**Chapter--10 Voting and Political Participation**

**People are most likely to be involved in politics if they have resources, interest, and an invitation.**

If you have ever voted in an election, signed a petition, participated in an interest-group activity, or sent an email to a government official, then you have engaged in political participation. Political participation simply refers to any kind of action that is aimed at changing or supporting government policy or officials. Political participation is essential in a democracy, but there is disagreement over how much and what kind of participation is necessary.

Some people contend that government is only democratic if all citizens are directly involved in policymaking. The ancient Athenian system of democracy, found in Greece around 500 BCE, has come the closest to this ideal. In that system, citizens voted directly on all issues of government. At the time, of course, the population of Greece was much smaller than it is today, and more than half of Athenians (women and slaves) were excluded from voting. The rest, adult males who had completed requisite military service, participated in politics by attending large assemblies or councils at which they voted on matters of public policy.

In both forms of government rests the assumption that citizens will participate to some extent in their own governance. Political participation in the modern world comes in many forms, and some actions are more conventional than others. Conventional participation refers to common actions, considered culturally acceptable at a given time in history, that communicate preferences through established institutions. Voting, for instance, represents a form of conventional participation in that it is established by the Constitution and accepted by the mainstream culture. In contemporary American society, cultural norms and institutions allow for citizens aged 18 and older to vote, regardless of race, gender, or property ownership. In the past, however, norms and institutions outlined different standards for the practice of voting. Other modern forms of conventional participation include contacting elected officials, working on election campaigns, associating with political parties or interest groups, and signing petitions.

When people are denied access to clearly established and culturally accepted channels of participation, they may instead engage in unconventional forms of participation. Unconventional participation refers to actions that are less common, take place outside of established institutions, and/or challenge cultural norms. Such actions can include participation in demonstrations, protests, strikes, boycotts, or sit-ins. In rare instances, unconventional participation can be taken to the extreme, as in the case of terrorist activities aimed at sending a political message.

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, African Americans, having been denied access to conventional forms of participation like voting, engaged in less conventional forms of participation. Activists staged sit-ins in public and private places, long-distance marches involving hundreds of people, and interstate Freedom Rides using public transportation. These actions were uncommon at the time, and challenged not only the established institutions that denied blacks the right to vote but also the cultural norms of acceptable behavior.

Challenging cultural norms is a bold tactic that can be met with violent repression, as illustrated by an infamous episode of the civil rights movement. When about 600 civil rights activists attempted to peacefully march 50 miles from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery on March 7, 1965, Governor George Wallace declared the march illegal and dispatched state troopers to stop it. Despite the nonviolent nature of the march, the troopers responded with force. Marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma were attacked by police wielding nightsticks and tear gas, and officers on horseback charged into the crowd. As a result of the police brutality, the day became known as Bloody Sunday.

Even today, demonstrations tend to be viewed as a less conventional form of participation. Although the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees citizens the right to peaceable assembly, about a quarter of Americans say they would never attend a demonstration.2 While demonstrations walk a fine line between conventional and unconventional behavior, boycotts and building occupations are definitely considered unconventional by Americans—most say they would not engage in either form of protest. Petitions, on the other hand, are viewed by Americans as a more conventional form of participation, with 97 percent suggesting that signing a petition is something they have done or would do. This illustrates the importance of cultural norms in determining what types of actions are considered unconventional.

Unconventional activities are typically used by marginalized groups that have been denied access to institutionalized modes of participation, but they are also used by groups seeking to attract awareness to their cause. Greenpeace is an environmental advocacy organization that uses unconventional direct action tactics to focus attention on environmental issues. For instance, the organization protests the practice of commercial whaling by deploying Greenpeace ships that attempt to interfere with the whale hunt. This tactic has drawn international attention to the issue of whaling and has contributed to a decrease in commercial whaling practices.

Unconventional participation can threaten stability in a democratic system, so the national government often responds by attempting to redirect participation into more conventional and institutionalized channels. The government responded to the unconventional actions of civil rights activists during the 1950s and ’60s with a series of civil rights laws that extended equal protections to a number of minority groups. Students who protested the Vietnam War by disrupting college campuses inspired the ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age to 18 in an effort to redirect the political energy of youth. The protests also succeeded in influencing the government to put an end to the military draft in 1973.

Of course, unconventional participation does not always lead to the desired policy change. Anti-abortion protesters have succeeded in dissuading many doctors from performing abortions, but their actions have not resulted in national policy that bans abortions. Antiwar protestors demonstrated heavily against U.S. military efforts in Iraq from the outset of the war in 2003, but it wasn’t until 2010 that the combat mission in Iraq was declared officially over. However, in certain cases—particularly those that involve a marginalized group being denied the opportunity to participate in more conventional ways—unconventional participation can be effective.

**The Forces Behind Political Participation**

Political participation, whether conventional or unconventional, requires resources, interest, and motivation. Some activities require more resources and interest than others. As such, the degree to which Americans participate in the political process and the types of activities they engage in vary widely. Figure 1 shows self-reported rates of conventional participation during the 2012 presidential election year. As you can see, participation overall is low among Americans, but it is very low when it comes to high-initiative activities, which are those that require more resources and interest. The activities on the list that require the most time, money, and/or interest include giving money to a campaign, attending a political meeting, and working for a party or candidate. Donating to a campaign does not require much initiative, but it does require money. Attending a meeting or working for a campaign requires time, interest, knowledge, and possibly even professional skills. Consequently, far fewer Americans report engaging in these activities.

Although voting is a low-initiative activity, just over half of voting-age Americans cast a ballot in the 2012 presidential election. Talking to others about vote choice requires very little effort, so it is not surprising that more than a third of Americans report doing this. Wearing a campaign button, putting a bumper sticker on one’s car, or displaying a yard sign also takes very little effort, but each activity does require a good amount of interest in politics. About 14 percent of Americans say they have done one or the other of these activities.

What leads someone to participate? Socioeconomic status is a good predictor of the likelihood that an individual will engage in conventional political participation. People with more education, higher incomes, and white-collar jobs are more likely to participate politically than people of a lower socioeconomic status. When the question is asked differently—what leads someone to not participate?—we are able to see why these socioeconomic factors matter when it comes to political participation. Political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady argue that people do not participate for three primary reasons: they cannot participate (they lack the necessary resources); they do not want to participate (they lack interest in politics); or nobody has asked them to participate (they have not been motivated).

As it turns out, people are more likely to participate politically if they have resources, are psychologically engaged in politics, and have been asked by someone else to get involved. The resources necessary for political participation include time, money, and civic skills. Psychological engagement in politics can stem from having a personal interest in a particular issue, having parents who are politically engaged, or having a direct connection to an issue. Finally, recruitment is important. A person might have resources and political interest, but if she is not mobilized into action by someone else, she might never get involved. Who recruits others to get involved in politics? Party activists, interest-group advocates, friends, family members, or coworkers all can be motivating forces.

**The Demographics Behind Political Participation**

Based on these three factors (resources, interest, and recruitment), we can understand why socioeconomic status is a useful predictor of participation. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the connection between levels of education and income and levels of voter registration and turnout. Education is the most important measure of socioeconomic status when it comes to predicting participation in conventional political activities. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady explain this connection:

[Education] affects the acquisition of skills; it channels opportunities for high levels of income and occupation; it places individuals in institutional settings where they can be recruited to political activity; and it fosters psychological and cognitive engagement with politics.

Several demographic variables are also associated with political participation, although many of the differences between demographic groups disappear when socioeconomic status is taken into account. One demographic variable in particular—age—is a useful indicator of political participation (see Figure 4). Young people are more likely than older people to engage in unconventional forms of participation, but they are less likely to engage in conventional forms of participation, including voting. Race, ethnicity, and gender have historically been associated with participation, but those relationships have changed over time (see Figures 5 and 6). In the past, blacks were less likely than whites to participate, but today they participate at comparable rates when socioeconomic factors are taken into consideration. Similarly, women used to participate less than men, but this difference has also largely diminished.

