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Introduction

Free and fair elections are the keystone of any democracy. They are essential for the peaceful transfer of power.

When voters elect representatives, they elect the leaders who will shape the future of their society. This is why elections empower ordinary citizens: they allow them to influence the future policies of their government, and thus, their own future.

The United States has been a representative democracy since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787 – although the electoral tradition began during the Colonial era and had its roots in British history. This book discusses the nature of the modern American electoral process, and how it works at the federal, state, and local levels. The process, complicated and sometimes confusing, has evolved to ensure universal suffrage to all men and women who are U.S. citizens — 18 years-of-age, or older.

Left, the 2000 Republican convention in Philadelphia.

Elections in the United States

Elections occur in every even-numbered year for some federal and most state and local government offices in the United States. Some states and local jurisdictions hold elections in odd-numbered years.

Voters fill out paperwork before casting their ballots, San Diego, 2004.

Thus, every four years, Americans elect a president and vice president. Every two years, Americans elect all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and approximately one-third of the 100 members of the U.S. Senate. Senators serve staggered terms of six years each.

The United States relies on a complex federal system of government, where the national government is central; but where state and local governments also exercise authority over matters that are not reserved for the federal government. State and local governments have varying degrees of independence in how they organize elections within their jurisdictions, but they a hold frequent, decisive, and well administered elections.

Types of U.S. Elections

There are two basic types of elections: primary and general. Primary elections are held prior to a general election to determine party candidates for the general election. The winning candidates in the primary go on to represent that party in the general election (although there may be a few more steps before their party lets them do that).

Top: Republican presidential hopeful for 2008 Rudolph Giuliani signs autographs in Bluffton, South Carolina. Bottom: Democratic presidential hopeful (2008) Hillary Clinton visits with supporters in Narberth, Pennsylvania.

Since the early 20th century, primaries have been the chief electoral device for choosing party candidates. With rare exception, victory in a primary election results in a candidate being nominated by that political party for the general election. In a few states, party candidates are chosen in state or local

nominating conventions, rather than primaries, either by tradition or at the option of the political parties.

Once the primary elections or conventions conclude, the general election is held to determine who will be elected to hold office. In the general election, voters make the final determination from among the party candidates listed on the ballot. The general election ballot may also include independent candidates (those not affiliated with a major political party) who gain access to the ballot by submitting a specified number of petition signatures, rather than by the traditional primary method. Furthermore, in some states, the ballot may include a place to "write in" the names of candidates who were neither nominated by the parties nor qualified by petition. Such candidates may be described as "self-nominated" and they win election to public office from time to time.

In the United States, elections may involve more than just choosing people for public office. In some states and localities, questions of public policy may also be placed on the ballot for voter approval or disapproval. Measures referred to voters by the state legislature or local board or council—referenda—and those placed on the ballot by citizen petition—initiatives—usually concern bond issues (approving the borrowing of money for public projects) and other mandates or strictures on government. In recent decades, these ballot measures have had major impacts, particularly on state budgets and policies, most notably with respect to the state of California education system.

The state of Washington has permitted citizens to place initiatives on the voter ballot since 1912, if enough voters sign a petition requesting it. Here, volunteers favoring an education initiative open and sort petitions in Seattle.

In addition to federal, state, and local elections held in even-numbered years, some states and local jurisdictions hold "off-year" elections in odd-numbered years. Many jurisdictions, also, provide for special elections, which can be scheduled at any time to serve a specific purpose, such as filling an unexpected vacancy in an elected office.

Presidential Elections

Every four years, the general election for U.S. president takes place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November. Prior to this general election, states hold primary elections or caucuses to choose delegates to the national nominating conventions where the party nominees are selected. These individual state primaries and caucuses typically take place between January and June, followed by the national conventions in July, August, or September.

Since the 1970s, the presidential candidates who will be the eventual nominees of the major parties are known before the conventions, because they amass a majority of delegates before

In recent decades, the Republican and Democratic national presidential nominating conventions have become less important, due to increased primary activity in advance. Now, they serve to showcase nominees, as here in the 2004 Republican convention in New York.

the primary and caucus season is concluded. As a consequence, the conventions have become largely ceremonial events. Highlights of the conventions include a keynote speech by a party leader or leaders, the announcement of the nominee's vice presidential candidate, the roll call of delegate votes by the state delegations, and the ratification of the party "platform" (the document that states its positions on the issues). As a televised political event and the start of the general election campaign, the conventions are an opportunity to promote the party nominees and define differences with the opposition.

The percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots varies

Two young women try to motivate registered Democrats in Ohio to vote from their perch in Central Park, New York City. "Get-out-the-vote" drives by not-for-profit and advocacy organizations play important roles in U.S. elections.

from election to election, but voter turnout in general — even in presidential elections — is lower than in most other democracies. Since 1960, voter turnout has generally declined from 64 percent (1960) to just over 50 percent (1996), although it increased again over the last two elections to just over 60 percent. There are several reasons for the comparatively low turnout in the United States. In contrast to some other democracies, a voter in the United States must self-register to be eligible to vote, a process that varies somewhat from one state to another. Another explanation is that voting is voluntary, not compulsory, as in some nations. Because of the high number

of elections that are required to fill the estimated more than one million elective offices throughout the country, it is also possible that voter fatigue contributes to lower turnout.

Statistics indicate that turnout can drop when the public is content with the political situation, or when polls point to an inevitable victory for a candidate. Conversely, turnout may rise when the race between candidates is considered to be very close or controversial issues are on the ballot.

