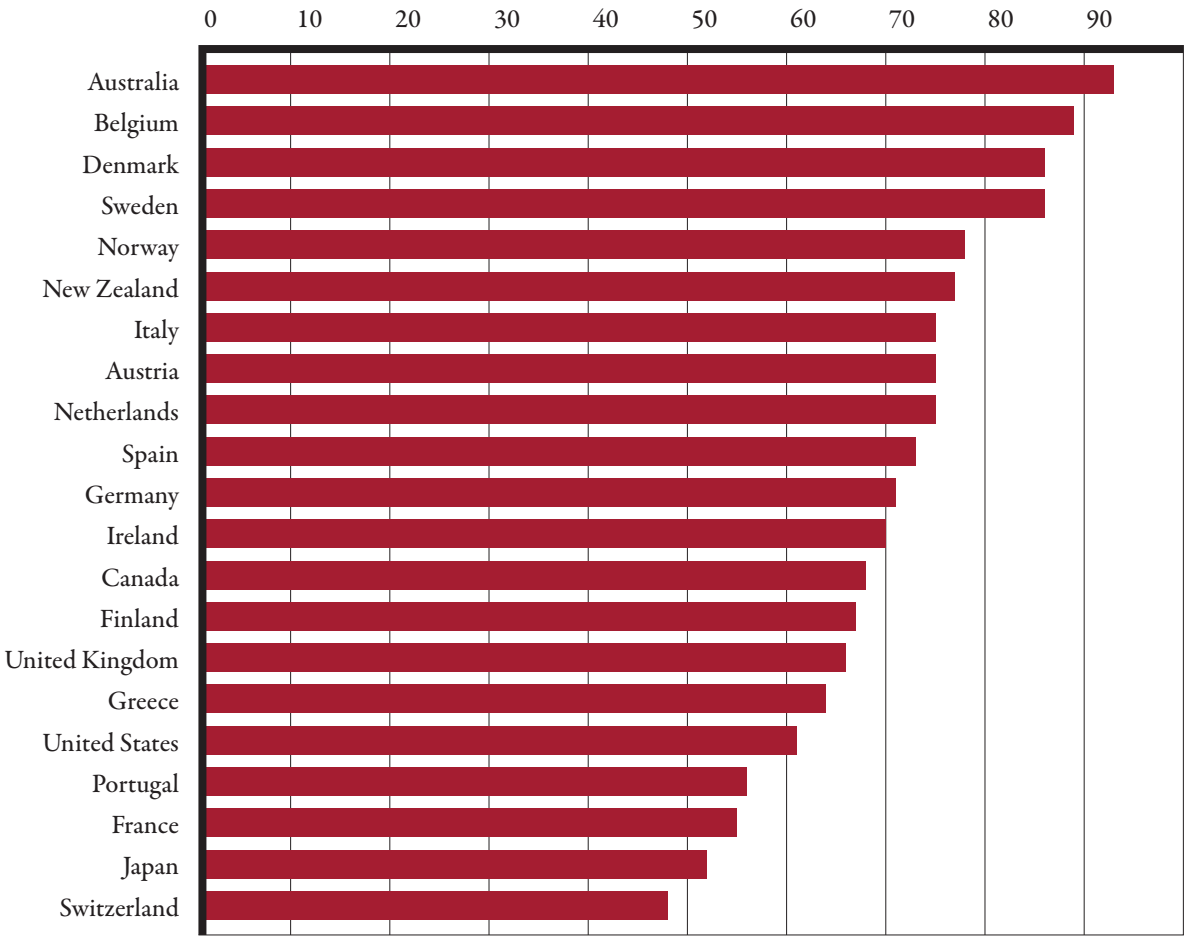
Despite such evidence, solutions to low voter turnout may take time to materialize. The American government took steps to address the registration concern with passage of the National Voter Registration Act in 1993. Although this effort to simplify the process resulted in higher registration rates, voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election was still less than 54 percent of the voting-age population and was only slightly higher in 2016. The 2020 election broke this trend, with about 62 percent of the voting age population casting a ballot, but it remains to be seen whether such a rate will persist, or whether 2020 was an anomaly.

Voting is the defining act of a democracy. While such problems as voter fraud cannot be ignored, the United States might take a lesson from many of its sister democracies: Low turnout is not an intractable given, but a problem that can be addressed by reducing obstacles and increasing incentives.

1. David Glass, Peverill Squire, and Raymond Wolfinger, "Voter Turnout: An International Comparison," *Public Opinion* (December, 1983): 49–55.

Figure 8.5 Percentage of Voting-Age Population That Votes in Twenty-one Western Countries

The United States ranks near the bottom of democratic countries in the percentage of the voting-age population that actually votes, primarily because it places more obstacles in front of and offers fewer incentives to voters.



DATA SOURCE: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Voter Turnout Trends Around the World," https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf (September 24, 2018); U.S. Elections Project, 2020 November General Election Turnout Rates, November 4, 2020, http://www.electproject.org/2020g (November 11, 2020).

8.3c Campaign Finance

Financing campaigns has always been an issue for candidates. The rate at which modern, media-based, jet-borne, poll-addicted campaigns consume money has made the problem even greater. The Federal Election Commission (FEC) reports that in congressional races alone candidates spent over $2.7 billion in the 2018 election cycle. The independent Center for Responsive Politics placed the total spending for the presidential contest and all other races in the 2016 election cycle at over $6.4 billion.[25] With the demands for more money have come growing public concern and increased legislative action to prevent political money from tainting the electoral and governmental processes.

In 1971 Congress passed the **Federal Election Campaign Act** (FECA). The unfolding of the Watergate scandal in 1974 and other subsequent developments have led to amendments to FECA. Current campaign finance law requires full disclosure of the sources and uses of campaign funds on the theory that requiring candidates to disclose where their money came from will encourage them to behave more ethically. Thus, candidates must file a complete accounting with the FEC of where they get their money and how they spend it.

The law bans direct contributions to candidates by corporations and labor unions, although such organizations can set up political action committees (PACs) through which their employees or members can contribute. (For more on PACs, see Chapter 7.) The law also places limits on campaign contributions. Currently individuals may give up to $5,200 per candidate in each election cycle, but thanks to a recent Supreme Court ruling there is no longer an overall cap.[26] In other words, a wealthy donor could contribute that full $5,200 to each candidate throughout the nation. An individual cannot give more than $5,000 to a PAC per election per year, and a PAC cannot give more than $5,000 to one candidate in a federal election. However, there are no limits on the total a PAC can contribute to all federal candidates or on the total a candidate can receive from all PACs. National party committees can also spend about six cents per member of the voting population on the presidential election campaign. The largest growth in spending in recent election cycles, however, has been in the so-called super PACs, which are unaffiliated with a particular campaign and are therefore not limited in the amount they can spend or that contributors can donate. An even more disturbing trend is that super PACs have begun using legal loopholes to avoid disclosing the sources of their funding until after an election cycle has concluded.[27]

Where does all the money for a political campaign come from?