As a look at Figures 2 through 6 reveals, voter registration and voting vary by socioeconomic status and by demographic group. These patterns are consistent with the variations found in participation in other conventional activities. In other words, people with less income and less education participate less in politics. Because of the link between low socioeconomic status and membership in a racial or ethnic minority group, this also means that participation can be uneven between whites and non-whites; on average, white Americans have more resources and thus participate more in politics. These uneven levels of participation have implications for the representativeness of elections and government. In the next section, we look specifically at the act of voting and what factors influence a person’s vote choice.

**People base their voting decisions on multiple factors, especially partisan loyalty, policy issues, and candidate characteristics.**

What cues do citizens take when deciding how to cast their vote? One’s vote choice can be influenced by many different factors, but the three most influential are partisan loyalty, policy issues, and candidate characteristics.

**Partisan Loyalty**

Most Americans feel a strong affinity toward one of the two dominant political parties (Democrats and Republicans), and their vote choices tend to reflect that connection (see Figure 7). This sense of party identification is often handed down from parents to children and is further reinforced by social communities such as schools or places of worship. Partisan identification frequently manifests itself through strong loyalty toward candidates, and it can serve as a useful shortcut when it comes to voting. Those who have a sense of party identification can vote without undergoing the rigors of obtaining thorough knowledge of the candidates themselves or the policies they espouse.

Voters tend to maintain their party attachments unless some major event or issue causes them to reexamine their party’s positions. In some cases, these “crises” are caused by the introduction of new issue topics, like reproductive rights and science. In recent decades, the national debate over abortion has led many Americans to consider their religious convictions when making political decisions. Currently, both political parties are competing for the loyalty of Catholic Latin Americans. Catholics have historically been a more liberal Democratic partisan group due to decades of minority status in the United States, but the party’s liberal stance on reproductive and abortion rights has led a good portion of the Catholic Latin American voting bloc to support more Republican candidates. In fact, during the 2004 election, George W. Bush won nearly two-thirds of the Latino vote nationwide.

Even though party loyalty can have a profound impact on voters’ decisions, partisanship has declined over the last 60 years. In 2010, 16 percent of Americans identified themselves as pure independents, meaning that they refused to claim any affiliation with either the Democratic or Republican parties.5 For those voters, and even for voters who strongly identify with a political party, other factors may play an important role in shaping vote choice.

**Policy Issues**

Voters also consider issues and candidate policy platforms when making political decisions. In today’s information-drenched world, voters can more readily and easily learn a candidate’s position on a variety of major issues. Citizens who consider issue positions when voting think about which candidates have policy preferences similar to their own. If campaigns are ambiguous on issues, then voters have difficulty making these evaluations. This difficulty can be compounded when candidates agree on general policy goals. For instance, most campaigns generally support fiscally responsible government, reduction in crime, strong national security, and quality education. Given the ubiquity of vague campaign slogans and similar policy goals, voters are often left to unearth the distinction between or among competing candidates.

By contrast, when candidates provide detailed information about their policy objectives, they help voters to realize the ideological differences between election rivals. But such detailed information can also unveil the complexities of policy issues and leave voters confused. Take, for example, the 2004 presidential election season, in which Democratic candidate John Kerry provided an abundance of information about his military experience in Vietnam as a soldier and his voting record against the war in Iraq. Despite claiming that the war in Iraq was unethical, poorly managed, and almost unwinnable, Kerry also advocated for an American presence in the foreign nation. The abundance of speeches he made on the Iraq War left many voters uncertain of his policy intentions and increasingly perplexed as to his stance on war in general.

Soon Senator Kerry found himself losing ground with voters on both sides of the issue. Opponents of the war wondered if he was truly committed to bringing the troops home. Supporters of the war questioned his suitability for the task at hand. As Kerry attempted to moderate his stance on both sides of the debate, he was quickly labeled a “flip-flopper” and lost voter confidence in his credentials on the issue.

It is also important to recognize that voters will make decisions based on the candidate’s past record on a particular policy issue or on the candidate’s promise to deliver results on that policy issue in the future. Basing voting decisions on forecasts of future political behavior is known as prospective voting. This form of decision making requires voters to trust candidates to fulfill campaign promises and realize policy goals once elected. Conversely, many voters evaluate candidates based on their experience or past performance. Political scientists call this retrospective voting.

What determines whether voters think retrospectively or prospectively? Largely, the candidate’s relationship to the contested seat shapes voter evaluations. Incumbents who have held office during relatively prosperous times will likely emphasize their past record in order to appeal to voters’ retrospective tendencies. On the other hand, incumbents who have held office during tumultuous times are more likely to make promises of future success in an attempt to appeal to voters’ prospective tendencies. Challengers often depict current officeholders as corrupt, government as inefficient, and the political situation as dire. In promising political change and policy reform, they ask voters to think prospectively toward a better future that only a new administration can make possible.

**Candidate Characteristics**

With the advent of television and the internet, a candidate’s personal characteristics have come to play a significant role in voters’ decision-making processes. The predominant attributes that voters consider are the candidate’s race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and background. Voters are largely drawn to candidates who share their own demographic profile. When voters feel a sense of resemblance (whether it comes in the form of personal appearance or shared experience), they are more likely to trust political leaders and feel confident in their policy decisions.

On the other hand, candidate attributes may also repel many voters. Without shared experiences, voters may turn to a candidate’s party affiliation or issue position to make decisions. To prevent the loss of potential support, presidential campaigns strategically select running mates who can attract voters from different geographic regions or racial groups. For politicians, this is known as balancing the ticket. This phenomenon is readily apparent during the vetting process of any potential vice-presidential running mate of either party.

In August of 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain shocked many political elites by selecting Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. With only limited experience and media exposure in national politics, Palin was an unexpected choice. The McCain campaign chose her to balance the ticket and strategically appeal to a different group of American voters. While Senator McCain’s opponents characterized him as elderly, out of touch with mainstream America, and a career politician, many saw Palin as young, a “Washington outsider,” and in touch with the American heartland. And, not by accident, Governor Palin represented a successful independent-minded woman—a presence that had been provided by Senator Hillary Clinton before she lost the bid for the Democratic nomination to Barack Obama.

Besides demographic characteristics, many candidate character traits also influence voters. These qualities include trustworthiness, intellect, prior service to the country, oratory skill, ability to empathize, and overall projection of power and strength. Presidents like John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama have enjoyed public support in part due to their speechmaking abilities and leadership qualities. Presidents Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush, on the other hand, appealed to some voters because of their perceived moral fortitude and ability to relate to the average American.

**Other Factors**

Sometimes the decision to cast a vote for a particular candidate is related to factors other than party loyalty, issue positions, or candidate characteristics. Often, citizens simply consider whether they are better off financially than they were a few years ago. For this reason, the overall state of the economy is often a strong predictor of election outcomes. If voters are satisfied with their financial situation, the incumbent candidate will likely garner their support. However, if the economy appears to be faltering and voters feel financially insecure, the incumbent candidate runs the risk of losing their support. Put bluntly, people tend to vote with their wallets.

A great example of this dynamic involves the presidency of George H.W. Bush (1989-1993). At the height of President Bush’s popularity, shortly after the Gulf War in 1991, he held a 90 percent favorability rating in national polls. The end of the Cold War and the success of Operation Desert Storm had proved Bush a strong successor to the Reagan administration. Nevertheless, the conclusion of these wars ushered in a period of military retraction and economic recession. In the 1992 presidential election, the sputtering economy and rising unemployment rate helped sway many independent voters to support Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, whose campaign mobilized around the slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Parties also can be blamed for poor economic performance. In the 2008 presidential election, the housing-market collapse, coupled with an escalating credit and financial crisis, left the incumbent Republican Party at a disadvantage. Although he had not been directly involved in the economic policies of the exiting Bush administration, Republican candidate John McCain was unable to shift voter confidence back toward himself or his party, despite proposing a drastically different economic policy than that of George W. Bush.