Candidate Requirements

Each federal elected office has different requirements, laid out in Articles I and II of the U.S. Constitution. A candidate for president, for example, must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, at least 35 years old, and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. A vice president must meet the same qualifications. Under the Twelfth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the vice president cannot be from the same state as the president.

Candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, have been U.S. citizens for seven years, and be legal residents of the state they seek to represent in Congress. U.S. Senate candidates must be at least 30, have been a U.S. citizen for nine years, and be legal residents of the state they wish to represent. Those seeking state or local office must meet requirements established by those jurisdictions.

The Twenty-Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution,

Three men hoping to win the Republican presidential nomination in 2008 (left to right): Rudolph Giuliani, Mitt Romney, and John McCain, pose prior to a nationally televised debate. Though party primary elections are state-by-state, national debates influence voters in all state primaries.

ratified in 1951, prohibits anyone from being elected president of the United States more than twice. However, the Constitution does not impose any term limits on representatives and senators in Congress, although various political groups over the years have lobbied for such limits. The term limits, if any, applied to state and local officials are spelled out in state constitutions and local ordinances.

The Role of Political Parties

When the Founders of the American Republic drafted and ratified the U.S. Constitution in 1787, they did not envision a role for political parties. Indeed, they sought through various constitutional arrangements — such as separation of

powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; by federalism; and by indirect election of the president by an Electoral College (see below) — to insulate the new republic from parties and factions.

In spite of the Founders' intentions, the United States in 1800 became the first nation to develop nascent political parties organized on a national basis to accomplish the transfer of executive power from one faction to another via an election. The development and expansion of political parties that followed was closely linked to the broadening of voting rights. In the early days of the Republic, only male property owners could vote, but that restriction began to erode in the early 19th century as the result of immigration, the growth of cities, and other democratizing forces, such as the westward expansion of the country. Over the decades, the right to vote was extended to ever larger numbers of the adult population as restrictions based on property ownership, race, and sex were eliminated. As the electorate expanded, the political parties evolved to mobilize the growing mass of voters as the means of political control. Political parties became institutionalized to accomplish this essential task. Thus, parties in America emerged as a part of democratic expansion, and, beginning in the 1830s, they became firmly established, and powerful.

Today, the Republican and Democratic parties — both of them heirs to predecessor parties from the 18th and 19th centuries — dominate the political process. With rare exceptions, the two major parties control the presidency,

Nominating conventions are an old U.S. political tradition. Top, delegates to the Republican convention, Chicago, 1868. Bottom, national Democratic party convention, Cincinnati, 1880.

the Congress, the governorships, and the state legislatures. For instance, every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or a Democrat, and in the post-World War II era, the two major parties' share of the popular vote for president has averaged close to 95 percent. Rarely do any of the 50 states elect a governor who is not a Democrat or a Republican. The number of independent or third-party members of Congress or of state legislatures is extremely low.

In recent decades, increasing numbers of individual voters classify themselves as "independent," and they are permitted to register to vote as such in many states. Yet, according to opinion polls, even those who say that they are independents normally have partisan leanings toward one party or another.

An exception to this general rule can be found at the local level, particularly in small cities and towns, where candidates may not be required to declare any party affiliation, or may run as part of a slate of like-minded office-seekers under the banner of a particular local initiative — such as downtown redevelopment or school construction.

Although the two major parties organize and dominate the government at the national, state, and local levels, they tend to be less ideologically cohesive and programmatic than parties in many democracies. The ability of the major parties to adapt to the nation's political development has resulted in a pragmatic domination of the political process.

Why a Two-Party System?

As noted, Republicans and Democrats have dominated electoral politics since the 1860s. This unrivaled record of the same two parties continuously monopolizing a nation's electoral politics reflects structural aspects of the American political system as well as special features of the parties.

The standard arrangement for electing national and state legislators in the United States is the "single-member" district system, wherein the candidate who receives a plurality of the vote (that is, the greatest number of votes in any given voting district) wins the election. Although a few states require a majority of votes for election, most office holders can be elected with a simple plurality.

Unlike proportional systems popular in many democracies,

Members of the 109th Congress take their oath of office in the House chamber on Capitol Hill, 2005.

the single-member district arrangement permits only one party to win in any given district. The single-member system thus creates incentives to form broadly based national parties with sufficient management skills, financial resources, and popular appeal to win legislative district pluralities all over the country. Under this system, minor and third-party candidates are disadvantaged. Parties with minimal financial resources and popular backing tend not to win any representation at all. Thus, it is hard for new parties to achieve a viable degree of proportional representation, and achieve national clout, due to the "winner-take-all" structure of the U.S. electoral system.

Why two instead of, say, three well-financed national parties? In part, because two parties are seen to offer the voters sufficient choice, in part because Americans historically have disliked political extremes, and in part because both parties are open to new ideas (see below).

The Electoral College

There is a further impetus toward the two-party solution, and that is the Electoral College system for choosing presidents. Under the Electoral College system, Americans, technically, do not vote directly for the president and vice president. Instead, they vote within each state for a group of "electors" who are pledged to one or another presidential candidate. The number of electors corresponds to the number in a state's congressional delegation, i.e., the number of representatives and senators from that state. Election to the presidency requires an absolute majority of the 50 states' 538 *electoral* votes. (That figure includes three electoral votes from the national capital city of Washington, the District of Columbia, which is not a state and which does not have voting representation in Congress.)