Find out who contributes to your favorite (or least favorite!) candidates at the Center for Responsive Politics.

http://www.bvtlab.com/6Y8RN

The Revenue Act of 1971 created a system of public financing for presidential campaigns. Every taxpayer had the option of earmarking $1 of federal income tax for the **Presidential Election Campaign Fund**. This earmark has since been raised to $3. The money generated is distributed directly to presidential candidates according to specific formulas that tie amounts that can be spent to the rate of inflation. Before the party conventions, candidates are eligible for federal matching funds. To receive these funds, candidates must raise at least $5,000 in each of at least twenty states. Contributions are limited to $250 per contributor. Once a candidate has qualified, the federal government will match all individual contributions up to a specified amount if the candidate agrees to hold total spending under a limit. After the party conventions, major-party candidates who give up the right to accept any contributions from the public whatsoever can opt for federal financing of their campaigns, up to limits set by the law. Since the Revenue Act of 1971 was passed, all major-party presidential candidates opted for federal funding—until 2008, when Senator Barack Obama decided to forgo this option, citing a broken system that needed to be fixed. Senator McCain initially accepted, and then later rejected, the spending limits and the $84.1 million dollars from the federal government that came with it. Neither major-party candidate has accepted public funding since then.

Individual, PAC, and party contributions, as well as federal funds, are not the only money that can be spent on a candidate's behalf. Independent of the official campaign, individuals and PACs can spend as much as they want on behalf of a presidential candidate on such things as their own political advertisements and direct mail. Also, candidates willing to forgo federal funding can spend as much of their own money as they

Federal Election Campaign Act
Law passed in 1971 and amended several times that regulates campaign financing and requires full disclosure of sources and uses of campaign funds and limits contributions to political candidates

Presidential Election Campaign Fund
Pool of money available that is collected from a $3 check-off on the federal income tax form and is available to presidential candidates for campaign expenses

want. In 1992 independent candidate Ross Perot was estimated to have spent at least $60 million of his own money in his bid to win the White House. Surprisingly, though he is a multibillionaire who claimed not to need money from others to run his campaign, Donald Trump spent only about $66 million of his own money on his 2016 campaign—less than 20 percent of the total raised.[28] As the incumbent, Trump spent none of his own money throughout the 2020 primary season. In contrast, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg spent over $1 billion of his own money on his short-lived 2020 Democratic primary campaign. Candidates who do opt for federal funding are limited to spending $50,000 of their own money.

The problems concerning PACs have led some recent candidates to reject financial support from them. Many critics now call for the abolition of PACs or for tighter controls on them, but these actions would raise serious questions about freedom of speech. As a result, PACs and super PACs may be a permanent fixture of American politics. How candidates manage their relationships with them, however, is another, less predictable matter. Proposals for PAC reform include increasing the amounts that individuals can give to candidates and restoring tax deductions for political contributions.

The major loophole in the controls on money that can be spent on a candidate's behalf was a seemingly innocuous amendment to the campaign finance laws passed by Congress in 1979—the so-called **soft money** loophole. The tight controls on party spending imposed by the FECA laws in the early 1970s had the effect of drastically reducing the money that the national party could give to state and local parties to help pay for grassroots activities supporting the presidential campaign—handing out buttons and bumper stickers, for example. In 1979 Congress moved to solve this problem by allowing the national parties to raise and spend money, without any restrictions, for state and local parties, routine operating expenses, and "party-building" activities, as long as the expenditures were not directly related to any federal campaign.

The parties soon began to exploit this exception to the hilt. Within the law, they moved to solicit unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, and unions. Within the law, they cleverly spent the money in ways that technically were not directly associated with federal candidates, but clearly helped the candidates and freed up other party funds to help them. Under the new law, parties have to report virtually nothing about how the money is raised or spent.

Many critics, led by such organizations as Common Cause, see the soft money exception as an evasion of the entire structure of campaign finance law. These organizations have prodded the FEC to scrutinize whether state and local expenditures are too closely tied to federal candidates and to rewrite the rules governing the raising and spending of soft money. The FEC has been slow to make changes; however, one reform that stands some chance of being implemented is fuller disclosure of the sources and uses of soft money—partly because the parties have already begun to do this on a limited, voluntary basis in an attempt to head off more restrictive reforms. Some would like to see the 1979 amendment that opened the soft money loophole repealed, but such repeal seems unlikely given that so many of the legislators voting on the issue benefit from the soft money system. Indeed, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 closed many loopholes, but its failure to tighten restrictions on uncoordinated expenditures (see Chapter 7) led to the formation of new groups (super PACs) and a new approach to soft money spending.

soft money

A category of campaign money that was created by an amendment to the campaign finance laws in 1979, allowing the national parties to raise and spend money, essentially without restriction, for state and local parties, routine operating expenses, and party-building activities, as long as the expenditures are not directly related to any federal campaign

8.3d Getting Nominated

The modern-day orientation toward the media, supported by unending efforts to raise money, is superimposed over the traditional political events that in the heyday of political

parties were the central mechanisms by which candidates were selected: primaries, caucuses, and conventions.

The most visible part of the presidential nominating process in recent years has been the long string of **primary elections** and party caucuses, extending from the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary in early February, to the big primaries in such populous states as Illinois and California in March and April, to the latecomers like New Jersey and Montana in June. In 2020 many states had to postpone their contests by a month or more to make social distancing adjustments due to COVID-19. Primary elections are intraparty elections in which a political party selects the candidates it will run for office in the final interparty **general election**. Primary elections differ from state to state in terms of who is allowed to vote. In an **open primary**, any voter regardless of party affiliation can participate in the selection of the party's candidates. In a **closed primary**, only voters registered as members of the party can participate in the selection process for that party. Some states express their presidential preferences in caucuses, or small party meetings. **Caucuses** typically include discussion time before voting, thus giving them a more deliberative character than the simple voting of a primary election. Each state and each party has its own set of rules for caucuses, but the process often includes a series of conversations about the candidates in which efforts are made to come to consensus by persuading the supporters of less popular candidates to join the cause of candidates with greater support. The process continues until one or more candidate(s) reaches a previously agreed to threshold of support, or until the state's delegates are divided proportionately.

The earliest presidential primaries and caucuses are the most important because they quickly sort out the field into contenders and also-rans. Most important in this respect is the New Hampshire primary, which provides the first real electoral test of the candidates' popular appeal. Candidates in the earliest contests run not so much against one another as against the expectations that the press and polls have created about how those candidates should fare. After the early contests shape the field, the political battles move out onto a broader plain.