One of the best predictors of presidential election outcomes is the Consumer Confidence Index (CCI). The CCI is calculated by the business research group Conference Board and based on surveys that ask voters about their prospective view of the economy. A score over 100 represents confidence in the economy—an atmosphere in which an incumbent candidate could expect voter support. A score under 100 represents relatively low confidence in the economy—an atmosphere in which an incumbent should fear voter retaliation.

In sum, many different factors influence public opinion. A combination of specific forces—partisan loyalty, policy issues, candidate characteristics, and economic conditions—can help explain the vote choices that Americans make. But many Americans don’t vote at all. What explains the choice not to participate in politics?

**Voter turnout has generally declined since the 1960s, and it remains lower in the United States than in many other industrialized nations.**

When it comes to voter turnout in the United States, two trends stand out. The first is that voter turnout has generally declined since the 1960s. The second is that voter turnout in the United States remains lower than in other industrialized countries.

Figure 8 illustrates the decline in American voter turnout since the 1960s. While we have seen a few exceptional presidential elections in recent years with relatively high levels of voter turnout, the general trend has been gradual declining turnout in both presidential elections and congressional elections. This phenomenon is evident around the world. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “Voter turnout has decreased globally over the past 10 years by almost 10 percent, both in established democracies as well as newly-democratized developing countries.”

What is responsible for declining turnout? Why are eligible voters not participating in politics? Several factors may be responsible for this trend. One ingredient in declining turnout may be the growing mobility of the American electorate. Modern advances in transportation and communications have enabled and encouraged people to move throughout the country. Moving requires that a voter change residence, alter voting precinct, and adapt to a new community and political context. It takes time to learn about the issues that impact a community and to identify the political actors who play a significant role in local governmental affairs.

A second factor, and one that is viewed as instrumental in the global decline in voter turnout, is the loss of social capital. Robert Putnam, a political scientist who studies civic engagement and political participation in democracies, uses the term “social capital” to refer to the degree of civic connectedness within a community or a state. Putnam paints the 1950s and 1960s as a time when American men and women belonged to a number of social networks such as churches, bowling leagues, and bridge clubs. They also joined professional service organizations to become Rotarians, Kiwanians, Elks, and Masons. But with the advent of television and the internet, Americans are now choosing to spend their leisure time at home and alone. This shift in social networking venues from the physical to the virtual has profound implications for political awareness and participation in the United States.

A third factor that might share responsibility for declining voter turnout is the way in which new media are being used by campaigns to reach voters. As television advertising and internet publication have become the dominant forms of political communication, the emphasis on door-to-door campaigning and personal appearances by candidates to shake hands with voters has declined. Without that personal touch, voters may not feel the same sense of connection to politics and may choose not to participate in elections. In addition, campaigns have increasingly relied on negative advertising to persuade voters. The extent of the influence of attack ads on potential voters is still not clear, but many find this use of media to be responsible for public cynicism toward politics and the electoral process.

A fourth factor potentially responsible for declining voter turnout involves demographic differences in political participation. The ratification of the 26th Amendment expanded the franchise to citizens aged 18, 19, and 20, who are members of the group least likely to participate in elections: 18- to 24-year-olds. By contrast, those over the age of 65 are the most likely to participate in elections. One explanation for declining turnout is that younger generations do not possess the same sense of civic responsibility as older generations. An alternative view would be that most politicians do not relate to younger Americans; as long as the national agenda continues to be dominated by such issues as Social Security and health care, young adults will find little motivation to participate. Whichever theory is correct, the reality is that until young people turn out at the polls in greater numbers, it is unlikely that politicians will much care what they think.

Finally, it is possible that declining voter turnout is due to generational effects. The cultural upheaval experienced by the generation of voters socialized to politics in the 1960s and 1970s may have shaped their views in a way that discouraged them from participating in politics. Events ranging from the civil rights movement to the Vietnam War to the Watergate scandal likely engendered high levels of distrust in government for those coming of age in that era. As younger generations replace these disaffected voters, it is actually possible that we could see a rise in voter turnout and political participation.

**Low Turnout Compared to Other Industrialized Nations**

Comparatively speaking, voter turnout in the United States is lower than in a number of other countries with regular elections (see Figure 9). Differences in voting laws and electoral systems among countries can account for this trend. One variation across countries involves the timing of elections and the time allowed for participating in elections. In some countries, the day of a major election is held on a weekend or declared a holiday so that more people can participate. Other countries allow voting to take place over more than one day. In the United States, Election Day is always held on a Tuesday. The polling places in many states are only open for extended business hours on the day of the election.

State and local governments in the U.S. have responded to concerns about the time constraints imposed on voters by offering absentee voting and convenience voting. Absentee voting permits a voter to request and return a ballot through the mail. Members of the military stationed overseas participate in elections through the process of absentee voting. Convenience voting (or early voting) allows voters to cast a ballot at various locations throughout their community during the weeks prior to an election. If a citizen is unable to vote at his designated precinct on the actual day of the election, then this option allows him to participate at a time and place more convenient to his schedule.

A second difference between the U.S. and other countries involves the voter registration process. In many countries, anyone who meets the voting eligibility requirements is automatically ready to vote without going through a formal registration. In the U.S., however, an eligible voter must obtain, complete, and submit a voter registration form. In most states this must be done at least two weeks prior to the election, although some states allow registration closer to Election Day and even on the day itself. Furthermore, each time a person moves, she must re-register to vote at her new address. In order to try to reduce the burden associated with re-registering to vote each time one moves, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also known as the Motor Voter Act. The legislation required state governments to allow eligible voters to register when applying for a driver’s license or social services.

A third difference between the U.S. and countries with higher levels of turnout is the electoral system in place, which can affect the frequency of elections, the length of election ballots, and the likelihood that a voter will cast a winning ballot. In the U.S., general elections for national office are held every two years and are preceded by primary elections. Elections for state and local positions can be held even more often, so voters in the U.S. are expected to participate in politics more frequently than voters in other countries. Furthermore, American voters are asked to consider people for a number of positions in each election, and in states with direct democracy, ballots can become quite lengthy with the addition of multiple referenda and initiatives. In a parliamentary system like the one in Great Britain, on the other hand, voters face far fewer elections and far fewer choices on each ballot.

Because U.S. elections are more frequent and ballots are longer, they require more time, knowledge, and interest from the voter. This can lead to what is known as voter fatigue. When voters are asked to make decisions too frequently and on too many issues, they may become exhausted or apathetic about the political process. In addition to helping to explain why turnout is lower in the U.S. than in other countries, this phenomenon may also contribute to the lower turnout in midterm elections versus presidential elections. On average, only 48 percent of the eligible American voting public has turned out to cast a ballot in federal elections since 1960. Even given this low figure, voting in presidential elections is much higher than voting in congressional elections. While approximately 40 percent of the voting public participates in midterm elections, approximately 55 percent of the voting public participates in presidential elections. This 15-percent difference is also due to the added national publicity and public interest surrounding presidential elections. Higher levels of information about elections tend to increase voter participation.

The electoral system established by the U.S. Constitution also affects the likelihood that a voter will cast a winning ballot, which may have the effect of depressing voter turnout. In many countries, multiple representatives are chosen from each district based on the proportion of the vote their parties received in the election. But in the United States, with single-member congressional districts and a plurality election rule, only one person represents each district, and that person can be elected to office without securing a majority of votes. This makes people reluctant to “waste” their votes on minor party candidates who stand little chance of winning. As a consequence, citizens may be less likely to turn out to vote if they feel they run a comparatively high risk of casting a losing ballot.

Finally, each country has a unique set of voting laws that affect their citizens’ likelihood of voting. In many countries, voting is mandatory. Voting is required by law in 32 countries around the world (see Table 1), but the law is only enforced in 19 of these countries, with fines being the most common form of punishment for not voting. Requiring citizens to vote has an obvious impact on their inclination to show up at the polls on Election Day. Australia, for example, instituted mandatory voting in 1924; since then, over 90 percent of the voting population has participated in every election cycle.8 In the U.S., on the other hand, voting is voluntary. Barely a majority of Americans participate in presidential elections.