The absolute majority requirement makes it extremely difficult for a third-party candidate to win the presidency because the individual states' electoral votes are allocated under a winner-take-all arrangement (with two exceptions). That is, whichever candidate receives a plurality of the popular vote in a state — even if it is just a narrow plurality — wins all of that state's electoral votes. In Maine and Nebraska, the statewide

Nebraska's Electoral College meets in December 2004, in Lincoln, Nebraska, to cast the state's five electoral votes for President George W. Bush.

popular vote winner is awarded two electoral votes and the winner in each congressional district is awarded one electoral vote. Like the single-member district system, the Electoral College works to the disadvantage of third parties, which have little chance of winning any state's electoral votes, let alone carrying enough states to elect a president.

The founders of the nation devised the Electoral College system as part of their plan to share power between the states and the national government. Under the Electoral College system, the nationwide popular vote for president has no final significance. As a result, it is possible that the electoral votes

awarded on the basis of state elections could produce a different result than the *nationwide* popular vote. In fact, there have been 17 presidential elections in which the winner did not receive a majority of the popular vote cast. The first of these was John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824, and the most recent was George W. Bush in 2000. Some people consider the Electoral College system to be an outmoded relic, while other observers prefer it because it requires presidential candidates to contest the election in many states, rather than just in the most populous ones.

Here, the Washington state electoral college casts its 11 votes in 2004 for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

Other Barriers to Third Parties

Given the tendency of the system to produce two national parties over the course of time, and with the Democrats and Republicans currently in control of the governmental machinery, it is not surprising that they have created other electoral rules that work to their advantage. For instance, qualifying a new party for the ballot in a state can be an arduous and expensive undertaking, often requiring petitions with tens of thousands of signatures and the ability to attract a sufficient "threshold" proportion of the vote in subsequent elections to remain on the ballot.

America's distinctive nominating process is an additional structural barrier to third parties. Among the world's democracies, the United States is unique in its overwhelming reliance on primary elections to nominate partisan candidates for presidential, congressional, and state offices. As noted, under this type of nominating system, rank-and-file voters in a primary election select their party's nominee for the general election. In most nations, partisan nominations are controlled by the party organizations and their leaders. But in the United States, it is now usually the voters who make the ultimate determination of who the Republican and Democratic nominees will be.

Although this system leads to weaker internal party organizations than is the case in most democracies, this participatory nominating process has contributed to the Republican-Democratic domination of electoral politics. By winning party nominations through primary elections, insurgents or reform candidates can work within the parties to gain access to the general election ballot and thereby enhance their chances of general election victories without having to organize third parties. Thus, the primary nomination process tends to channel dissent into the two major parties and makes

Voters in New Hampshire listen to Democratic presidential aspirant John Edwards in a private house in Salem, early in the 2008 primary season.

it, generally, unnecessary for dissidents to engage in the difficult business of forming a third party. Furthermore, the parties and their candidates tend to adapt electoral strategies to co-opt the message of third party and independent candidates who demonstrate wide appeal.

Broad-Based Support

The Republican and Democratic parties both seek broad-based support, and tend to draw voters from across economic classes and demographic groups. With the exception of African-American and Jewish voters — the vast majority of whom usually vote for the Democratic presidential candidate — both parties draw significant levels of support from virtually every major socioeconomic group in society. The parties also exhibit flexibility with respect to policy positions and do not generally enforce a strict adherence to an ideology or a set of policy goals. Rather, they have traditionally been concerned first and foremost with winning elections and controlling the elective branches of government.

Given their broad socioeconomic bases of electoral support and the need to operate within a society that is largely middle-of-the-road ideologically, American parties have adopted essentially centrist policy positions. As noted, they also demonstrate a high level of policy flexibility. This non-doctrinaire approach enables the Republicans and the Democrats to tolerate great diversity

Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D) of Hawaii (right), gives traditional greetings to a supporter at his campaign headquarters in Honolulu.

within their ranks, and has contributed to their ability to absorb third parties and protest movements when they have occurred. In general, Republicans are seen as the conservative party — with more of an emphasis on property rights and private accumulation of wealth, and the Democrats are seen as somewhat more to the left, favoring liberal social and economic policies. In practice, when they achieve power, both parties tend to be pragmatic.

Decentralized Party Structures

In addition to being ideologically flexible, the two main American parties are characterized by a decentralized structure. Once in office, a president cannot assume that his party's members in Congress will be loyal supporters of his favored initiatives, nor can party leaders in Congress expect straight party-line voting from members of their party. The Democratic and Republican congressional caucuses (composed of incumbent legislators) are autonomous, and may pursue policies that are in opposition to the president, even if the president is from the same party. Party fundraising for elections is similarly separated, as the Republican and Democratic congressional and senatorial campaign committees operate independently from the national party committees that tend to be oriented to the presidential election. In addition, except for asserting authority over procedures for selecting delegates to national nominating conventions, national party organizations rarely meddle in state party affairs.

In the layered U.S. federal system, local elections are as important as national elections to local citizens. Here, Houston mayoral candidate Bill White makes a media appearance.

This organizational fragmentation reflects the consequences of the constitutional separation-of-powers system — the division of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, both at the federal and state level. The system of divided power may create only limited incentives for party unity between legislators and their party's chief executive. This is broadly true whether we are talking about members of Congress *vis-a-vis* a president of their own party, or a similar relationship between state legislators and a governor.

The layered system of federal, state, and local governments in the United States provides further impetus for decentralization of the parties by creating thousands of constituencies for officeholders at the federal, state, and local levels. As previously noted, the use of primary elections to nominate candidates also weakens the party organizations by denying them the ability to

control the selection of party nominees. Individual candidates, therefore, are encouraged to build their own personal campaign organizations and electoral followings, first to win the primaries and then the general elections.