In 2016, the process took longer than expected for both parties. The Republicans started with an astounding seventeen candidates, with several staying in the race well into the primary season. Not until after political neophyte Donald Trump had secured a majority of delegates on May 3 did Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Ohio Governor John Kasich finally suspend their campaigns. Intraparty opposition to Trump's candidacy—symbolized by the #NeverTrump movement—made the real estate tycoon's nomination a topic of suspense right up until it was made official at the Republican convention in July. While the Democratic field was much smaller, both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders battled it out through the entire season of primaries and caucuses. Many observers attributed the long primary season to the Democratic Party's awarding of state delegates proportionately. Unlike the Republicans' winner-take-all approach in many states, any Democratic candidate securing at least 15 percent of a state's vote is eligible to receive delegates. This process allowed both candidates to continue accruing delegates, even in states where their opponent won the plurality of votes.

In 2020, the nomination worked very differently for the two parties. The Republicans had, in Donald Trump, an incumbent president who was eligible for reelection. So, they did what parties typically do in this case and renominated him. Though there were some intraparty grumblings about Trump no serious challenger emerged, and the sitting president received the party's nomination with little effort. On the Democratic side, however, over two dozen hopefuls vied for the opportunity to be their party's nominee. With multiple people of color, women, and an LGBT candidate, it was an impressively diverse field. In the end, though a number of contests had to be postponed or modified due to the COVID-19 threat, former vice president Joe Biden emerged with the nomination.

primary election
Preliminary election in which a party picks delegates to a party convention or its candidates for public office

general election
Election, which occurs in November, to choose the candidates who will hold public office, following primary elections held during the spring and summer

open primary
A primary election in which any voter, regardless of party affiliation, can participate

closed primary
A primary election in which only the members of the party holding the election are allowed to participate

caucus
A meeting of members of a political party (the members of a party in a legislature are also referred to as a party caucus), used in some states to select delegates to the national conventions, which nominate presidential candidates

The protracted series of primaries and caucuses leading up to the party conventions seems excessive to many observers. The crucial early events, which set the tone for the rest of the campaign, take place in relatively small and unrepresentative states. Some see this as a good thing. A long primary season with many of the early events centered in small states keeps the political process open by giving less well-known candidates with limited resources a chance to break into the political arena. Others see this as a disadvantage. They say the American political process is served less well by the election of obscure outsiders than by that of better-known insiders who understand how to make the system work as soon as they take office.

(Nuno21 / Shutterstock)

Then-Senator Kamala Harris giving a rebuttal response to the Republican National Convention and failure of President Trump on August 27, 2020. In November 2020, Harris became the first female elected to the office of vice president.

One reform proposal suggests that the primary process be compressed in time and broadened in representation by instituting either a one-day national primary or a series of regional primaries. Advocates argue that such moves would speed up the nominating process and give the citizens of every state, not just those with early delegate-selection procedures, the opportunity to play a meaningful role in the selection of presidential candidates. The one-day national primary strikes many as a radical change, giving only the best-known and most prosperous candidates a real chance at the nomination. A reasonable compromise between the current fragmented system and a single national primary has been proposed—a series of **regional primaries** in different areas of the country, perhaps spaced two weeks apart over two months. Lesser-known candidates would then have the opportunity to build from small beginnings in their home regions.

regional primary
A primary election held across an entire geographic area (for example, the South or the West) rather than within a single state

The state caucuses and primaries culminate in the selection of delegates to the national **party conventions** held in late summer of the presidential election year. It is here that the party nominees are finally selected. In the past, the outcome of the nominating contest was often in doubt as delegates wrangled over disputes about rules, credentials, and party platforms, and as decisions were made in "smoke-filled rooms" by party elites. In recent years conventions have become more sedate. The publicity surrounding the selection of delegates has made the convention process almost perfunctory. The parties have tried hard to settle differences in advance of—or off of—the convention floor, lest public bickering paint an inharmonious picture of the party on television screens across the country. As the parties have tried to control and exploit media coverage of their conventions, the news value of these political events has declined and the television networks have given them less coverage. Despite rumblings of dissatisfaction—and threats of an attempt to block Donald Trump's nomination on the floor of the convention—even the 2016 Republican convention went off without much controversy. The 2020 conventions, facing the challenges of social distancing, were postponed and then conducted largely in online and remote formats with smaller in-person gatherings, though ones which still allowed for televised speeches in prime time.

party convention
Regularly scheduled general meeting of a political party that is held for the purpose of ratifying party policies and deciding on party candidates

One of the most important strategic decisions a presidential candidate must make by the end of the convention is selection of a vice-presidential running mate. Much political folk wisdom revolves around this choice, particularly the need to **balance the ticket** geographically or ideologically. The idea is to pick a running mate who differs from the presidential candidate in a way that makes the ticket attractive to a broader range of

balance the ticket
A political party's effort to appeal to a wider cross-section of voters by providing regional or ideological balance in its nominations for president and vice president

(The Toidi / Shutterstock)

Sample ballot from the 2020 presidential election.

voters. Thus, southern outsider Jimmy Carter picked northern insider Walter Mondale in 1976, western outsider Ronald Reagan picked eastern insider George Bush in 1980, and eastern liberal Michael Dukakis picked southern conservative Lloyd Bentsen in 1988. Bill Clinton broke with this practice in 1992 when he chose Al Gore, a moderate white Southern male like himself, as his running mate. In 2000, Al Gore attempted to purify a candidacy tainted by connection to campaign finance scandals and chose Joe Lieberman, a senator whose ethical standards were above reproach. George W. Bush, perceived by some as being an intellectual lightweight, chose the more cerebral Dick Cheney to balance his ticket. In 2004, John Kerry of Massachusetts went the regional route, selecting North Carolina Senator John Edwards to provide the ticket with broader appeal in the South. In 2008, Barack Obama selected Delaware Senator Joe Biden to give his ticket more experience in the field of foreign policy. John McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin in order to shore up support from the more conservative wing of the Republican Party. In 2012, Mitt Romney also catered to conservative Republicans with his choice of running mate, Paul Ryan. Unlike McCain, though, Romney avoided accusations that he had chosen an inexperienced political lightweight by selecting Wisconsin Representative Ryan, a member of Congress since 1999 who had already held important leadership roles, such as chair of the House Budget Committee. In 2016, and again in 2020, Donald Trump picked Indiana governor Mike Pence, both to appeal to the morally conservative wing of his party and to balance his own bombastic style with Pence's more sedate tone. Moreover, it provided the ticket with one member who had held office before. Hillary Clinton chose Tim Kaine, a senator from Virginia who was seen as both likable and unconnected to scandal. Democrat Joe Biden declared early on that he would choose a female running mate in 2020. Ultimately, he stayed true to his word and selected California Senator Kamala Harris. Harris became the third female nominated by a major party for the vice presidency and the first person of African American and Indian descent.

