

Government in America

CHAPTER 10 OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Elections *socialize* and *institutionalize* political activity, making it possible for most political participation to be peacefully channeled through the electoral process. Because elections provide regular access to political power, leaders can be replaced without being overthrown. American voters rarely question the fairness of election results, allowing officeholders to govern with a **legitimacy** they can take for granted. This chapter focuses on how elections work in the United States, who votes, and how individuals make their voting decisions.

HOW AMERICAN ELECTIONS WORK

Unlike most other democracies, the United States has *three kinds of elections*: those which select *party nominees*, those which select *officeholders* from among the nominees, and those in which voters engage in *making or ratifying legislation*. Elections in most other countries perform only the function of selecting officeholders.

A TALE OF THREE ELECTIONS

Elections have changed dramatically since 1800 when Adams ran against Jefferson. In 1800, there were no primaries, no nominating conventions, no candidate speeches, and no entourage of reporters. Both incumbent President John Adams and challenger Thomas Jefferson were nominated by their parties' elected representatives in Congress (caucuses). Once nominated, the candidates did not campaign; they let their state and local organizations promote their causes. Although the election had to be decided in the House of Representatives, the transition from Adams to Jefferson marked *the first peaceful transfer of power between parties via the electoral process* in the history of the world.

By 1896, **national nominating conventions** had become well established. William Jennings Bryan broke with tradition and actively campaigned in person, traveling through 26 states. William McKinley ran a front-porch campaign from his home in Ohio, and managed to label the Democrats as the party of depression. The *Republicans* won overwhelmingly in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, and became firmly entrenched as *the nation's majority party for the next several decades*.

The 2000 presidential election will no doubt go into the history books as one of the most memorable finishes in the history of democracy. The election coverage on television provided a wild night of entertainment, full of ups and downs for everyone. Because Bush's lead over Gore in the initial count was less than one-tenth of one percent, Florida law mandated an automatic recount. Ultimately, with the margin between Bush and Gore down to 537 votes, the election hinged on whether or not the undervotes (ballots that

showed no vote for president) would be examined by hand or not. As with any dispute, this one ended up in the courts, which played a pivotal role in a presidential election for the first time ever. The U.S. Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* (2000) overruled the Florida Supreme Court and held that although a recount was legal, the same (and more precise) standards for evaluating ballots would have to be applied in all counties. Most importantly, they ruled that there was not enough time to recount all the ballots in an orderly fashion by the time the electors were to vote on December 12. Thus, the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately determined that George W. Bush would emerge the winner. The 2000 election, however, showed that how candidates present themselves to the American people really matters. Had Gore been able to keep the focus on past performance, he no doubt would have done better. Instead, at the Democratic Convention he announced that he was running as his own man. George W. Bush sought to take advantage of concerns over presidential character raised during the Clinton Administration by repeatedly promising to "restore dignity and honor to the White House." While Bush and Gore debated the crucial theme of the scope of government, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader raised issues neglected by the major parties.

WHETHER TO VOTE: A CITIZEN'S FIRST CHOICE

Nearly two centuries of American electoral history include greatly expanded **suffrage** (the right to vote). Ironically, *proportionately fewer of those eligible* have chosen to exercise that right. The highest turnout of the past 100 years was the 80 percent turnout in 1896; in 2000, only 51 percent of the adult population voted for president.

Individuals with high levels of political efficacy and civic duty are more likely to vote, as are individuals who see policy differences between the two parties. **Political efficacy** is the belief that ordinary people can influence the government. Some people will vote simply to support democratic government, that is, to make a long-term contribution toward preserving democracy. This is called doing one's "civic duty."

Before voting, citizens in most states must register to vote, often a cumbersome procedure. Largely to prevent corruption associated with stuffing ballot boxes, states adopted voter registration laws around the turn of the century, which require individuals to first place their name on an electoral roll in order to be allowed to vote. Although these laws have made it more difficult to vote more than once, they have also discouraged some people from voting at all. The Motor Voter Act—which allows individuals to register to vote when they receive or renew their drivers' license—has made registration a little easier since 1993.