**Vote or Die?**

In the end, does it matter that only half of the American voting population participates in elections? One way to think about this question is to consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of instituting mandatory voting in the United States. While it might seem more democratic to include more people in the process, mandatory voting can also be seen as subverting fundamental American notions of liberty.

Advocates of mandatory voting highlight the fact that requiring everyone to participate in an election would lead to a more representative election outcome—one that truly reflects the preferences of all segments of society rather than just the preferences of the politically and socially advantaged. If everyone participated in the process of electing public officeholders, then the government could claim greater legitimacy to make policy decisions. Advocates further suggest that voting is a civic duty; as such, voters should be held responsible for a lack of civic engagement. Through greater involvement in democratic politics, people will become aware of the important public issues that directly impact their lives and will want to hold elected officials accountable for their actions on these issues.

Opponents of mandatory voting argue that elections should only be decided by those who care to be informed and to participate in the process. If the people who exercise their right to vote happen to be better educated, have higher incomes, or belong to a particular ethnic heritage, then these people should receive special attention from the government. If others choose not to participate even in the face of this outcome, then the government should not feel a particular responsibility to force civic engagement on them. Opponents also maintain that certain citizens might have legitimate reasons for refusing to vote—some might be opposed to voting for religious reasons, while others might be satisfied with the system and simply lack interest in politics. According to this view, political apathy is not necessarily a bad thing. If we were to force these individuals to vote, their meaningless preferences would be weighted just as heavily as those who do care about politics, and this might negatively skew the results of elections.

**The Will of the People**

Political participation, whether conventional or unconventional, plays an important role in a democracy because it allows citizens to communicate their will to public officials. While voting provides a clearly established and low-cost mode of participation, other forms of political participation also provide channels of expression for those seeking to influence government. People are more likely to participate politically if they have resources, are psychologically engaged in politics, and have been asked by someone else to get involved. Some activities require more resources, interest, and motivation than others. Because these factors are unevenly distributed across members of the public, some Americans participate in the political process more than others. People of higher socioeconomic status—those with more education, higher incomes, and white-collar jobs—are more likely to participate than those of lower socioeconomic status. Once the decision to go to the polls has been made, decisions about who to vote for can be based on a number of factors, especially partisan loyalty, policy issues, candidate characteristics, and economic conditions.

Voter turnout has gradually declined over the past 50 years, and it remains lower in the U.S. than in many other countries. The decline in voter turnout since the 1960s can be attributed to a number of factors, including the growing mobility of the population, the loss of social capital, technological developments, changes in the population eligible to vote, and increasing levels of distrust in government among younger generations. The low turnout in U.S. elections compared to those in other countries can be attributed to differences in voting laws and electoral systems among countries. All of these elements of participation have important consequences for democratic representation.

**Chapter--11 Elections and Campaigns**

**Too Close to Call**

Through most of the 2000 election season, the presidential contest between Vice President Al Gore and Texas governor George W. Bush was considered relatively uneventful. In fact, so uninteresting was the race that some commentators dubbed the candidates Gush and Bore.1 On election night, however, all that would change. As polls closed across the country, it became evident that the outcome would hinge on vote totals in the state of Florida. Gore had likely won the national popular vote, but he did not have enough electoral votes to win the election without the state of Florida. In fact, the tallies were so close in Florida that state law required a mandatory recount.

After a month of vote recounting and a contentious legal battle that reached all the way to the Supreme Court, Bush was awarded Florida’s electors and, with them, the presidency. Gore, however, had secured 537,179 more popular votes nationwide than Bush did. In the aftermath of the election, many people questioned the legitimacy of the election outcome. This concern partially reflected a lack of familiarity with the technical details of the presidential election process, as the average American had not internalized the nuances of the procedure for electing the president. It also reflected doubts over the vote-counting measures taken in the state of Florida. Given that Bush’s victory was announced before a thorough recount could be completed, and given that his winning margin was only by 537 votes statewide, many wondered if Bush truly reflected the nation’s choice for president. Should George W. Bush take office if it was not certain that he had rightfully won the election?

Although many Americans continued to question the legitimacy of his presidency, Bush assumed office peacefully in 2001 and was subsequently reelected to a second term in 2004. This highlights an important democratic function of elections—they confirm the legitimacy of the process by allowing voters to hold the government accountable for its actions. Despite the fact that Gore had won more popular votes than Bush in the 2000 election, Americans still viewed the electoral system as a legitimate one and generally accepted the process by which Bush became president. Furthermore, after a two-term Republican administration, voters decided to give the Democratic Party a chance to govern. The Democratic takeover of Congress in 2006 and the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 demonstrate the ability of voters to institute reform through national presidential and congressional elections.

Elections bring about change. In democratic societies, the hope is that this change can be peaceably secured. When all members of the society enjoy the right to vote, and all members accept the procedures for deciding election outcomes, the result of an election is understood to be a legitimate reflection of the will of the people. As the contest between Bush and Gore showed us, even a polarizing figure can be recognized and respected as holding power legitimately if the process is fair and all members of society have the opportunity to have their votes counted.

**American elections ensure political legitimacy through indirect representation and popular participation.**

The story of the 2000 presidential contest sheds some light on the nature and significance of elections. At the most basic level, elections allow citizens to control government. Through elections, voters communicate their preferences to elected leaders by rewarding or punishing them for their actions. The process through which voters communicate their preferences in elections may seem complex, but it matters—the rules governing how often elections are held, who is eligible to run for office, who is allowed to vote in elections, how votes are counted, and how candidates can campaign are designed to legitimize government and provide accountability.

American elections encourage citizens to feel that the government has political legitimacy. The electoral process was designed by the Founders to allow for fair competition between citizens with differing views on what government should do. In other words, the candidate who loses an election in one year still has a shot at winning the next election. As long as the winning candidate was elected according to a process viewed by citizens as legitimate, then even the voters who supported the losing candidate will recognize the authority of the winning candidate to govern.

The Constitution requires that elections to choose our national leaders be held every two years. In the years just after the Founding, voters would head to the polls every second year to directly elect members of the House of Representatives. The rest of their national leaders were chosen indirectly either by their state legislature, as in the case of U.S. senators, or by electors appointed by their state, as in the case of the president and vice president. Although the Constitution has since been amended to allow for the direct election of U.S. senators by voters, and all states now select their presidential electors through popular election, the initial decision to limit citizen selection of national leaders was intentional. The Founders were skeptical of the general public’s decision-making capabilities and wanted to limit direct involvement of the public in governance.

Elections today include more citizen involvement than the Founders may have intended. Not only do citizens directly elect representatives, senators, and electors, they also are involved in the process of nominating candidates for these various offices.

Every two years, voters head to the polls to select all 435 members of the House and one-third of all members of the Senate. Every fourth year, voters also indirectly select the president and vice president. This biennial process is known as the general election, and by law it is held in November of every even-numbered year. General elections in which the president and vice president are selected take place every four years and are known as presidential elections. General elections held in the even-numbered years between presidential elections are known as congressional elections, midterm elections, or off-year elections.

Before candidates for each of these offices can be elected, however, they must be nominated. Today, the Democratic and Republican parties usually allow party voters—that is, citizens who are registered with the political party—to participate in the process of nominating candidates. This process is governed by state laws, which means that there are variations throughout the 50 states in the ways that candidates are nominated.

It is important to note that parties are not required to allow rank-and-file members to be involved in the nomination process. Prior to the 1830s, congressional party leaders chose presidential nominees. But with the contentious election of President John Quincy Adams in 1824 over the popular candidate Andrew Jackson, the Democrats chose to hold their first national nominating convention in 1828 in order to take control of the nominating process away from Congress—or “King Caucus.” This event set the precedent for partisan nominating conventions at which delegates from the states vote to select the presidential nominee. Today, the states use different methods for selecting their delegates. Iowa still uses a caucus system, but most other states have moved toward a direct primary system in which the choice of presidential nominee is put directly to the voters. This is known as a primary election.