The vice presidency has long been the object of political scorn. Nevertheless, the offer of the vice-presidential nomination is something that few politicians would sneer at. The amenities that go with the job are first-class, and recent presidents have gone to special lengths to see that their seconds have meaningful work. Perhaps most important is the fact that the vice presidency is the most direct stepping-stone to the White House. Of the forty-seven people who have served as vice president, fourteen have gone on to become president. No job in the world gives its holder better odds of becoming president. However, the ascent typically comes by death of the president rather than election. Since 1800, only two incumbent vice presidents have gone on to win a presidential election: Martin Van Buren in 1836 and George Bush in 1988.

8.3e The Electoral College

The main factor driving strategic decisions in the general election is the **Electoral College**. (Discussed in Chapter 2 as a federalism issue, the topic is revisited here as a key facet of presidential elections.) The election of the president of the United States is an indirect process: Citizens' votes elect electors; and those electors, constituted as the Electoral College, elect the president. Each state gets a number of electors equal to the combined

Electoral College
This institution was established by the Constitution for electing the president and vice president. Electors chosen by the voters actually elect the president and vice president. Each state has a number of electors equal to the total number of its senators and representatives, while the District of Columbia (under the terms of the Twenty-third Amendment) has three electors.

Table 8.1 Electoral Votes, 2020 Presidential Election

State	Trump	Biden	State	Trump	Biden
Alabama	9	--	Nebraska	4	1
Alaska	3	--	Nevada	—	6
Arizona	--	11	New Hampshire	—	4
Arkansas	6	--	New Jersey	--	14
California	--	55	New Mexico	--	5
Colorado	--	9	New York	—	29
Connecticut	--	7	North Carolina	15	—
Delaware	--	3	North Dakota	3	—
Florida	29	--	Ohio	18	--
Georgia	--	16	Oklahoma	7	--
Hawaii	--	4	Oregon	--	7
Idaho	4	--	Pennsylvania	--	20
Illinois	—	20	Rhode Island	--	4
Indiana	11	—	South Carolina	9	--
Iowa	6	--	South Dakota	3	--
Kansas	6	--	Tennessee	11	--
Kentucky	8	--	Texas	38	--
Louisiana	8	--	Utah	6	--
Maine	1	3	Vermont	--	3
Maryland	--	10	Viginia	--	13
Massachusetts	--	11	Washington	--	8
Michigan	--	16	Washington, DC	—	3
Minnesota	--	10	West Virginia	5	--
Mississippi	6	--	Wisconsin	--	10
Missouri	10	--	Wyoming	3	--
Montana	3	--	**TOTAL**	**232**	**306**

number of its representatives in the Senate and House. Thus, every state gets at least three electors, with additional electors depending on the size of its population. The District of Columbia currently gets three electors under the terms of the **Twenty-third Amendment** (1961). (Table 8.1 shows the number of electoral votes for each state.) The Electoral College has 538 in all, with 270 needed to win the presidency. There is no constitutional requirement about how states choose their electors; such choices are left to the discretion of each state's legislature. All but two of the states have chosen to award all their electoral votes to the candidate (actually the slate of electors for that candidate) who wins a plurality in the state. The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska, which award two electoral votes to the statewide winner and the rest of their electoral votes by congressional district.

The members of the Electoral College never actually meet in one place. Electors from each state meet in their state capitals to cast their ballots on or about December 15 of the election year. The results are sent to the U.S. Senate; and the president of the Senate (who is, of course, the vice president of the United States) presides over the counting of the results in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives. A presidential candidate who has a majority (more than 50 percent) of the electoral votes is elected outright. If no candidate has a majority, the House of Representatives—with each state delegation casting a single vote—elects a president by majority from among the top three contenders. If no president can be elected by this process, the vice president becomes acting president. A vice-presidential candidate who has a majority is elected outright. If no candidate has a majority, the Senate picks the vice president from the top two contenders by majority vote of individual members. In the days following the 2000 election, Al Gore found himself with 267 electoral votes and George W. Bush had 246—with disputed Florida returns still in question. The need for the House of Representatives to decide the outcome was averted when the Supreme Court ruled against additional recounts and Bush was declared the winner in Florida, allowing him to clear the threshold with 271 electoral votes. Though still close, the 2004 contest was more decisive, with Bush beating Kerry 286–252. In 2008, Barack Obama claimed 365 electoral votes to McCain's 173, providing the most decisive electoral outcome since 1996. In 2012, Obama was reelected with 332 electoral votes to Romney's 206. In 2016, Hillary Clinton received nearly 3 million more popular votes than Donald Trump but came up short in the Electoral College, receiving only 227 electoral votes to Trump's 304. This unusual outcome was due to Clinton winning big in some heavily populated states and losing narrowly in others. In 2020, Joe Biden racked up over 5 million more popular votes than incumbent Donald Trump and was victorious in the Electoral College 306–232. Though the popular vote was very close in some swing states, and Trump's campaign asked for recounts and filed numerous lawsuits alleging fraud or other improprieties, these challenges were largely found meritless and did not affect the outcome of the contest.

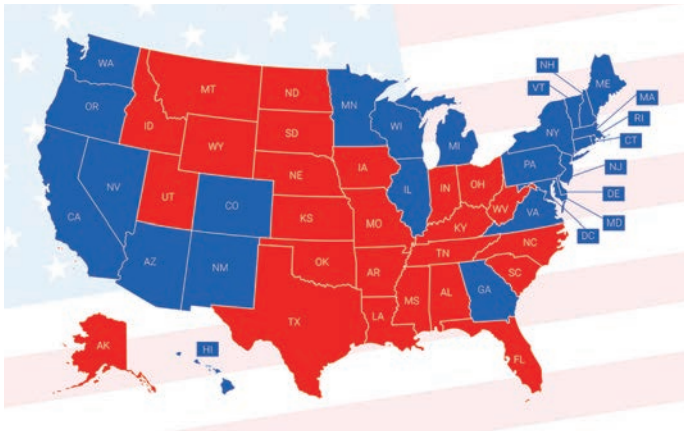
The Electoral College has been, perhaps, the most prominent target of the advocates of electoral reform. Because the number of senators as well as the number of representatives determines a state's representation, small states are represented out of proportion to their populations. Electors are chosen state by state by plurality election, so a winner's advantage and a loser's disadvantage, no matter how slim, are magnified in the extreme. The greatest gains can be made at the smallest cost with narrow victories in big states, so candidates often focus their efforts almost entirely in the larger states. Further, persons chosen as electors for a particular presidential ticket are under no effective legal obligation to actually cast their ballots for that ticket (the **faithless elector** problem). In fact, in 2016, there were seven faithless electors—five refusing to cast a ballot for Clinton and two refusing to vote for Trump. This explains the slightly lower totals for the states of Washington, Texas, and Hawaii. To correct this problem, many states have passed laws