There are several distinguishing demographic *characteristics of voters and nonvoters*: education, age, race, gender, marital status, mobility, and union membership. Research suggests that some political outcomes would change if this class bias in turnout did not exist. Accordingly, it is likely that little further will be done to modify voter registration requirements and encourage turnout, as many Republicans believe that increased turnout will be to their disadvantage.

HOW AMERICANS VOTE: EXPLAINING CITIZENS' DECISIONS

Many journalists and politicians believe the winner of an election has a **mandate** from the people to carry out the policies he or she promised during the campaign. Conversely, political scientists know that different kinds of people vote a certain way for different reasons. Political scientists focus instead on *three major elements of voters' decisions*: voters' party identification, voters' evaluations of the candidates, and the match between voters' policy positions and those of the candidates and parties (known as policy voting).

Because of the importance of **party identification** in deciding how to vote, the parties tended to rely on groups that lean heavily in their favor to form their basic coalition. Scholars singled out party affiliation as the *single best predictor of a voter's decision* in the 1950s. With the emergence of television and candidate-centered politics, the hold of the party on the voter eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s, and then *stabilized at a new and lower level* during the 1980s. Political psychologists Shawn Rosenberg and Patrick McCafferty show that it is possible to manipulate a candidate's appearance in a way that affects voters' choices. Other research has shown that the three most *important components of candidate image are integrity, reliability, and competence*.

Policy voting occurs when people base their choices in an election on *their own issue preferences*. True policy voting can take place only when several conditions are met: voters must have a clear view of their own policy positions; voters must know where the candidates stand on policy issues; voters must see a difference between candidates on these issues; and voters must actually cast a vote for the candidate whose policy positions coincide with their own. One recurrent problem is that candidates often decide that the best way to handle a controversial issue is to cloud their positions in rhetoric; *both* candidates may be deliberately ambiguous. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the media typically focus more on the "horse race" aspects of the campaign than on the policy stands of the candidates.

THE LAST BATTLE: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

It is the **electoral vote** that actually determines the outcome of the presidential election. The founders created the **electoral college** because they wanted the president to be selected by the nation's elite. Nevertheless, it has been customary since 1828 for electors to vote for *the candidate who won their state's popular vote*. The electoral vote may *distort* the popular vote. All states except Maine and Nebraska have a **winner-take-all** system in which electors vote as a bloc for the candidate who received the most votes in the states. One of the key reasons George W. Bush won the electoral college vote in 2000 without winning the popular vote was that he did better in the small states. The winner-take-all rule also means that candidates will necessarily focus on winning the states where the polls show that there appears to be a close contest.

UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

According to democratic theory, elections accomplish two tasks: they *select the policymakers*, and they are supposed to *help shape public policy*. In the hypothetical world of *rational choice theory* and the Downs model (see Chapter 8), elections do in fact guide public policy. Social science research on the question has produced mixed findings. Elections do affect public policy to some degree, and public policy decisions also partly affect electoral outcomes.

The greater the policy differences between the candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices. If elections can affect policies, then policies can also affect elections. Most policies have consequences for the well-being of certain groups or the society as a whole. Those who feel better off as a result of certain policies are likely to support candidates who pledge to continue those policies, whereas those who feel worse off are inclined to support opposition candidates. This is known as the theory of **retrospective voting**.

While the threat of election defeat constrains policymakers, it also helps to increase generalized support for government and its powers. Elections *legitimize the power of the state*, thereby making it easier to expand the size of the government. When people have the power to dole out electoral reward and punishment, they are more likely to see government as their servant instead of their master. As a result, citizens in a democracy often *seek to benefit from government* (rather than to be protected from it). As democracy has spread, government has come to do more and more, and its size has grown.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. HOW AMERICAN ELECTIONS WORK

A. Elections serve many important functions in American society, including legitimizing the actions of elected officials.

1. They *socialize* and *institutionalize* political activity, making it possible for most political participation to be peacefully channeled through the electoral process.
2. Political **legitimacy** means that the people within a nation accept the procedures by which rules and transfers of power are made.
3. American voters rarely question the fairness of election results, allowing officeholders to govern with a legitimacy they can take for granted.