The development of primaries is a relatively recent phenomenon. An outgrowth of the Progressive movement at the turn of the 19th century, primaries soon replaced less transparent means of candidate selection for all levels of office. In the early 1900s, Wisconsin became the first state to implement a statewide primary administered by government officials rather than party leaders, and several others soon followed its lead.2 In the election of 1912, about a dozen states utilized some form of primary to select their presidential nominee; by 2012, more than two-thirds of the states had shifted to a direct primary party-nomination system.

**Congressional Elections**

Congressional elections are very different from presidential elections. Not only do they occur every two years, they involve diverse constituencies in districts and states across the country. A campaign strategy that works in one place might not work in another, and so members of Congress must develop a “home style” that meets the expectations of district voters.

All 435 members of the House of Representatives face reelection every two years. That has been the case since the Founding. Senators, on the other hand, enjoy six-year terms, and they campaign at staggered intervals. Only a third of the Senate goes up for reelection after each two-year interval, a design that makes it difficult for public opinion to have too much influence on the Senate in any one election cycle. This is one reason why the Senate is thought to be less responsive to swings in public mood than the House of Representatives. And it is a design that has been modified since the Founding. Remember that the original Constitution called for senators to be selected by the state legislatures until the 17th Amendment, ratified in 1913, established the direct election of senators by the voters of each state.

Though intended to be the more distant chamber of the Congress, the Senate’s membership face elections that are much more hotly contested and garner much more media attention than the House’s membership. The candidate pool spanning an entire state is usually of higher quality than one spanning a single congressional district. It is thus more common to see highly experienced, well financed, and widely known candidates facing off in Senate elections than in House elections.

The first step for a congressional candidate pursuing a seat in the House or the Senate is to qualify for the state ballot, which can be accomplished by either winning the nomination of a party or gathering enough signatures on a petition to run independent of a party. Before the 20th century, party leaders selected congressional candidates behind closed doors. Today, party candidates for both the House and the Senate are selected through primary elections.

This is important because it alters the type of candidate that parties nominate. In an earlier era when candidates were selected by party elites, the driving qualification was electability: could the candidate appeal to a broad general electorate? In our current era of mass partisan selection of candidates, on the other hand, the driving qualification has become ideological fidelity: can the candidate be trusted to reflect the preferences of the most fervent voters of the party? But what happens when ideologically polarized candidates run in a general election against each other? The danger exists that neither candidate will reflect the average voter’s policy positions very well at all. Paradoxically, then, a more democratic selection process might lead to less representative outcomes.

The second step for a congressional candidate is to win the general election. In most states, the House or Senate candidate who receives the most votes wins the election. This is known as plurality voting. Some states rely on majority voting, which means that a candidate must get more than 50 percent of the vote to win. If no candidate wins a majority, then there is a runoff election between the top two finishers.

All candidates for congressional office are not situated equally. Members of Congress running for reelection, incumbents, employ sophisticated campaign organizations and spend a good deal of time between electoral cycles raising money through campaign contributions. Figure 1 illustrates the average expenditures of incumbents running for reelection. In 2012, this number totaled $1,656,257—almost three times the average amount spent by challengers. Those candidates running against incumbents face a steep uphill battle in raising enough campaign funds to pose a real threat to their seasoned opponents. This is one of the main reasons why incumbents rarely lose office, and it is one of the major components of the incumbency advantage.

Deeper pockets are not the only advantage incumbents possess. Their work in Congress provides them with opportunities to build name recognition with constituents—an asset when voters scan through ballot choices on Election Day. Additionally, the franking privilege gives members of Congress the opportunity to advertise their bill sponsorship, committee work, voting record, and policy positions back home in the district. They also have opportunities to make media appearances speaking on behalf of their parties, their committees, their policy initiatives, and topics of concern to their constituents. Finally, members are able to perform casework for constituents, assisting them in dealing with federal agencies on issues ranging from a missed Social Security check to an expedited passport. Through these activities and others, members of Congress establish a record of service on behalf of their districts, an electoral advantage that is difficult for challengers without on-the-job experience to match.

Figure 2 traces the percent of House incumbents who ran and won reelection from 1946 to 2016. Clearly, the vast majority of incumbents hold their seats from one term to the next. Most of the time, over 90 percent of incumbents who run are reelected while fewer than 10 percent of them lose in any given election cycle. Since the House of Representatives has 435 members, this means that fewer than 44 races are ever competitive. Of course there are exceptions to this generalization, but even in the most competitive of electoral cycles, at least 85 percent of incumbents retain their seats. The most competitive of all elections was in 1948, when “only” 79.3 percent of incumbents won reelection.

Incumbents usually retain their seats, and they do so with comfortable vote margins. However, the electoral mood does impact the competitiveness of congressional races. During the 2006 midterm elections, for example, Republican incumbents faced an American public eager for a change of course from the war in Iraq, and the Democratic Party went on to win majorities in both houses of Congress. But in 2010, Democratic incumbents faced an electorate that was concerned with government spending and the national debt. The grassroots mobilization of the Tea Party introduced several candidates into primary races against Republican incumbents and general races against Democratic incumbents that upset the electoral balance, made for a more competitive electoral climate, and ultimately resulted in the Republican Party regaining control of the House of Representatives and increasing their numbers in the Senate. Often, incumbents who anticipate strong electoral competition choose to retire rather than face possible defeat. These retirements create open-seat elections—the most competitive of all congressional races.

We often see an upswing in retirements when incumbents feel most vulnerable to electoral defeat. The election cycle just after redistricting is usually accompanied by increased retirements because members face changes to the geographical boundaries of their districts. These alterations bring in new constituents less familiar with the member and his or her service. Finally, incumbents are vulnerable when they have been the subjects of scandal. Representative Daniel Crane (R-IL), for example, faced a congressional censure for having a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old female congressional page in 1983. He was defeated in the very next election.

**Presidential Elections**

The rules governing the nomination and election of the president and vice president are slightly different from those governing congressional elections. If you wish to be one of the U.S. senators representing your state, you first need to win the nomination of your state’s political party. You then need to win the most popular votes among your state’s voters in the general election. If you wish to be the president, you first need to win the most delegates from around the country who support your nomination as the party’s candidate. You then need to win a majority of electoral votes among the states. These requirements highlight the federal and indirect nature of presidential elections: the president is nominated and elected by the states rather than by the national popular vote.

The nomination phase of presidential elections involves the selection of delegates from the Republican and Democratic parties in each state to attend the national nominating conventions of each party. A presidential candidate’s goal is to win the most delegates in each state. Although delegates are not required to support the winning candidate in their state, they are expected to do so. The timing of these elections, the number of state delegates selected, and the influence of delegates at conventions are determined by both the states and the national parties.

Delegates can be selected in primary elections, by caucuses (sometimes referred to as conventions), or through a combination of both. The majority of states use primary elections to nominate the candidates for each party, while about ten states use caucuses and approximately five use a combination of both primaries and caucuses. The differences between the two are quite striking. Simply put, primaries are elections in which voters indicate their choice for the party’s nominee by private ballot, while caucuses are meetings in which party members publicly determine their preferred nominee.

State law determines both the timing of primary elections and the type of primary system used. An open primary is one in which voters registered with a political party may choose the ballot of either party. In this system, a registered Republican may vote in the Democratic primary, and a registered Democrat may vote in the Republican primary. In a closed primary, voters can only vote on the ballot of the party with which they are registered; for instance, a registered Democrat can only vote on the Democratic Party’s nominees. Either type of primary can be modified to allow unaffiliated voters to participate in the selection of a party’s nominee.