Twenty-third Amendment
Constitutional amendment adopted in 1961 granting the District of Columbia three electors in the Electoral College

faithless elector
A person who is chosen to vote for particular presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the Electoral College but who, nevertheless, votes for different presidential and vice-presidential candidates

that require electors to cast their votes for the winner of the state's popular vote. The Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of such laws in 2020.[29]

Worst of all, to some people, is the prospect of a popular-minority president—a president who gets fewer popular votes than the opponent but still wins the presidency. This has happened five times in American history. In 1824 Andrew Jackson received more votes than John Quincy Adams, but the House chose Adams as president. In 1888, popular-vote winner Grover Cleveland lost to Benjamin Harrison. In 1876, the Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden outpolled Republican Rutherford B. Hayes; but a Republican-controlled commission appointed to settle a dispute over the electoral votes of three southern states awarded them—and thus the White House—to Hayes. The 2000 presidential contest provides a more recent occurrence, when Gore received 50,992,335 popular votes to George W. Bush's 50,455,156, making Gore the popular-vote winner but electoral-vote loser. Hillary Clinton became the most recent to share this fate in 2016—her popular vote total of 65,853,514 to Trump's 62,984,828 made Donald Trump the most extreme popular-minority president in modern American history.



(Shutterstock)

This is how the USA voted in the 2020 presidential election, showing the electoral votes for each state going to the Republicans (red) or to the Democrats (blue).

Given these inadequacies, it should not be surprising that Americans are not generally supportive of the Electoral College. A consistent majority of respondents have favored eliminating it since Gallup began asking this question in its polls in 1948.[30] To repair all these alleged defects, reformers have come up with a variety of changes. The most sweeping proposal is to do away with the Electoral College entirely and to replace it with **direct popular election** of the president and vice president. Thus, whichever candidate received the largest percentage of the total national popular vote would win the White House. Such a process solves all the problems cited so far, but critics of direct national election see it as jeopardizing the delicate balance of the American political system. Simple plurality election would mean that presidents could be elected with the support of far less than half the people. Instituting a requirement of a majority of the votes to be elected might often mean a runoff election. That, in turn, would encourage more candidates to run in the first-round election. The result might be the end of the two-party, middle-of-the-road approach that has so long characterized American politics. Critics of the popular election can easily point to one of the Electoral College's greatest virtues: With only the five exceptions cited, it almost always produces a clear-cut winner.

direct popular election
Selection of officials on the basis of those receiving the largest number of votes cast, sometimes referring to a proposal to choose the president and vice president on this basis rather than through the Electoral College

Seeing problems with both the current Electoral College and direct popular election, moderate reformers propose to steer a course somewhere between the two. One idea for reducing the impact of the statewide winner-take-all system with the resultant candidate emphasis on big states is to move to a winner-take-all system on the level of congressional districts, as Maine and Nebraska have done. This would reduce the tendency of large blocs of votes to be awarded on the basis of narrow popular-vote margins. Solutions to the faithless elector problem propose requiring electors to vote for the presidential candidate under whose banner they were elected or to do away with electors completely and simply tally up electoral votes.

Another call for reform focuses on the problems generated by a president who is compelled to spend the last half of a first term running for a second term. Critics of the current law, which limits a president to two full four-year terms, contend that

single-term presidents do not have enough time to master the job and that first-term presidents who aspire to a second term are diverted from their duties by their efforts to get reelected. Defenders of the status quo argue that the limitation of two four-year terms gives good presidents plenty of time to achieve their objectives and allows the public ample opportunity to vote out poor presidents. A president limited to a single term, they say, would become an instant lame duck. A compromise would be to allow the president one longer term, for example, a term of six years (see "A Six-Year Term for Presidents?" in Chapter 10).[31]

8.3f Campaign Strategies

Presidential campaigns must pay careful attention to several strategic problems. One such problem is that of image. Most candidates seek to establish their image in the public mind. For an incumbent, the choice is usually an easy one: to exploit as much as possible the resources of the presidency. Presidents often try to look fully occupied with governing the country and too busy to engage in partisan politics. For opponents the choices are more difficult. Should the challenger go on the attack against the incumbent president or play the role of the statesperson instead? If the president is popular, the electorate may take the former as an attack on the country; however, the latter course is likely to attract little attention. Neither of these does the challenger much good.

Look at maps, examine party success over time, and compare vote totals for every presidential election at Dave Leip's *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*.

http://www.bvtlab.com/776aj

How much focus should be placed on issues is another strategic problem. Should the candidate present specific proposals regarding national problems or instead project a broad and necessarily fuzzy vision of the future? The American people continually decry candidates who do not take clear positions on issues because they deny voters a choice. It is sobering to note, however, that the two candidates in postwar history who gave the public the clearest choices, the conservative Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the liberal George McGovern in 1972, went down in two of the biggest defeats in American electoral history.

(Smithsonian Institution Archives (1993) via Wikimedia)

George Bush and Bill Clinton shake hands just after the 1993 inaugural ceremonies at the U.S. Capitol.

Nowhere are the questions of images and issues raised more directly and dramatically than in presidential debates. For an incumbent, a debate is close to a no-win proposition. It gives publicity to the opponent, puts the challenger on an equal footing with the president, and risks embarrassment either by an inadvertent slip or by an aggressive challenger. Only the desire not to appear intimidated keeps a president from opting out of debates completely. As a result, incumbents usually want as few debates and as much structure as possible. For a nonincumbent, a debate represents perhaps the best strategic opportunity of the campaign. It provides the greatest media exposure, "presidential" standing, a

chance to flush the president (if the incumbent is the opponent) out of the Rose Garden, and an opportunity to display one's intellectual, political, and rhetorical wares.

The 1992 debates provided a case study on many of these issues. George Bush, as an incumbent tied to a weak economy facing an experienced and articulate debater in Bill Clinton, initially tried to avoid debates as long as possible. Clinton's taunts that Bush was afraid to debate (accompanied by Clinton supporters dressed in chicken suits haunting Bush campaign appearances) and Clinton's persistent lead in the polls forced Bush campaign advisers to go with a heavy debate schedule as one of their few hopes of turning the election around.

In the debates, Clinton appeared presidential and Bush failed to deliver either a negative knockout punch or a positive vision of his plans for a second term. In fact, many saw Bush's fumbling response in the second debate to a young woman's question about how the bad economy had affected him personally as a clear sign that he was not going to be able to turn the election around. Bill Clinton, who followed up with a more articulate and sensitive response to that question, and Ross Perot, who scored overall with his homespun rhetoric and humorous one-liners, emerged as the overall winners.