Public Wariness

In spite of the long and impressive evidence of organized partisanship within the American political system, one ingrained component of American civic culture has been increasing distrust of political parties. The adoption and growth of the primary system for nominating congressional and state candidates is testimony to a populist, or even an anti-party, sentiment within the public. Modern Americans are skeptical about the leaders of their party organizations exercising great power over their government. Public opinion polls consistently reveal that large proportions of the population believe that the parties sometimes do more to confuse the issues than clarify them — and that it would be better if there were no party labels on the ballot.

Parties thus must contend with the problem of a substantial number of voters attaching diminished importance to party identification. One indicator of this is the incidence of ticket-splitting. For instance, a voter may vote for his own party's nominee for president and for the other party's nominee in his district for Congress. Thus, in an age of divided government, presidents often find themselves attempting to govern without a majority in one or both houses of Congress. Divided party

Internet bloggers update their convention blogs at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, 2004. Modern presidential conventions tend to be joyous media spectacles rather than serious politics.

control of the executive and legislative branches of government has become a commonplace feature of both the national government and the governments in the 50 states. Some observers believe that voters even prefer the arrangement, because it tends to stifle major government initiatives that might inconvenience voters.

Third Parties and Independent Candidates

Third parties and independent candidates, despite the obstacles discussed previously, have been a periodic feature of American politics. Often they have brought societal problems that the major parties had failed to confront to the forefront of public discourse — and on to the governmental agenda. But most third parties have tended to flourish for a single election and then die, fade away, or be absorbed into one of the major parties. Since the 1850s, only one new party, the Republican Party, emerged to achieve major party status. In that instance, there was a compelling moral issue — slavery — dividing the nation. It provided the basis for candidate recruitment and voter mobilization.

Third-party presidential candidates have arisen several times in the 20th century. Though they have not won, they have influenced presidential elections. In this photograph, former president Teddy Roosevelt makes a speech to his own "Bull Moose" party supporters, 1912.

In 1992, Texas billionaire Ross Perot became concerned about federal budget deficits and ran a third-party presidential campaign, detailing his views on television. Some say his legacy was the election of Bill Clinton as president.

There is evidence that third parties can have a major impact on election outcomes. For example, Theodore Roosevelt's third-party candidacy in 1912 split the normal Republican vote and enabled Democrat Woodrow Wilson to be elected with less than a majority of the popular vote. In 1992, H. Ross Perot's independent candidacy attracted voters who, in the main, had been voting Republican in the 1980s, and thereby contributed to the defeat of the incumbent Republican president, George H.W. Bush. In the extremely close 2000 contest between Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore, it is possible

In 2000, Green Party presidential candidate and social activist Ralph Nader received only a small fraction of the vote. Al Gore supporters blamed him for siphoning away just enough of the liberal vote from Gore to throw the election to George W. Bush.

that had Green Party candidate Ralph Nader not been on the ballot in Florida, Gore might have won that state's electoral votes and thereby the presidency.

Public opinion surveys since the 1990s have consistently shown a high level of popular support for the *concept* of a third party. In the run-up to the 2000 election, a Gallup Poll found that 67 percent of Americans favored a strong third party that would field candidates for president, Congress, and state offices against Republican and Democratic nominees. It is just such sentiments, plus lavish campaign spending, that enabled Texas billionaire Ross Perot to gain 19 percent of the popular vote for president in 1992, the highest percentage for a non-major-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt (Progressive Party) won 27 percent in 1912.

Presidential Nominations

Rules within parties for nominating presidential candidates are not spelled out in the U.S. Constitution. As noted, there were no political parties in existence at the time the Constitution was drafted and ratified in the late 1700s, and the founders of the Republic had no interest in proscribing procedures for such entities.

Beginning in 1796, members of the U.S. Congress who identified with one of the political parties of the time met informally to agree on their party's presidential and vice presidential nominees. Known as "King Caucus," this system for selecting party candidates continued for almost 30 years. It broke down in 1824, a victim of the decentralization of power in politics that accompanied the westward expansion of the United States.

Eventually, the national nominating conventions replaced King Caucus as the means for selecting party nominees. In 1831, a minor party, the Anti-Masons, met in a saloon in the city of

George Washington takes the oath of office as first president of the United States, 1789. Washington distrusted political factions, but popular parties began their rise under his presidency.

Baltimore, Maryland, to choose candidates and write a platform on which they would run. The next year, the Democrats met in the same saloon to select their nominees. Since then, the major parties and most minor parties have held national nominating conventions, attended by state delegates, to choose their presidential and vice presidential candidates and to agree on policy positions.

Advent of Television

Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, the presidential nominating conventions, though attended by many of the party faithful, were controlled by state party leaders. These political "bosses" had used their influence to hand-pick their state's convention delegates — and to make sure that they voted "correctly" at the national party convention. Opponents to the party leaders demanded reforms to permit ordinary voters to select convention delegates. Primary elections came into being to do just this. By 1916, more than half the states held presidential primaries.

The movement was short-lived, however. Following the end of World War I, party leaders, who knew the primaries were a threat to their power, persuaded state legislatures to abolish them on the grounds that they were expensive and that relatively few people participated in them. By 1936, only a dozen states continued to hold presidential primaries.

But democratizing pressures reemerged after World War II. For the first time, television provided a medium through which people could now see, as well as hear, the political campaigns in

Television after World War II made national elections popular entertainment. Here, party loyalists gather to watch election returns at Republican headquarters in Meridian, Mississippi.