A caucus system involves scheduled meetings of voters at the county, state, and national levels. Unlike primaries, voters do not communicate their preferences in the privacy of a voting booth on an election day. Rather, they gather together at a certain location and vote with a public show of hands or through groupings with other caucus participants who share their choice of candidate. Caucuses often involve speeches, discussions, and even negotiations among the participating members over which candidate to support for their party’s nomination.

Primary elections and caucuses are held over a five-month period beginning in February (see Figure 3). Because the primaries and caucuses held early in the season can have a significant impact on presidential candidate success, states often compete over scheduling. The trend of states moving their primaries and caucuses earlier and earlier in the primary season in order to have more influence over the outcome of the nomination process is called frontloading. Running a campaign is an expensive and time-consuming affair, so presidential candidates tend to put a lot of their resources into the early primaries to establish themselves as viable and to create momentum for their campaigns. Candidates who do not perform well in the early primaries tend to drop out of the race when it becomes clear that they have little chance of winning their party’s nomination. Consequently, the timing of state primaries has real repercussions for the nomination process.

States do quarrel over the order in which they hold their nominating events. For over a century, Iowa and New Hampshire have held the first caucus and primary (respectively) of the presidential nomination season at the end of January. This special designation is rooted in both national custom and political party rules, but party leaders from other states often complain about the degree of influence that these two small and relatively homogenous states exert on the nomination process. Before the 2008 presidential election, the Democratic and Republican national committees reached an agreement to move up the Nevada and South Carolina nominating events in the calendar in order to provide more clout to other geographic regions of the country.

In response, Michigan and Florida moved their primaries to January 2008, although they did so without the agreement of the parties’ national committees. Iowa and New Hampshire then moved their nominating events even earlier in January so that they would still be the first of the season. The national committees responded to the actions of Michigan and Florida by refusing to seat the states’ delegates at the national conventions. For a time, it appeared that the results of the Michigan and Florida primary elections might be significant in determining the nomination of the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008. When both John McCain and Barack Obama secured the necessary number of delegates to win their parties’ nominations, however, both parties seated the delegates from Michigan and Florida and gave them full voting rights at the convention. In 2016, the national parties drafted a set of dates for primaries and caucuses that alleviated some of the competition between states that had occurred during the previous election cycles. The calendar began with the state of Iowa on February 1, followed by New Hampshire on February 9.

Many states continue to coordinate the timing of their primaries and caucuses to increase their collective influence. During the 2016 presidential primary season, for example, ten states held their nominating elections for both parties on March 1, with the Republican caucus in Alaska and the Democratic caucus in Colorado also occurring on that day. This tradition of holding a large number of state primaries and caucuses on the same date early in the year has become known as “Super Tuesday.”

Once the delegates have been selected through the nomination process, both parties hold their national conventions in late summer. Today, national conventions are largely symbolic proceedings in which delegates affirm state nominees and parties formally present their presidential and vice presidential candidates. By the time the Democratic and Republican parties held their conventions in July of 2016, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were already the presumptive nominees. However, both candidates had to wait until the party conventions for the official delegate counts and subsequent announcements that they would be the presidential candidates in the general election. The conventions also serve to bring members of the party together to unite behind the party presidential and vice-presidential nominees, to establish the party platform, and to revisit party rules and processes.

Prior to the early 1900s, when voters were first invited to participate in the nomination process through primaries and caucuses, the national convention was the event at which party elites would select their party’s candidate behind closed doors. The national conventions of today are highly choreographed affairs intended to draw media attention to the candidates. Conventions often feature high-profile political and celebrity speakers endorsing the party’s candidate, and even live performances by well-known musical artists. The event generally concludes with an appearance by the party’s candidate, who gives his first formal address as the party’s presidential nominee.

**The Electoral College**

Once a presidential candidate has been formally nominated by a party, he then faces the next challenge: the general election. Just as voters are indirectly involved in the nomination of candidates, voters are also indirectly involved in the election of the president, who is formally elected by the Electoral College. The Electoral College is made up of representatives from each state who cast votes for the president and vice president.

The Electoral College was established by the Constitution, although the document does not actually refer to it by that name. Article II, section 1 of the Constitution mentions electors that will be responsible for selecting the president and vice president. Electors will be appointed by states “in such a manner as the legislature thereof may direct.” In other words, states are at liberty to decide how their electors are appointed. Since 1860, all states have used the statewide popular vote on Election Day to appoint their electors.

The number of electors from each state is determined by the size of the state’s combined delegation in both houses of Congress. Since each state is guaranteed two senators along with at least one representative (depending on its population size), states with larger populations and more representation in Congress also have more electors, while smaller, less-populous states have fewer electors. Wyoming and the District of Columbia each have only three electoral votes in the Electoral College. Among the states with the most electoral votes are California (55), Texas (38), and New York (29), but this does not necessarily guarantee these states the most influence in the outcome of presidential elections, as we will see below. The total number of electors today is 538. Given that a candidate must secure an absolute majority to win presidential office, a minimum of 270 electoral votes is necessary for victory.

In all but a few states, only the names of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates—and not the names of the electors nominated to vote on behalf of each candidate if chosen—appear on the ballot. The political parties designate individuals to serve as electors prior to Election Day. With the exception of Nebraska and Maine, most states use a winner-take-all system to determine which party’s slate of electors will participate in the Electoral College.5 That is, the presidential candidate who wins the statewide popular election (by receiving the plurality of votes) wins all of the state’s electors. To use the 2016 election as an example, Donald Trump won the popular vote in the state of Florida, so the entire Republican slate of Florida’s 29 electors voted for him in the Electoral College following the general election. In Vermont, on the other hand, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, so all three of Vermont’s Democratic electors voted for her.

On the Monday after the second Wednesday in December, electors meet at state capitals to formally cast votes for president and vice president. The 12th Amendment establishes that electors will cast one vote for president and one vote for vice president. If no candidate wins a majority of electoral votes, the House of Representatives must choose among the three candidates winning the most electoral votes. Since the ratification of the 12th Amendment in 1804, the House of Representatives has only had to select the president once, in the 1824 election between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson.

**Is the Electoral College Good or Bad for American Democracy?**

There are advantages and disadvantages to using the Electoral College system to select the president. One advantage is that it preserves the principle of federalism built into the Constitution by the Founders. The Constitution calls for the president and vice president to be selected by representatives of the people of the independent states. The executive branch of government is therefore directly accountable to the states and indirectly accountable to the voters, who entrust their state governments with appointing electors who will act in the best interest of the public.

The use of the Electoral College also makes the election process easier from a technical perspective. Each state sponsors its own statewide election. The state is responsible for all of the logistics associated with running the election, including counting of the votes. Orchestrating a nationwide election to popularly elect the president would be a much more difficult task from beginning to end. Imagine if a national vote recount were necessary. In the 2000 election, Florida recounted six million votes. In a nationwide election, the government would have had to recount over 100 million votes!

Another advantage is that this system allows for small states to exert influence over the presidential selection process. From the 2016 election results map (see Figure 4), we can see that the most populous states have a large influence on the outcome of presidential elections. However, because candidates need at least 270 electoral votes to win, they must also pay attention to small states. Just as small states are overrepresented in the Senate, so too are they overrepresented in the Electoral College, since each state is guaranteed at least three electoral votes regardless of population size. Rather than concentrating campaign activity in only the most populated parts of the country, the Electoral College system encourages candidates to spend some time and attention campaigning in small states and rural areas.

One disadvantage of the Electoral College system is that a candidate can win the popular vote nationally and still lose the election, as happened in the 2000 contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore and in 2016 with Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. How is this possible? If we add up the total number of votes each candidate wins in each state, the person with the most popular votes may not necessarily be the person with the majority of electoral votes. Imagine that, instead of the 13.5 million Californians that turned out to vote in the 2016 presidential election, all 22 million eligible voters in California turned out and the majority of them voted for Hillary Clinton. Even though Clinton would have earned millions more popular votes in this scenario, she still would have only won the same 55 electoral votes from California. No matter how many or how few people turn out to vote, the number of electoral votes given to the candidate who wins the most votes in a state remains the same.