The questions of campaign strategy are numerous and complex. The most vexing fact, however, is that strategy is always at the mercy of events. An unforeseen event can make a candidate look like a hero or a fool. A serious economic dislocation, a negative revelation about an associate, an outbreak of violence halfway around the world—any of these things can make one candidate look inept and another candidate look "presidential." Because incumbent presidents have the power to take action rather than just talk about events, they generally gain some advantage in such circumstances. If events prove to be intractable, incumbent presidents can suffer badly. Jimmy Carter's futile struggle to free the hostages from the American embassy in Tehran, Iran, during the 1980 campaign; George Bush's poor economic record in 1992; and Donald Trump's inability to develop an effective plan to combat the spread of COVID-19 stand as recent examples. Sometimes there is little anyone, even the president of the United States, can do to overcome events.

8.4 The Candidate's Perspective: Running for Congress

Running for Congress is much like running for president, except the stage is smaller, of course—a state (for the Senate) or a congressional district (for the House) instead of the entire country. The basic strategic elements are the same: the problem of getting money; the two-phase contest of getting the nomination and then winning the election; the impact of party, candidate appeal, and issues; the growing importance of the media; the long hours on the campaign trail; and so on. However, different aspects tend to be particularly problematic.

8.4a Campaign Finance

Like presidential campaigns, House and Senate elections have become big-money enterprises. Candidates need money for television advertising, direct-mail operations to get their messages across and raise more money, polling to see how their messages are playing, and expensive media consultants. According to Federal Election Commission statistics,

Politics and Ideas

Midterm Elections: Reflection and Change

On November 6, 2018, American voters went to the polls to cast their ballots in elections for all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and about one-third of the U.S. Senate. Dubbed *midterm* elections, these federal elections come in even-numbered years when there is not a presidential election. Midterm elections are typically characterized by relatively low turnout and serve both as an opportunity for the nation to reflect on the performance of the incumbent president and his or her party and as the beginning of speculation about the upcoming presidential race. The 2018 midterms were no exception to these trends. Even though turnout was higher for a midterm than it had been in decades, only 49.4 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot—as opposed to the 60.1 percent who had voted in the 2016 presidential election.[1] The lack of a presidential race, combined with the lack of competitiveness and voter interest that characterizes many congressional races, produces far fewer voters.

Despite lower turnout, midterm elections often serve as a referendum on the president. In six of the last seven second-term midterm elections, the president's party lost congressional seats. On average, the opposition party gains six Senate seats and twenty-nine House seats during the sixth year of a presidency. As an example, 2014 was fairly typical in this regard, when President Barack Obama's Democrats lost a total of twenty-two seats in both houses. First-term midterm elections—like the one in 2018—have just as dismal a record. In 2002, George W. Bush was the only president since 1962 to gain seats for his party during a first-term midterm election. President Donald Trump's Republican Party did not deviate from the typical pattern of losing seats. In 2018, Republicans lost nearly forty House seats and gained only two Senate seats, leading to a new Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. These changes meant that President Trump would have a more difficult time achieving his legislative agenda than he had during the first two years of his presidency.

The media attention around midterm elections often focuses on potential contenders for the White House. In this regard, as well, 2018 was no exception. On the Democratic side, the reelection campaigns of Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand were spotlighted not because they were in close races—both won easily—but because they were seen as potential precursors to 2020 presidential runs. Texas Senate candidate Beto O'Rourke, even though he lost to Republican incumbent Ted Cruz, also demonstrated his broad national appeal. On the Republican side, Trump garnered a large amount of media attention throughout the campaign season. Taking pride in the importance of his support, President Trump endorsed several Republican candidates, which gave him an opportunity to speak at campaign rallies despite not being up for reelection himself until 2020. When the smoke had cleared, Trump's endorsement actually resulted in a significant net loss for his party; however, in politics, almost everything is subject to "spin." The president himself presented the election result as a win, boasting via Twitter of receiving "so many Congratulations from so many on our Big Victory."[2]

How did events play out in the 116th Congress (2019–20)? Did the perceived presidential candidates behave accordingly? In retrospect, what should they have done differently? The 115th Congress (2017–19) coincided with the first two years of a new presidency. How did this result in different strategies and expectations from the 116th? How did candidates position themselves for the 2020 elections, and what issues did they focus on?

1. U.S. Election Project, http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data (November 21, 2018).

2. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), November 7, 2018, https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetem-bed%7Ctwterm%5E1060130202418864129&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vox.com%2F2018%2F11%2F7%2F18071396%2Fmidterm-elections-results-trump-big-victory-twitter (November 21, 2018).

candidates for the House and Senate in the 2018 midterm elections spent more than $2.7 billion on their contests. This figure represents more than a 50 percent increase in spending over the 2010 midterm election cycle.[32]

Although public financing has been an important resource for presidential elections, congressional campaigns continue to operate without it. This leaves, as the primary resources for most congressional campaigns, money donated or spent by individuals,

parties, and PACs. Recent congressional elections have seen widespread efforts by candidates and parties to get around the restrictions imposed by federal campaign finance laws. Foremost among such efforts was the increasing use of independent PAC expenditures to avoid the legal limits on direct contributions to candidates and the use of soft money by parties. Since the Court's 2010 decision in Citizens United, the spending by nonaffiliated independent expenditure groups known as super PACs has shown a dramatic increase.[33]

A key question is whether this money actually helps a candidate. Research suggests that it helps challengers more than officeholders. The more money a challenger spends, the more likely he or she is to defeat the incumbent. Such a tendency is probably due to the fact that money can be used to buy the name recognition and visibility necessary to offset the advantages of incumbency. Incumbents who spend a lot of money, however, do not fare as well as those who spend less. This is probably because incumbents tend to spend a lot of money only when they find themselves facing a serious challenge.[34]

As in presidential campaigns, financing is a frequent target for reform in congressional campaigns. The focuses for reform are similar in some respects—for example, too much PAC money, particularly for incumbents, and too much soft money. However, the problems for congressional elections are exacerbated by the lack of public financing of congressional campaigns. This makes congressional candidates much more dependent than presidential candidates on problematic sources of funds. Thus, the most significant campaign reform in congressional campaigns would be to institute public funding—a change that would be supported by about 50 percent of Americans.[35] Congress has struggled repeatedly over the last several years to institute this reform, but so far it has been unable to arrive at any plan agreeable to both Democrats and Republicans. Many Democrats and Republicans now say they want public financing; the bone of contention lies over whether spending limits should be imposed. Democrats want limits because they fear the wealth and fundraising potential of some Republican candidates. Republicans, on the other hand, oppose limits because they think outspending firmly entrenched Democratic incumbents is the only way to dislodge them.