B. Some unique American electoral features.

1. Unlike most other democracies, the United States has *three kinds of elections*: those which select *party nominees*, those which select *officeholders* from among the nominees, and those in which voters engage in *making or ratifying legislation*.
2. Elections held for the purpose of picking party nominees are called **primaries**.
3. The **initiative petition** enables voters in 23 states to place proposed legislation on the ballot if they gather the required number of signatures on

a petition (usually a number equaling ten percent of the voters in the previous election).

4. The **referendum** is a form of direct legislation in which voters are given the chance to approve or disapprove some legislative act (such as school bonds) or constitutional amendment.

II. A TALE OF THREE ELECTIONS

A. Elections have changed dramatically since 1800 when Adams ran against Jefferson.

1. By 1896, it was acceptable for candidates to campaign in person, as William Jennings Bryan did.

2. Today, campaigns are slick, high-tech affairs.

B. 1800: The first electoral transition of power.

1. In 1800, there were no primaries, no nominating conventions, no candidate speeches, and no entourage of reporters.

2. Both incumbent President John Adams and challenger Thomas Jefferson were nominated by their parties' elected representatives in Congress (caucuses).

3. Once nominated, the candidates did not campaign; they let their state and local organizations promote their causes.

4. The focus of the campaign was on state legislatures (not the voters), which had the responsibility for choosing members of the electoral college.

5. Most newspapers of that time were openly partisan and made no attempt to be objective.

6. The election was thrown into the House of Representatives through an error when all of Jefferson's electors also voted for Aaron Burr. At that period of history, each elector cast two ballots; the winner would be president and the runner-up would be named vice president. The result in 1800 was a tie vote, and the Federalist-controlled House of Representatives took 36 ballots before electing Thomas Jefferson.

7. The transition from Adams to Jefferson marked *the first peaceful transfer of power between parties via the electoral process* in the history of the world.

C. 1896: A bitter fight over economic interests.

1. By 1896, **national nominating conventions** had become well established.

2. The election was fought primarily over economics.

3. Bryan broke with tradition and actively campaigned in person, traveling through 26 states. McKinley ran a front-porch campaign from his home in Ohio, and managed to label the Democrats as the party of depression.

4. The *Republicans* won overwhelmingly in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, and became firmly entrenched as *the nation's majority party for the next several decades*.

III. 2000: WHAT A MESS!

A. The 2000 presidential election will no doubt go into the history books as one of the most memorable finishes in the history of democracy.

1. Because Bush's lead over Gore in the initial count was less than one-tenth of one percent, Florida law mandated an automatic recount.
2. Ultimately, with the margin between Bush and Gore down to 537 votes, the election hinged on whether or not the under-votes (ballots that showed no vote for president) would be examined by hand or not.
3. As with any legal dispute, this one ended up in the courts, which played a pivotal role in a presidential election for the first time ever.
 - a. The U.S. Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore* (2000) overruled the Florida Supreme Court and held that although a recount was legal, the same (and more precise) standards for evaluating ballots would have to be applied in all counties. Most importantly, they ruled that there was not enough time to recount all the ballots in an orderly fashion by the time the electors were to vote on December 12. Thus, the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately determined that George W. Bush would emerge the winner.

B. For academic voting behavior specialists, Bush's election came as quite a surprise.

1. With the economy rolling along, and with Bill Clinton's job approval rating hovering around 60 percent, it seemed like a no-brainer for them to project that the Democrats would retain the White House.
2. The 2000 election, however, showed that how candidates present themselves to the American people really matters.
 - a. Had Gore been able to keep the focus on past performance he no doubt would have done better. Instead, at the Democratic Convention he proudly announced that he was running as his own man.
 - b. George W. Bush sought to take advantage of concerns over presidential character raised during the Clinton Administration by repeatedly promising to "restore dignity and honor to the White House."
3. While Bush and Gore debated the crucial theme of the scope of government, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader raised issues neglected by the major parties.