The consequence of this is that the person whom more Americans want to see in the Oval Office may not end up there if he or she does not also win at least 270 electoral votes. This scenario is particularly likely if one candidate wins a few large states but loses the vast majority of small states, which are overrepresented in the Electoral College. This has only happened four times since the states began appointing electors based on the popular statewide vote.

Another disadvantage of the Electoral College system is that it concentrates campaign activity in battleground or swing states, which are those in which support for the major candidates is evenly divided. In a swing state, either candidate has a chance at winning the states’ electoral votes on Election Day. A safe state, by contrast, is a state in which one candidate has a wide margin of support over the other candidate. Figure 5 shows the swing states, Republican states, and Democratic states prior to the 2016 election. As you can see, 14 of the 50 states were swing states. This meant that the candidates spent most of their time campaigning in these highly competitive arenas and very little time in the other 36 states. The candidates did not avoid safe states altogether because they still provided opportunities for fundraising and media exposure. Nonetheless, the candidates did prioritize their time to focus on the small number of battleground states in order to persuade undecided voters.

A final disadvantage of the Electoral College system involves its inherent bias toward the two major parties. Because the vast majority of states use a winner-take-all system to appoint electors, third-party candidates have little hope of reaching the 270 electoral votes necessary for victory. The most a third party can expect to accomplish is to attract attention for a cause, influence the development of the Republican or Democratic platforms, and possibly disrupt the two-party balance in the Electoral College. If both major parties fall short of 270 electoral votes, the House and Senate would play a deciding role in the presidential election. However, this has rarely occurred, making the prospects of third-party success rather bleak.

Concern about these effects of the Electoral College has led to a number of congressional proposals to replace the current system with a nationwide popular vote. None of these proposals has successfully passed Congress. In light of the advantages of the system, it is difficult to imagine that many states—small ones in particular—would be eager to give up the power that the Electoral College system affords them in the presidential election process.

Overall, the electoral system in the United States requires quite a bit of time and attention from American voters. They must make more choices among more candidates and do so more frequently than voters in other countries. As cumbersome as it may be, the logic behind our electoral system was clearly laid out in the Constitution—the Founders wanted popular participation through indirect representation, and they designed the process to be slow and deliberative. Though the system has changed over time to allow for more direct citizen involvement in the selection of national leaders, much of what the Founders intended has been preserved. In the next section, we discuss the campaign strategies employed by candidates for office.

**Campaign strategies vary depending on the stage in the election cycle, the level of office sought, the character of the constituency, and the resources of the candidate.**

Political campaigns adopt strategies and employ tactics depending on a number of factors related to the stage in the election cycle, the level of office sought, the characteristics of the state or district, the degree of competition for the seat, and the financial resources available to the candidate. A campaign strategy is the overall approach used to convince citizens to vote for the candidate, while campaign tactics are the specific procedures used to execute the strategy.

There are three basic strategies that campaigns tend to use in some combination. One is a party-oriented strategy, in which a candidate relies on the party’s platform and record, as well as the organization’s resources, to appeal to voters’ partisan identification. A second basic strategy is an issue-oriented strategy, which is directed at groups of Americans with strong preferences toward policy on specific issues. A third strategy is a candidate-oriented strategy; a candidate using this strategy organizes the campaign efforts around his or her personal characteristics, such as experience, leadership capacity, and integrity.

Throughout a campaign cycle, a candidate may rely on all three of these strategies. For instance, a party-centered strategy would be less useful during the nomination process, since the candidate is competing with other members of her party for the party’s nomination. During this stage of the campaign, a candidate would likely adopt an issue-oriented approach that would distinguish her position from her rival’s, or a candidate-oriented strategy that would highlight her unique personal characteristics and record. A party-centered strategy appears to be most useful when voters have less political knowledge and are more likely to rely on party identification as a shortcut for making voting decisions. This strategy, therefore, may be more useful during the general election campaign, when voter turnout is generally higher and includes voters with low levels of political knowledge.

The level of office and the constituents of the district or state can also influence the strategy and tactics used by a candidate. A candidate running for a U.S. Senate seat must appeal to a much broader range of interests in his campaign than would a candidate running for a seat in the U.S. House. Consider, for instance, that a person seeking to be a U.S. senator from California would represent about 38 million Californians across the state, whereas a person seeking to be a representative would represent about 700,000 Californians from a particular area. Similarly, a candidate running for a U.S. Senate seat in California would run a different campaign than would a candidate running for a U.S. Senate seat in, say, Kentucky, since the political, economic, and social needs and interests of each state’s residents are unique.

In addition, candidates tailor their campaign efforts to the competitiveness of the seat for which they are running. Although the majority of congressional races are not competitive due to the high rate at which incumbents are reelected, in the rare case of a close race between an incumbent and a challenger (or in the case of an open seat), candidates will focus more resources on strategies and tactics that will distinguish them from their opponents.

The internet is becoming increasingly fertile ground for campaigning. Candidates now use it to raise funds and to advertise themselves and their positions. Among the benefits of having an active internet presence is the ability to purchase paid advertising space or to allow word to spread virally through email and social networking sites at no cost to the candidate. In addition, the internet allows candidates to reach a demographic that has historically been disengaged from politics—young voters. In the 2008 election, the Obama campaign used the internet to mobilize political action among supporters and to generate funds through massive amounts of individual donations both large and small. The campaign raised over 600 million dollars this way, a sum that dwarfed the revenues it collected from all other sources combined.

In order to employ the tactics necessary to execute a chosen campaign strategy, candidates must rely heavily on one resource in particular—money. Candidates with well-stocked war chests are able to use their resources to pursue a variety of tactics, including advertising, traveling to make public appearances and meet constituents, and accommodating the press. Through advertising, candidates increase their name recognition, communicate their personal characteristics and issue positions, and portray opponents in a negative light. Many campaigns are staffed by paid consultants and advisors who are responsible for seeking campaign supporters and donors, tracking public opinion, spreading the word about the candidate through direct mailings and media advertisements, and coordinating public appearances. Candidates often make public appearances because they garner media coverage, which serves as a free source of advertising.

As former House Speaker Thomas (Tip) O’Neill once observed, “There are four parts to any campaign: the candidate, the issues of the candidate, the campaign organization, and the money to run the campaign with. Without money you can forget the other three.” Candidates spend a considerable amount of time fundraising in order to build up their campaign war chests, but they must do so within the parameters of federal and state laws regulating campaign finance.

**Campaign Finance**

Campaign finance reform is a major subject of debate when it comes to both presidential and congressional elections. In large part this is due to dramatic increases in spending over the past 25 years. Candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives need a sizable war chest to win a seat representing a congressional district, and candidates for the Senate need an even larger one to win a seat representing an entire state. In 2014, successful candidates in House races spent nearly $1.5 million on average, while successful candidates in Senate races spent over $9.6 million (see Figure 6). Still, these numbers pale in comparison to what it costs to win the White House. During the 2012 presidential election, the two major-party nominees, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, spent over a billion dollars combined.

Critics of the role of money in politics have charged that this escalation in campaign spending is wasteful and discriminatory. To run successfully for federal public office, they argue, you must be independently wealthy or connected to social elites. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) marks the most recent piece of major legislation geared toward limiting spending by candidates and advocacy groups to influence elections. Introduced by Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Russell Feingold in 2002, the act faced considerable opposition from lawmakers, interest groups, and citizens who saw it as a violation of the First Amendment right to free speech. Nevertheless, it was largely upheld by the Supreme Court in the case of McConnell v. Federal Election Commission (2003).

The BCRA essentially replaced legislation from 1971 that limited the amount that individuals, organizations, and political action committees (PACs) could donate to election campaigns. The original law—known as the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA)—distinguished between hard money for candidates and soft money for campaigns. It targeted hard money by limiting individual contributions to $1,000 and PAC contributions to $5,000, but it placed no restrictions on soft money contributions. In challenges to FECA, the Supreme Court upheld the limitations on hard money donations to candidates but struck down limits on the amount that individuals and organizations could spend on behalf of a candidate (in the form of advertising, for instance).