Even the modest reforms of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 were struck a blow in 2008, when the Supreme Court found one of its provisions—the so-called "Millionaire's Amendment"—unconstitutional. The Court said the provision, which allowed higher party-contribution limits to candidates whose opponents exceeded certain self-financing thresholds, was an infringement of First Amendment speech rights.[36]

8.4b Incumbency

Incumbency is even more of an asset to members of Congress than it is to presidents. In 2020, about 95 percent of all representatives who ran for reelection won. In the Senate, incumbency is also an important advantage, although the retention rates are typically somewhat lower. In 2020, the success rate for incumbent senators was about 90 percent. In 2018, incumbents won 93 percent of the time in the House and 86 percent of the time in the Senate. Of course, political movements can challenge the incumbency advantage from time to time. The Tea Party movement and other anti-incumbency sentiment led to the defeat of over sixty incumbent legislators who were seeking reelection during the 2010 midterm elections.

safe seats
Congressional districts in which the division of voters between the parties is so lopsided as to virtually ensure one party of victory

The main reason for the frequent difference between the House and Senate return rates is that about five out of six congressional districts are **safe seats**. That is, House districts tend to be homogeneous, and the division of party affiliation within them is lopsided enough that one or the other party is virtually assured of victory. Because senators represent states, their "districts" are often more heterogeneous, with a more even division

between the parties. For both representatives and senators, incumbents are usually much better known than their challengers.[37]

As described in Chapter 9, incumbents in Congress continually boost themselves by taking credit for every beneficial activity the federal government undertakes in their states and districts. Incumbents, also, generally have a much easier time raising campaign funds. For example, in recent elections, more than 80 percent of all PAC money contributed to House campaigns went to incumbents. In addition, members of Congress are in a good position to use the resources of their offices to get reelected. One of the most valuable resources they have is the franking privilege, the right to send out official mail without any postage. Senators and representatives frequently use this privilege to send out newsletters extolling their activities on behalf of the district or questionnaires soliciting the public's opinion on current issues. In almost every case, the name and face of the legislator are prominently displayed. Another valuable resource is staff. Most members of Congress use much of their staff's time to perform constituency services—mostly running interference through the Washington bureaucracy for constituents with problems. Needless to say, the hope is that the satisfied home voters will remember the favors on Election Day.

Critics charge that the high rates of reelection for incumbents have led to legislative stagnation and unresponsiveness. One solution that has attracted broad attention in recent years is **term limits**, restricting the number of terms a person can serve in the House or Senate (for example, to twelve years). Term limits were on the ballot in fourteen states in 1992 and won in all fourteen. In 1995, the Supreme Court held that these restrictions were unconstitutional at the federal level, although limitations on state-level legislators now exist in about fifteen states.[38] Another solution is to reduce the advantages that come with a seat in the House or Senate, in particular to limit the amount of mail members of Congress may send at public expense under their franking privilege. A series of revisions to the franking privilege in the late 1990s requires members of Congress to deduct franking costs from their official budgets, even though there is no restriction on the amount of their budgets they can use for mailings.

(Shutterstock)

In the 2016 presidential elections, Donald Trump brought attention to the issue of immigration by declaring that, if elected, he would have a wall built along the border with Mexico. This caused the impact of the immigration issue to soar.

8.4c Parties, Candidates, and Issues

After incumbency, the single most important determinant of voting in congressional races is party. Both party and incumbency provide "low-cost" information cues to people facing a voting decision. The candidate's party is supplied on the ballot. The incumbent's name and generally positive reputation are known. Either may be used with little time and effort in information gathering—and either one may be substituted for the other.[39]

Earlier discussion indicated that the issues themselves usually do not play a major role in presidential campaigns. The same is even truer of congressional campaigns. The major problem is information, or rather a lack of it. If, as in many contests, voters do not even recognize the names of the candidates, they obviously know even less about the candidates' positions and voting records on the issues.[40] Of course, the impact of issues can soar when differences between the candidates are sharp and well publicized on matters

term limits
Laws restricting the number of terms an elected representative may serve—the Court has struck down state efforts to limit terms for federal offices, but has allowed state laws that limit terms for elected officials at the state level

of importance. The only issue that consistently achieves salience with the public is the economy. In both presidential and midterm election years, the better the economy is doing, the better the congressional candidates of the president's party do.[41]

The other major factor in congressional voting, as in presidential voting, is the candidates themselves. Candidates for the House rest their appeal on such general qualities as trust and competence, and voters seem to respond most favorably to them.[42] Senate candidates, in contrast, are evaluated in more specific terms of experience and ability, qualities that are closer to those by which presidential candidates are judged.[43] This difference in factors affecting voting decisions between House and Senate candidates is probably due to the fact that Senate candidates are generally better known than House candidates. Negative campaigning is as much a trend and an issue for congressional campaigns as it is for presidential ones.

The success of the congressional candidates from each party may be affected by the popularity of their party's president or presidential candidate. In the years when congressional elections coincide with a presidential election, a presidential candidate whose popularity appears to give a boost to his party's candidates for the House and Senate is said to have coattails. Ronald Reagan was said to have coattails in 1980 because his appeal seemed to help Republican congressional candidates to do better than had been expected. In contrast, in 1988, George Bush was said to have no coattails because his party picked up no seats. In four of the last seven presidential elections, the winning candidate's party actually lost seats in Congress—an effect known as negative coattails. In midterm elections, the congressional vote is often interpreted as a referendum on how the president is doing. Historically, the president's party has tended to lose congressional seats in midterm elections. A gain or a small loss for the president's party is interpreted as an endorsement of the president and a big loss as repudiation. In the 2006 midterm elections, President Bush's Republican Party lost thirty-four seats; and in the 2010 midterm elections, President Obama's Democratic Party lost sixty-nine seats. The 2010 midterm elections proved to be the largest swing in recent years, with the Republicans gaining seventy seats and regaining the majority in the House of Representatives. The news only got worse for President Obama in the 2014 midterm elections. His party lost its majority in the Senate—and in the House, Republicans made enough gains to secure their largest majority since just after World War II. In the 2018 midterms, President Trump's Republican Party gained two seats in the Senate, where it retained its majority, but lost nearly forty seats in the House of Representatives, where it became the minority party.

Chapter Review

1. The American voter confronts two fundamental decisions on Election Day: whether or not to vote and, if so, how to vote. Qualifications for voting and registration in most states define the boundaries of the electorate. Beyond that, voting turnout varies substantially with social characteristics and psychological outlook toward politics.
2. The voter's decision about how to vote is similarly influenced by a broad range of factors. Throughout much of American history, partisanship has established a baseline in the division of the vote; but in recent years, opinions about candidates and issues have caused voters to break from party lines.
3. Presidential candidates confront a challenge that is difficult in both strategic and physical terms. Strategically, a candidate for president confronts two separate contests: the intraparty race for the nomination and the interparty race for the White House. Physically, the candidate faces a grueling journey that begins not long after one presidential election and ends in elation or disappointment on election night four years later.
4. Congressional candidates confront a similar range of problems in getting elected. Money is an even greater problem because public financing has not yet come to congressional campaigns. Private contributions, particularly from PACs, remain a major source of political lifeblood. Because congressional elections are generally less visible than presidential campaigns, personalities and issues usually count for less and party and incumbency for more.