State-by-state primary elections (or sometimes caucuses) have become the road to the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations. Here, a Republican presidential aspirant, Lamar Alexander (checked shirt, center), greeted media and New Hampshire primary voters in winter, 1996.

their own living rooms. Plausible candidates for the presidency could use television exposure to demonstrate their popular appeal. The decades that followed brought back democratizing reforms to widen participation in party nominating conventions.

As a result, most states now hold primary elections. Depending on the laws of the state, primary voters may cast a ballot for a party's presidential nominee and a slate of "pledged" delegates, may vote for the presidential candidate with delegates to be chosen later to reflect the vote, or may indirectly vote for a candidate in a caucus by choosing convention delegates who are "pledged" to one or another nominee. Under the caucus system, partisans who live within a relatively small geographic area — a local precinct — get together and vote for delegates who are pledged to support specific candidates for president. Those delegates, in turn, represent their precinct at a county convention, which chooses delegates to attend the congressional district and state conventions. The delegates to these conventions ultimately elect delegates to represent the state at the national convention. Although this system takes place over several months, the candidate preferences are essentially determined in the first round of voting.

The actual size of any state's delegation to the national nominating convention is calculated on the basis of a formula established by each party that includes such considerations as the state's population, its past support for the party's national candidates, and the number of elected officials and party leaders currently serving in public office from that state. The allocation formula that the Democrats use results in national conventions that have about twice as many delegates as those of the Republicans.

As a result of these reforming tendencies since World War II, two important trends stand out. First, more states have moved their presidential primaries and caucuses earlier on the calendar toward the decisive early stage of the nominating season, a trend known as "front-loading." Being an early primary or caucus state may allow voters in the state to exercise more influence over the ultimate selection of the nominees. In addition, it

may encourage the candidates to address the needs and interests of the state early on, and may force candidates to organize within the state, spending money on staff, media, and hotels in order to try to obtain a decisive psychological victory early in the party nomination process.

Increasingly, the Internet is used to raise money and to gain attention for long-shot candidates. An Ohio congressional candidate (right) and his communications director (left) pose and show off their blog page.

In addition, in some parts of the country, states have cooperated with one another to organize "regional primaries" by holding their primaries and caucuses on the same date to maximize the influence of a region.

Both of these trends have forced candidates to begin their campaigns earlier to gain a foothold in the increasing number of states that hold the early contests. Candidates also have had to depend increasingly on the mass media — radio, television, and the Internet — and on the endorsements of state party leaders to help them reach voters in the multiple states that may be conducting their primaries on the same day.

Decline of the Political Convention

One consequence of the changes in the presidential nomination process has been the decreasing importance of the party's climactic, televised, national nominating convention. Today, the presidential nominee is effectively determined by the voters relatively early in the primary elections process. That eventual nominee may, in turn, even indicate his choice for a vice presidential candidate before the convention meets. (Vice presidential candidates do not run independently for that office in primaries but are selected by the party's winning presidential nominee.)

Thus, the presidential nominating process continues to evolve. In recent decades, this evolution has enhanced participation, improved demographic representation, and strengthened the tie between the average partisan and the candidates. As presently constituted, the process provides an advantage to candidates who are better known, can raise more money, have the most effective campaign organizations, and can generate the most enthusiasm among voters early in the presidential primary season.

The Internet Connection

Candidates and their supporters have been quick to adopt the Internet as a campaign tool. It has proved to be an effective and efficient way to solicit funds from potential supporters and to promote one's policies and experience. Campaign organizations now maintain their own blogs.

The bloggers on these sites are campaign staffers paid to write about the statements and activities of their particular candidates. Meanwhile, thousands of independent bloggers write commentaries in support of their favorite candidates and engage in debate with other bloggers who oppose them.

Video sharing on sites such as *YouTube* has provided opportunities and pitfalls for political campaigning. Candidates have taken advantage of the technology to produce videos about themselves, occasionally humorous. At other times, candidates have been recorded in an unguarded moment saying or doing something that they would not say or do before a general audience — and having their *faux pas* shown countless times on the Internet and on television.

Congressional Elections

Elections for the U.S. Congress can be as competitive and important as those for president. This is because of the central role that Congress plays in making laws.

Unlike a parliamentary system where the chief executive comes from the parliament, the American system, as noted, separates the legislature and the presidency. Presidents and legislators are elected separately. Although a sitting president may propose laws to Congress, they have to be drafted in Congress by his allies within that institution, and must be passed by the Congress before being sent back to the president

Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse celebrates his election as a U.S. senator from Rhode Island. Both senators and congressmen wield significant power.

for his signature. The House and Senate are legally and politically independent of the will of the president.

Within Congress, party discipline is less strictly observed in the American system than in parliamentary systems. It is fairly easy for members of Congress to vote on policies as they think best, including what they think best for winning their own reelection. As a result, congressional leaders must put together a winning coalition one member at a time, rather than count on automatic support from highly disciplined parties. This makes every congressional legislative victory difficult to obtain.

Thus, Congressional elections are important to the nation, as Congress is powerful, and difficult to predict; and so are individual congressmen.

House and Senate Differences

The House and the Senate have nearly equal powers, but their means of election are quite different. The founders of the American Republic intended members of the House of Representatives to be close to the public, reflecting the public's wishes and ambitions. Therefore, the Founders designed the House to be relatively large in order to accommodate many members from small legislative districts, and to have frequent

Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (left) swears in two sisters, Linda (center) and Loretta Sánchez, both elected to the House from California.

The upper house of Congress, the Senate, was designed by the Founders to be a conservative, stabilizing force. Here, the 100 senators pose for their portrait.