C. There were sharp regional divisions in the vote in 2000.

1. Bush ran strong in the South and Mountain West, whereas Gore turned in a good showing in the Northeast and the Pacific Coast states.

D. Although Bush won in the Electoral College by 271 to 266 (one elector from Washington, D.C. abstained in protest), Gore narrowly won the popular vote by 48.4 to 47.9 percent.

1. This marked the first time since 1888 that the winner of the popular vote lost the decisive electoral college count.
2. As a result, serious discussion is now being given to changing the electoral college system, but it is likely that reform proposals will encounter strong opposition from senators who represent small states.

IV. WHETHER TO VOTE: A CITIZEN'S FIRST CHOICE

A. Who votes and who stays home?

1. Nearly two centuries of American electoral history include greatly expanded **suffrage** (the right to vote).
 - a. As the right to vote has been extended, *proportionately fewer of those eligible* have chosen to exercise that right.
 - b. The highest turnout of the past hundred years was the 80 percent turnout in 1896; in 2000, only 51 percent of the adult population voted for president.
2. A policy approach to deciding whether to vote.
 - a. In his model of democracy, economist Anthony Downs argues that people who see **policy differences** between the parties are more likely to join the ranks of voters.
3. Another reason why many people vote is that they have a high sense of **political efficacy** – the belief that ordinary people can influence the government.
4. Those who vote out of a sense of **civic duty** are people who vote simply to support democratic government (even if they are indifferent about the outcome).

B. The registration system.

1. States adopted **voter registration** around the turn of the century, largely to prevent corruption associated with stuffing the ballot boxes.
2. Registration procedures differ greatly from one state to another.
 - a. States in the upper Great Plains and the Northwest make it easiest to register; there is no registration at all in North Dakota; and four states permit registration on election day.
 - b. States in the South still face the most difficult forms of registration (and they also record lower voter turnout rates).
 - c. This changed somewhat when the 1993 **Motor Voter Act** went into effect in 1996. The act requires states to permit people to register to vote at the same time citizens apply for driver's licenses. The Motor Voter Act *makes voter registration much easier* by allowing eligible voters to simply check a box on their driver's license application or renewal form.

C. Social science research points to several characteristics of voters and nonvoters:

1. Voting is a class-biased activity. People with higher than average education and income levels have a higher rate of voting. This is *the most important factor affecting turnout*.
2. Young people have the lowest turnout rate.
3. Whites vote with greater frequency than members of minority groups (but blacks and other minority groups with high levels of income and education have a higher turnout rate than whites with comparable socioeconomic status).
4. Southerners are less likely to vote than northerners.

5. Government employees are heavy participators in the electoral process.
 6. Voting is not very strongly related to gender.
- D. The political consequences of class bias in turnout.
1. Research suggests that some political outcomes would be different if there was no class bias in turnout.
 2. Future reforms oriented toward increasing turnout will likely be minimal, because Republicans will likely block such changes, believing they will be disadvantaged by them.

V. HOW AMERICANS VOTE: EXPLAINING CITIZENS' DECISIONS

A. Mandate theory of elections.

1. Many journalists and politicians believe the winner of an election has a **mandate** from the people to carry out the policies he or she promised during the campaign.
2. Conversely, political scientists know that people rarely vote a certain way for the same reasons. Political scientists focus instead on *three major elements of voters' decisions*: voters' party identification, voters' evaluations of the candidates, and the match between voters' policy positions and those of the candidates and parties (known as policy voting).

B. Party identification.

1. Because of the importance of **party identification** in deciding how to vote, the parties tended to rely on groups that lean heavily in their favor to form their basic coalition.
2. With the emergence of television and candidate-centered politics, the *hold of the party on the voter* eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s, and then *stabilized at a new and lower level* during the 1980s.
3. Scholars singled out *party affiliation* as the *single best predictor of a voter's decision* in the 1950s. Voting along party lines is less common today, particularly in elections for the House of Representatives, where *incumbency* is now of paramount importance.