Key Terms

Readings for Further Study

The voter's side of campaigns and elections is explored in two major works on voting, the classic *The American Voter* by Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and in *The Changing American Voter*, rev. ed., by Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). The former is based on surveys from the 1950s, and the latter with surveys from the 1960s and 1970s; the latter also updates and challenges, in some cases, the earlier study. The ideas in these volumes have been updated with the publication of *The American Voter Revisited* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008) by Michael Lewis-Beck, William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg.

Examinations of more recent elections include *Political Behavior in Midterm Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2015), by Elizabeth A. Theiss-Morse, Michael W. Wagner, William H. Flanigan, and Nancy H. Zingale; Elizabeth A. Theiss-Morse and Michael W. Wagner's *2018 Congressional Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2019); *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, 14th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2018) by Elizabeth A. Theiss-Morse, Michael W. Wagner, William H. Flanigan and Nancy H. Zingale, and *The American Campaign,* 2nd ed., by James E. Campbell (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

Two excellent studies of voting turnout are Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980) and Ruy A. Teixeira *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1992). A recent study on how the electorate can be changed is Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Melissa R. Michelson's *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate Through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

The literature on presidential campaigns and elections is rich indeed. Virtually every election spawns at least one substantial account of what "really" went on. Most notable is the *Making of the President* series by Theodore H. White—particularly the classic *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1988).

An interesting philosophical question is raised in Martin P. Wattenberg's *Is Voting for Young People?*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020). Russell J. Dalton takes up a similar theme in *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics,* 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2020).

Notes

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2. Steven Rosenstone and Raymond Wolfinger, "The Effect of Registration Laws on Voter Turnout," *American Political Science Review 72* (1978): 22–45; G. Bingham Powell Jr., "American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective," *American Political Science Review 80* (1986): 35; Brennan Center for Justice, *Voting Law Changes in 2012*, http://brennan.3cdn.net/92635ddafbc09e8d88_i3m6bjdeh.pdf (August 9, 2012).
3. National Conference of State Legislatures, "Same Day Voter Registration," June 28, 2019, https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-registration.aspx (July 5, 2020).
4. Federal Election Commission, *The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act on the Administration of Elections for Federal Office, 1997–1998*, http://www.fec.gov/pages/9798NVRAexec.htm (August 26, 2001).
5. U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016," May 2017.
6. Angus Campbell, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change," in *Elections and the Political Order*, eds. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes (New York: Wiley, 1966), p. 41.

7. Walter Dean Burnham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," *American Political Science Review 59* (1965): 7–28.

8. Philip E. Converse, "Change in the American Electorate," in *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, eds. Angus Campbell and Philip E. Converse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972), pp. 281–286.

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10. This argument is most often associated with Bernard Berelson, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 305–323.

11. "Election 2016: Exit Polls," *The New York Times,* November 8, 2016.

12. "National Exit Polls: How Different Groups Voted," *The New York Times,* November 3, 2020.

13. Donald Stokes, "Some Dynamic Elements of Contests for the Presidency," *American Political Science Review 60* (1966): 19–28.

14. The Gallup Organization, "Clinton's Biggest Asset, Trump's Biggest Liability: Experience," June 3, 2016.

15. "Manhattan Project, 1992," *Newsweek* special election edition (November/December 1992): 40–56.

16. The Gallup Organization, 2001.

17. The Gallup Organization, "Likeability Top Characteristic for Both Romney and Obama," June 26, 2012.

18. The Gallup Organization, "Clinton's Biggest Asset, Trump's Biggest Liability: Experience," June 3, 2016.

19. The Gallup Organization, "Americans' Views of Trump's Character Firmly Established," June 18, 2020, https://news.gallup.com/poll/312737/americans-views-trump-character-firmly-established.aspx (July 5, 2020).

20. Monmouth University, "More Voters Trust Biden on Race Relations," June 3, 2020, https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_060320/ (July 7, 2020).

21. The Gallup Organization, 2004.

22. The Gallup Organization, "Likeability Top Characteristic for Both Romney and Obama."

23. The Gallup Organization, 2001.

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32. Federal Election Commission, https://transition.fec.gov/press/campaign_finance_statistics.shtml (July 11, 2020).

33. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 50 (2010).

34. Gary Jacobson, *Money in Congressional Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 49.

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Pop Quiz

1. Two social characteristics that show the strongest relation to voting turnout are _____ and _____.
2. The three virtues that voters seem to consider most important in a candidate are attractive personal qualities, _____, and _____.
3. Today, presidential candidates tend to rely on more professional _____ _____ to plan and execute their campaign strategy.
4. A major loophole in the controls on money that can be spent on a presidential candidate's behalf is the ability of state and local parties to raise _____ _____.
5. A presidential candidate whose popularity appears to give a boost to his party's candidates for the House and Senate is said to have _____.
6. Studies have shown that younger people are more likely to vote than older people. T F
7. In recent years, political party affiliation has become a less important determinant of voting decisions. T F
8. Candidates tend to favor long television advertisements in order to maximize public exposure and issue formulation. T F
9. An incumbent president has little to gain in accepting a debate with his opponent. T F
10. Candidates for the House and Senate receive only a small amount of public financing, too little to run a successful campaign. T F
11. The two social characteristics that show the strongest relation to voting are _____ and _____.
    A) party identification, income
    B) race, religion
    C) age, education
    D) sex, regional habitat
12. In recent years, which of the following is true of serious contenders for the presidency?
    A) They have most often come from the successful side of mainstream America.
    B) They usually come from the House of Representatives.
    C) They have never, until George Bush, served as vice president.
    D) They have rarely had college educations.
13. Which of the following is true of the Federal Election Campaign Act?
    A) It creates a system of public financing for presidential campaigns through the federal income tax system.
    B) It limits the amount of money a PAC can contribute to all federal candidates.
    C) It requires all contributions to be funneled through the state and local political party.
    D) It requires full disclosure of sources and uses of campaign funds.
14. Which of the following applies to presidential debates?
    A) They are most advantageous for nonincumbents.
    B) They are required by law before a candidate can receive federal funds.
    C) They have had little impact on the outcome of presidential elections.
    D) All of the above
15. Which of the following is true of midterm congressional elections?
    A) They usually result in a gain for the president's party.
    B) They are often viewed as a referendum on how the president is doing.
    C) They usually result in high voter turnout.
    D) They have historically favored the Republican Party.

Answers:
1. age, education 2. experience, leadership
3. campaign consultants 4. soft money
5. coattails 6. F 7. T 8. F 9. T
10. F 11. C 12. A 13. D 14. A 15. B