(two-year) elections. Originally, a two-year term was considered by some to be too long. In the days when transportation was by horse, a two-year term in Washington could keep a congressman away from his constituents for two years. Today, the concern is that elections every two years force congressmen to fly back to their districts every weekend or so to shore up political support.

Each House seat represents a unique geographic constituency, and, as noted above, every member is elected as sole representative from that district by plurality rule. Each of the 50 states is assured of at least one seat in the House, with the rest allocated to the states according to population. Alaska, for

example, has a very small population and therefore holds only one seat in the House. California is the mostly highly populated state and holds 53 seats. Following each decennial census, the number of seats assigned to a state is recalculated to account for changes in state populations during the past 10 years, and state legislatures redesign congressional district boundaries within states to reflect changes in the number of seats assigned to the state or population shifts within the state.

The Senate was designed for its members to represent larger constituencies — the entire state — and to provide equal representation to that body of each state, regardless of population. Thus small states possess as much influence (two senators) as large states in the Senate.

Senators were originally selected by the state legislatures. It was not until enactment of the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1913 that senators were directly elected by their state's voters. Every state has two senators elected for staggered six-year terms, with one-third of the Senate seats up for reelection every two years. A senator is chosen by plurality vote of the state electorate.

Loyalty to Party or Person

In the past, congressional elections tended to be "party centered," as many voters held long-term loyalties toward one political party or the other and tended to vote along party lines for Congress. The individual personalities and performances of office-holders may have only marginally added to or subtracted from voter support. In recent decades, the views and personalities of individual candidates have become more central to electoral politics and have somewhat diminished the importance of party loyalties.

Indeed, since the 1960s, national elections have become increasingly candidate-centered. The growth of the media and the Internet, the importance of aggressive campaign fundraising, constant opinion polls, and other aspects of modern campaigning have made the voter more aware of the candidate as an individual. As a result, voters tend to weigh individual candidate's strengths and weaknesses along with party loyalties in deciding whom to support. The establishment of broad-based public education in the early 20th century and of higher education after World War II has also made voters more confident of their own judgment; and less reliant on party cues with respect to ballot choices.

In this context of candidate-centered elections, incumbent members of Congress fare very well, with reelection rates well above 90 percent. This is partly due to often bland media coverage of Congress, and particularly coverage of individual members by local media in their states or congressional districts. With this generally favorable media exposure and daily involvement with public policy issues — and individuals and groups that seek to influence policy — incumbents also tend to raise far greater sums of money with which to campaign. For these reasons and more, incumbents who run for reelection are very likely to win, no matter which party they belong to.

POLLS AND PUNDITS

Though not part of the rules and laws governing electoral politics, public opinion polls have become an essential part of the electoral process in recent decades. Many political candidates hire pollsters and take frequent polls. Polling informs political candidates of how well they are being perceived in relation to their competitors, and what issues are uppermost in the minds of the voters. The media — newspapers, television — also conduct opinion polls and report them (along with results of private polls) to give citizens a sense of how their preferences for candidates, issues, and policies stand in relation to the preferences of others.

Fifty years ago, only one or two large organizations dominated public opinion polling. Today, in an era of instant news, the Internet, and 24-hour cable-news channels, numerous sources regularly provide the results of opinion polls.

Polls in History

By now, constant polling of public opinion by private, competent pollsters has become commonplace for individual candidates, as well as for high-level government officials such as the president, who want to know which way the political winds are blowing. However, independent, media-commissioned polls have been more typical throughout U.S. history.

Although the first political poll was conducted in 1824 by the local newspaper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, independent polls did not become a staple of media news coverage of political campaigns until the 1930s. By the 1970s, all three major U.S. television network news operations of the day (ABC, CBS, and NBC) were offering their own polls for the presidential races, and thereafter for important state races for governor and for the U.S. Congress.

Modern media polls — such as those conducted in the name of a TV news network and a newspaper partner (e.g., CBS/*New York Times*, ABC/*Washington Post*, NBC/*Wall St. Journal*) — are conducted frequently and can track public opinion about candidates and issues on a weekly, or daily basis. They are well designed to be neutral and independent. Over the decades,

Lee Miringoff of Marist College's Institute for Public Opinion supervises polling activity.

independent political polling has offered an objective look at election races, an assessment of each candidate's strengths and weaknesses, and an examination of the demographic groups supporting each candidate. Such independent polling gives reporters and editors the ability to make and report honest assessments of the status of a campaign, and voters a better sense of the political landscape.

Mark Penn, chief strategist and pollster for Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, speaks to reporters following a debate in January 2008.

Sample Size and Makeup

Sometimes, overnight polls are conducted after a major event such as the president's annual State of the Union Address or a debate between candidates for political office. Often these polls are done in one night for quick publication the next day and feature a sample of only 500 adults nationwide.

While these "overnighters" might offer a fast take on public reaction, some experts believe that a sample of 500 citizens is too small for serious consideration in a nation of more than 300 million people. Many professionals prefer posing questions to at least 1,000 adults to provide a representative sample of the entire population. Even the most thorough polls are open to interpretation, and there are numerous examples of candidates who have risen from relative obscurity to wide popularity, contrary to trends suggested by early polling results.

Early polls can provide a wealth of data well beyond showing which candidates are ahead in the race. They can reveal concern for current issues and portray the public's overall mood. As one pollster has said, "Polls merely add science to what candidates see and what crowds feel — contentment, resentment, anger, frustration, confidence — or even despair." Both private and public polling results, then, help candidates determine the optimum communications message to emphasize, while focusing issues for members of the public.