The BCRA updated FECA by increasing the limits on individual spending and banning unregulated soft money donations to political parties. Figure 7 illustrates the amount of soft money raised by both national parties before the BCRA went into effect and the result of the ban on soft money in the 2004 election cycle. Despite the elimination of soft-money contributions, however, the new regulations do not appear to have had a negative impact on either party’s ability to raise funds. According to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), 2004 constituted a record year for both parties in terms of campaign finance. Democratic receipts for the 2004 presidential election cycle were over 89 percent higher than those collected during the 2000 presidential election cycle. Similarly, Republican receipts for 2004 were 46 percent higher than they were in 2000.

The BCRA also included provisions regulating “electioneering communications,” which are defined by the FEC as those communications that refer to a federal candidate in the days leading up to an election. The BCRA aimed at limiting issue advocacy ads sponsored by groups like 527 organizations unaffiliated with a particular candidate from flooding media markets within 30 days of a primary election or 60 days of a general election. It further prohibited corporations from using treasury funds to sponsor these types of communications.

In 2008, a conservative political organization called Citizens United attempted to broadcast a lengthy political advertisement critical of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Hillary: The Movie, a documentary funded through corporate and individual donations, was set to air during the primary phase of the presidential election but was blocked by the Federal Election Commission. However, in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010), the Supreme Court struck down sections of the BCRA that banned political advertising by corporations, citing First Amendment protections.This controversial decision was alternately hailed by supporters as a victory for free-speech rights and condemned by critics as a corruption of the democratic process. Its full implications for the role of money in electoral politics still remain to be seen.

**The party-centered campaigns of the 19th century have evolved into the candidate-centered campaigns of today.**

Part of the reason that campaigns in the United States are more candidate-centered than campaigns found in other advanced industrial democracies is a consequence of the structure of the American electoral system. The U.S. electoral map is subdivided into single-member congressional districts in which the candidate with the majority vote wins. This type of arrangement naturally encourages a governing party and an opposition party—that is, a winner and a loser. In other countries, you may find multimember districts with proportional representation. The candidates selected for office reflect the distribution of the vote across the political parties on the ballot. In this type of arrangement, minor parties may not ever expect to control government outright, but they may amass enough support to win seats in the national parliament and thereby represent the views of their supporters. In proportional representation systems, parties make candidate lists (sometimes referred to as party lists). Candidates from these lists are chosen dependent on the number of seats allocated to the party by the election result. An electoral system structured to accommodate multimember districts and provide proportional representation through party lists encourages party loyalty over candidate loyalty. Who the individual candidates are is relatively inconsequential. Rather, it is the party platform that matters most to voters.

It is important to note, however, that American political campaigns have not always been so candidate-centered. Even though the U.S. has always had single-member districts with a winner-take-all decision rule for allocating seats in government, the individual candidate has not always been emphasized over the party in national electoral politics. Political reforms have also shaped campaigns and elections. One of the major aims of the Progressive movement of the late 19th century was electoral reform. The Progressives criticized the methods used by political machines and party bosses to influence election outcomes. Voting during this period was not secretive; parties printed, distributed, and collected electoral ballots. These tickets were often coded with party colors or symbols so that illiterate voters would not be confused.

Without being able to cast a secret ballot, many voters faced political intimidation. In addition, elections controlled by parties were susceptible to widespread corruption. During the 1880s, states across the country moved to use secret ballots. The government assumed responsibility for printing ballots, and these ballots were only available at the polling place. Voters were provided with a full list of all candidates running for office and given a private space to cast their votes in secret. This step marked a major shift in electoral politics. While it drastically reduced the potential for voter fraud and intimidation, it undercut the power of parties to control the outcomes of election.

One important consequence of this reform effort was that the government assumed responsibility for deciding who could access the ballot. When parties controlled the printing of ballots, any party could field a candidate, print ballots, solicit voters, and find representation in the ballot box. When state governments began to print ballots, they were able to control which parties’ candidates would appear on the official ballot and which parties’ candidates would not. Such access restrictions tend to favor the two major parties by requiring third-party candidates to produce a requisite number of signed petitions in order to gain access to the ballot. States have maintained control of ballot access to this day.

Even though the electoral reforms of the late 19th century stripped the parties of control over ballot design and distribution, ballots continued to emphasize candidate party affiliation. They often provided visual cues to voters that possibly encouraged straight-ticket voting. Many states found ways to prominently display partisan symbols on printed ballots to identify candidate party affiliation for voters. Given that each state controls the access to and production of its ballots, there has always been great diversity in the appearance of ballots and in the mechanisms used by voters to mark their choices on ballots.

By the late 20th century, however, these symbols began to disappear. Today, ballots typically provide a candidate’s party affiliation, but this affiliation is often less prominently featured than the candidate’s name and rarely represented symbolically. Why is this trend an important one? It reflects a larger shift in the role of political parties in the electoral process, as American elections have become increasingly candidate-centered in a variety of ways. In part, this is due to ballot reform.

The shift from party-centered to candidate-centered elections is also a result of significant technological advancements that have permitted candidates to exert more control over their individual electoral fortunes. With the introduction of televisions into American homes in the 1950s and 1960s, political campaigns began to focus on candidate image rather than party message. Candidates could bypass the trappings of the political party and make more direct appeals to voters, emphasizing their personality, appearance, or background. Candidates also began to hire political consultants and polling firms to help shape their images and meet voter expectations. In addition, modern modes of transportation and new methods of instant communication now permit candidates to make many more personal appearances than were previously possible. Members of Congress, for example, can be in Washington, DC, for half of each week, then return home to their districts for the other half in order to meet with constituents, attend events, and campaign for reelection. Presidential candidates can cover a wide territory in relatively little time, making several campaign stops each day to give speeches and greet supporters. Through media blitzes of campaign commercials, candidates can reach even more voters. These various approaches enable candidates to focus on image and avoid alienating voters who do not share their partisan leanings. As a consequence, modern parties have been forced to take a backseat in campaigns, providing money and resources but exercising less control over electoral politics.

Though parties might serve a different function in modern-day campaigns, they are still central to the electoral process. Candidates run under partisan banners for all levels of office. To win office, candidates must vary their campaign strategies according to the level of office sought, the character of the constituency, and the resources available to the campaign.

**Once Upon a Tuesday**

Elections are central to our democratic political system, and their structure reflects the variety of federal regulations, state laws, party rules, and local political cultures in place across America. Some states use primaries to nominate party candidates for office, while others use caucuses. Some states get priority scheduling for their primary and caucus events, such as New Hampshire and Iowa, while others face party sanctions for moving their election dates. Voter registration laws and local political climates can affect turnout, leading some races to be decided by a fraction of the population and others to break records for political participation. Finally, campaigns can have a real impact on American politics, which originates with candidate efforts to get on the ballot, mobilize voters, raise campaign funds, focus the debate, set the political agenda, and ultimately win control over government. Elections are exciting to watch because they bring together the candidates, the voters, the political process, and the high stakes involved in a heated race to the finish line.

It is important to remember that the Constitution did not originally call for direct election of national officeholders, with the exception of members of the House of Representatives. The Founders premised our political structure on a system of indirect election—the people would choose representatives to select leaders on their behalf. Before the 17th Amendment was ratified in 1913, state legislatures selected U.S. senators. Even today, voters in their respective states appoint electors who participate in choosing each president through the institution of the Electoral College. These processes are important because elections serve to bring about change, legitimize our government, and provide accountability. Without elections, we would have no influence on the composition of our government and no way of shaping its policies and activity. We may sometimes be frustrated with the indirect nature of our system and the impact that it has on elections, but this does not mean that voting is futile. As Al Gore stated in 2008, “Take it from me—elections matter.”