C. Candidate evaluations.

1. Political psychologists Shawn Rosenberg and Patrick McCafferty show that it is possible to manipulate a candidate's appearance in a way that affects voters' choices (even by substituting a good picture for a bad one).
2. Research by Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk shows that the three most important components of candidate image are integrity, reliability, and competence. However, *integrity* (where Jimmy Carter scored high) is not enough; a candidate must also be seen as being dependable and decisive. (George Bush's image of *reliability* suffered when he broke his "no new taxes" pledge prior to the 1992 campaign.) The personal traits most often mentioned by voters involve *competence* (which played a major role in 1988 when a majority of voters were more impressed with Bush's wide experience in office than with Michael Dukakis' stance).

D. Policy voting.

1. **Policy voting** occurs when people base their choices in an election on *their own issue preferences*.

2. True policy voting can take place only when several conditions are met.
 - a. Voters must have a clear view of their own policy positions.
 - b. Voters must know where the candidates stand on policy issues.
 - c. Voters must see a difference between candidates on these issues.
 - d. Voters must actually cast a vote for the candidate whose policy positions coincide with their own.
3. One recurrent problem is that *candidates* often decide that the best way to handle a controversial issue is to cloud their positions in rhetoric; *both* candidates may be deliberately ambiguous.
4. The *media* also may not be helpful, as they typically focus more on the "horse race" aspects of the campaign than on the policy stands of the candidates.
5. Although it is questionable whether voters are really much more sophisticated now about issues, policy voting has become somewhat easier than in the past. Today's candidates are compelled to take clear stands to appeal to their own party's *primary* voters. Thus, it is the *electoral process* that has changed rather than the voters.

VI. THE LAST BATTLE: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

- A. It is the **electoral vote** rather than the popular vote that actually determines the outcome of the presidential election.
 1. Because the founders wanted the president to be selected by the nation's elite—and not directly by the people—they created the electoral college.
 2. *Political practice* since 1828 has been for electors to vote for *the candidate who won their state's popular vote*.
- B. Mechanics of the electoral college system.
 1. Each state has as many electoral votes as it has U.S. senators and representatives. Today, state parties nominate slates of electors.
 2. All states except Maine and Nebraska have a **winner-take-all** system in which electors vote as a bloc for the candidate who received the most popular votes in the states.
 3. Electors meet in their respective states in December and mail their votes to the president of the Senate (vice president of the U.S.). The vote is counted when the new congressional session opens in January, and the result is reported by the president of the Senate.
 4. If no candidate receives an electoral college majority, the election is thrown into the House of Representatives, which must choose from among the top three electoral vote winners. The *unit rule* is used, which means that each state delegation has one vote (not each member).
 5. If the election is not thrown into the House, the system gives extra clout to big states. The *big-state bias* also produces an *urban bias* in the electoral college.

VII. UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

- A. According to democratic theory, *elections* accomplish two tasks: they *select the policymakers*, and they are supposed to *help shape public policy*.

1. In the hypothetical world of *rational choice theory* and the Downs model (see Chapter 8), elections do in fact guide public policy.
2. Social science research on the question has produced mixed findings. Elections do affect public policy to some degree, and public policy decisions also partly affect electoral outcomes.

B. Democracy and elections.

1. The greater the policy differences between the candidates, the more likely it is that voters will be able to influence government policies by their choices.
2. As long as politicians can take refuge in ambiguity, the possibility of democratic control of policy is lessened.
3. When individual candidates offer a clear choice, voters are more able to guide the government's policy direction.
4. Most policies have consequences for the well-being of certain groups or for society as a whole. According to the theory of **retrospective voting**, voters essentially ask the question, "What have you done for me lately?"
5. Public policy—especially the *perception of economic policy impacts*—can affect elections. In presidential elections, people who are unhappy with the state of the economy tend to blame the incumbent.

C. Elections and the scope of government.

1. While the threat of election defeat constrains policymakers, it also helps to increase generalized support for government and its powers. Elections *legitimize the power of the state*, thereby making it easier to *expand the scope* of the government.
2. When people have the power to dole out electoral reward and punishment, they are more likely to see government as their servant instead of their master. As a result, citizens in a democracy often *seek to benefit from government* (rather than to be protected from it). As democracy has spread, government has come to do more and more, and its scope has grown.