Exit Polls

Exit polls (polls taken by television networks as voters leave their polling places) have been a staple in U.S. elections since the 1970s. They also are arguably the most controversial, because they give TV networks the means to predict election victories based on interviews with people who have just voted. Exit polls achieved particular infamy in the 2000 U.S. presidential election, when they were misused by the television networks to make not one, but two, incorrect projections of the winner who had been selected by voters in Florida. The pressure to get the projection *first* trumped the pressure to get it right.

However, exit polls, when used properly, can be a vital tool for pollsters, the press, and academics. Above and beyond their

Voters in rural Pennsylvania (including members of the Amish community) enter and exit a polling place.

questionable use in projecting winners early on election day, they provide experts and political scientists with details of how specific demographic groups have voted and the expressed reasons for their vote.

Financing Campaigns

Federal law dictates how candidates for the federal offices of president, senator, and representative — and certain of their political allies — may raise funds, as well as from whom,

Voters leave a polling place in West Virginia. This group of pastors came to vote against a ballot measure to expand legalized gambling.

and in what amounts. Federal campaign finance laws are separate from state laws that regulate elections for state and local offices.

In the American system, presidential candidates raise hundreds of millions of dollars for a campaign directed at a nation of more than 100 million voters. Though in many cases the fund-raising is from private sources, the process by which they raise and spend the money is highly regulated.

A candidate for president must establish a campaign organization, called a political committee. The political committee must have a treasurer and must register with the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Notwithstanding its

New York politician Andrew Cuomo (center) chats with supporters at a fundraising affair during his campaign for governor.

name, the FEC only supervises and enforces campaign finance laws; it does not actually conduct the elections. (The process of registering voters, conducting the balloting, and counting the votes is the responsibility of state and local election officials.)

Various types of political committees are registered with the FEC. In addition to the candidates, political parties must register their own committees with the agency. In addition, any group of private citizens may form a political committee. For example, groups of individuals from corporations, labor unions, and trade associations often form such committees (although use of corporate or labor union treasury funds is prohibited). These political committees are often referred to as PACs, or political action committees, and must also register with the FEC.

Once registered, political committees may start raising campaign funds. Such funds, as well as expenses, are reported to the FEC on either a quarterly or monthly basis. The reports may also be filed electronically and are available to the public on the FEC's Web site [www.fec.gov]. Numerous private organizations also maintain Web sites to monitor contributions and expenses of the candidates, political parties, and PACs. The point of this is to make it easier for the press and the voters to know which groups are giving money to which candidates and causes. There are legal limits to how much money individual citizens and individual committees can give to candidates they favor. Accordingly, a candidate for president who needs to raise hundreds of millions of dollars for a presidential campaign must attempt to find thousands of contributors.

To campaign for office, a candidate needs to hire staff; arrange for office space and travel; conduct research; issue position papers; advertise on radio and television, in publications, and on the Internet; and conduct numerous public appearances and fundraising events. A candidate for the House of Representatives will base these activities in his or her specific congressional district, while

Republican Senator John McCain has spent much effort trying to reform campaign finance. What constitutes desirable reform is still debated.

a Senate candidate will do likewise throughout his entire state. (Congressmen and senators may also conduct specific fund-raising events elsewhere, such as Washington, D.C.). Candidates for president have the daunting task of organizing their primary campaigns state by state and then, if nominated, their general election campaign throughout the nation.

Public Financing

Since 1976, candidates for president have been eligible to participate in a public financing system. Until the 2000 elections, all candidates nominated for president participated

Political Action committees can lobby and raise money in all kinds of ways. They may telephone to mobilize voters…

… or hold fund-raising parties, in art galleries or elsewhere.

in this system by accepting government funds in exchange for a promise not to spend more than a specified amount. However, this system has become increasingly unappealing to candidates because the imposed spending limit is considered too low — and less than the amount that major candidates can often easily raise from private sources. Consequently, many major candidates have been opting out of public funding.

Spending invariably increases from one election to the next. In addition to candidate spending, the political parties, PACs, and other interest groups will spend money to influence elections. A recent development in funneling money for elections, for example, is the "527 political organization,"

named for a section of the U.S. tax code. These groups are organized primarily for the purpose of influencing the selection, nomination, election, or appointment of an individual to a federal, state, or local public office. 527 political organizations, such as MoveOn and Swiftboat Veterans for Truth, are not regulated by the Federal Election Commission or by a state elections commission, and are not subject to the same contribution limits as PACs. Critics of these and similar groups have long asserted that high spending in U.S. elections, combined with the reliance on private sources for funds, raises the specter of undue influence over public policy by wealthy donors and powerful interest groups.

Proposed reforms have been opposed by those who see election spending as proportionate with both the costs of goods and services in today's economy. In this regard, election spending is seen as the price a democracy pays for electoral competition, with large contributions and expenditures by interest groups as the contemporary expression of America's long-standing pluralism. It is hard to prove any specific connection between interest-group donations and government policy. Courts have also questioned whether further restrictions on campaign giving and spending might unduly limit donors' constitutionally protected right to free speech in the political arena. Given the immense expense of modern campaigning, certain extremely wealthy individuals simply fund their own campaigns for public office — there is no rule against it. Sometimes they win, sometimes they don't.

U.S. Elections Procedures

Thousands of administrators are responsible for organizing and conducting U.S. elections, including tabulating and certifying the results. These officials have an important and complex set of tasks — setting the exact dates for elections, certifying the eligibility of candidates, registering eligible voters and preparing voter rolls, selecting voting equipment, designing ballots, organizing a large temporary work force to administer the voting on election day; then tabulating the votes and certifying the results.

While most American elections are not particularly close, there are occasionally races with a very small margin of victory or races in which the outcome is contested. The outcome of the 2000 U.S. presidential election — the drawn-out contest to determine a winner in the closest presidential election in American history — exposed Americans to many of these administrative issues for the first time.

Voting in the United States is a two-step process. There is no national list of eligible voters, so a citizen must first qualify by becoming registered. Citizens register to vote where they live; if they move to a new location, they have to register again at their new address. Registration systems were designed to eliminate fraud, but the procedures for registering voters vary from state to state. In times past, selective registration procedures were used to discourage certain citizens — most notably, African Americans in the South — from participating in elections.

An election clerk displays a new voting device in Austin, Texas.

Recently, there has been a tendency to ease registration requirements. For instance, the 1993 National Voter Registration Act makes it possible for citizens to register to vote at the time they renew their state-issued drivers' licenses.

One of the most important functions for election officials is ensuring that everyone who is eligible to vote is on the registration lists but that no one who is unqualified is included. Generally, local election officials err on the side of keeping people on the lists even if they have not voted recently, rather than eliminating potentially eligible voters. When people appear


A young woman in Rhode Island signs up to get her driver's license and registers to vote, simultaneously.

at the polls whose names are not on the lists, they are now given a provisional ballot to record their votes. Their eligibility is subsequently reviewed before their votes are counted.

Administering Elections

As we have seen, in the United States, an election, even an election for federal office, is a locally conducted administrative exercise. And, as noted, election administrators — typically county or city officials or clerks — have a daunting task. Not

only are they responsible for registering voters all year long and for determining who is eligible to vote in a particular election — they also have to design the ballots for each election, and make sure that all certified candidates are listed and all issues up for decision correctly worded. And they must try to make the ballot as simple and as clear as possible.

Currently, there are no national standards for ballot forms. Under the Voting Rights Act, election officials may have to provide for ballots in multiple languages (if a percentage of the population does not speak English as a primary language). In some jurisdictions, the order of the candidates and parties on the ballot has to be randomly assigned. Ultimately, local election officials have to select the specific voting machines to use, and the ballots must fit the devices.

In between elections, these officials are responsible for the storage and maintenance of the voting devices. And one of their most difficult tasks is to hire and train a large temporary staff for one long session of work (typically 10 to 15 hours) on election day.

The Nature of Balloting

Thus, a certain effort goes into fair, legal, and professional preparation for elections. Since the equipment and ballot forms are generally purchased by officials at the local level, the type and condition of equipment that voters use often is related to the socioeconomic status and the tax base of their locale. Since local tax revenue also funds schools, police, and fire services,

Voters wait patiently to cast their ballots during a voting machine breakdown, New York City, 2004.

as well as parks and recreation facilities, investments in voting technology often have been given low priority.

A wide variety of voting devices is available in the United States, and the landscape of voting technologies is continuously changing. Today, there are very few places where voting takes place with handheld paper ballots marked with an "X" next to a candidate's name, as was done in the past, but many computerized systems still depend on paper ballots on which circles are filled in or lines connected. These ballots are

then scanned mechanically to have the votes recorded; the equipment is known as an optical scan system.

Some jurisdictions still use "lever" machines, on which voters turn a small lever next to the names of the candidates they prefer or the side of an issue they support. Another very common device is a "punch-card" machine. The ballot is a card where holes or punches are made next to a candidate's name, or the card is inserted into a holder that lines up with a ballot image, and then the holes are punched. This is the form of ballot that caused controversy in counting votes for the 2000 U.S. presidential election in Florida. As a result of that situation, many jurisdictions have eliminated punch-card devices. The Help America Vote Act provided voluntary funding to jurisdictions to replace lever and punch card voting systems.

The current trend is toward adoption of direct recording electronic (DRE) devices, which have touch screens that resemble those of automated banking machines. Security specialists are working to refine these systems to resolve security issues.

A significant change in balloting in recent years has been the adoption of procedures that make ballots available to voters before the election. This trend started with provisions for absentee ballots, issued to voters who anticipate being away from their home (and their voting place) on election day. Some states and local jurisdictions gradually liberalized this provision, allowing citizens to register as "permanent absentee voters" and routinely have a ballot mailed to their home. Oregon conducts its elections entirely by mail, but it is the only state to do so at present. Absentee voters generally return their completed ballots by mail.

Another new provision is "early voting," for which voting machines are set up in shopping malls and other public places for up to three weeks before election day. Citizens stop by at their convenience to cast their votes.

Counting the Votes

Tabulation of votes takes place on election day. Even though early ballots are becoming more popular, they are not counted until tabulation begins after the polls close, so that no official information can be released about which candidate is ahead or behind. Information about early results of balloting could affect later stages of the election.

The Reform Movement

One of the distinct lessons of the 2000 presidential election was that the election administration, balloting, and vote-counting issues encountered in Florida could have occurred to some degree in almost any jurisdiction in the United States. Several studies were commissioned, and a variety of panels heard expert witnesses and took testimony about the need for reform.

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which includes several notable elements. First, the

federal government offered payments to states and localities to replace outdated punch-card and lever-voting machines. Second, it established an Election Assistance Commission to provide technical assistance to local election administration officials and establish standards for voting devices. The commission's portfolio includes establishment of research programs to study voting machine and ballot design, methods of registration, methods for provisional voting and for deterring fraud, procedures for recruiting and training poll workers, and education programs for voters, among other matters.

The HAVA represents a significant departure from limited federal involvement in what has historically been a local administrative issue. But this procedural reform effort has helped reconfirm the faith that Americans have in their electoral system. And the costs involved are small when one considers that elections are the legitimizing foundation of democracy.

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