Elections

The most profound expression of an individual's political preferences is the vote. It is a blunt but effective instrument for controlling the government. Citizens usually cannot decide directly what laws are enacted, what the tax or interest rates will be, or whether to declare war. Citizens can affirm their commitment to stay the course or to change their government when they think a new direction is needed. It is our way of reinsing in government and ensuring that elected officials remain attentive to public preferences. Elections have proved a remarkably successful method of bringing about continual renewal of government through peaceful means.

Frequent, regular elections are the hallmark of democracy. The United States embraces this idea to a greater extent than any other democracy. America has elections very frequently, with great regularity, and for all manner of governments. Voters in the United States elect the president, governors, and other executive officers every four years; federal and state legislators every two years, and thousands of local mayors, councilors, and commissioners with similar frequency. All told there are over 88,000 governments at the federal, state, and local levels in the United States, nearly all of them run by elected bodies. In a typical election, a voter may choose candidates for a dozen different offices, as well as deciding bond issues and other local questions put before the voters, and in any given year a typical person in the United States has the opportunity to vote three or four times.

Why do elections work? How is it that elections create a government that reflects and responds to the preferences of the public? The simple idea behind

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1. Vermont and New Hampshire elect their governors every two years.
2. One federal government, 50 state governments, over 3,000 county governments, about 35,000 municipal and town governments, about 13,500 school districts, and over 35,000 special districts (for example, water or utility). www.census.gov/govs/www/ Apog0001.html (accessed 3/16/02; site discontinued).
democracy is that there is power, and perhaps even wisdom, in numbers. Voting
allows each of us to express our preferences, and election procedures aggregate
those votes into a legitimate collective choice. Election laws determine how votes
are counted and translate into a government—who wins seats in the legislature,
who is elected to the executive, and, in many states, who will serve as judges.

Elections in the United States work by choosing who will govern, not what
they should do or what the laws should be. We do not have direct democracy in
federal elections, although many states and municipalities allow voting on bonds
and a small number of laws. For the most part, elections are, to put the mat-
ter in terms introduced in Chapter 1, occasions when multiple principals—the
citizens—choose political agents to act on their behalf.

Two problems immediately arise for the principals (the citizens). First, are we
selecting the best people for the job? This is a problem of adverse selection and
stems from hidden information. We want to choose the people who have the nec-

essary competence to write smart legislation or who have our interests at heart,
but we may not have the information to judge which candidate possesses those
characteristics. Second, once elected, do the politicians do the job as we wish them

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**CORE OF THE ANALYSIS**

- The United States holds frequent elections as a means of keeping
  politicians close to the preferences of a majority of the people.

- The United States uses a system of plurality rule in which the
candidate with the most votes wins the electoral district. Plurality
rule creates a strong pressure toward two-party politics and makes
it difficult for third parties to succeed.

- Plurality rule also shapes the incentives facing candidates and
  parties. It creates strong pressure on the parties or candidates to
take centrist policies so as to appeal to the median voter among
  the electorate as a whole.

- Most voters develop strong attachments to political parties, based
  on agreement on policy, social pressure, or upbringing. Those who
  identify with a party, vote with that party nearly all of the time.

- Campaigns try to mobilize their candidates' supporters and
  persuade undecided voters. In the process, they provide
  information that helps solve some of the informational problems
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### CORE OF THE ANALYSIS

- The United States holds frequent elections as a means of keeping politicians close to the preferences of a majority of the people.
- The United States uses a system of plurality rule in which the candidate with the most votes wins the electoral district. Plurality rule creates a strong pressure toward two-party politics and makes it difficult for third parties to succeed.
- Plurality rule also shapes the incentives facing candidates and parties. It creates strong pressure on the parties or candidates to take centrist policies so as to appeal to the median voter among the electorate as a whole.
- Most voters develop strong attachments to political parties, based on agreement on policy, social pressure, or upbringing. Those who identify with a party, vote with that party nearly all of the time.
- Campaigns try to mobilize their candidate’s supporters and persuade undecided voters. In the process, they provide information that helps solve some of the informational problems inherent in representative democracy.
This is a problem of moral hazard and stems from hidden actions. Once selected, representatives cannot easily be monitored. Political leaders necessarily engage in many acts that do not attract public attention, such as making deals with other politicians to build a winning coalition for a particular bill. In these situations, we need to make sure that the decisions the politicians make are the ones we want them to make. However, voters cannot know everything about the candidates running for office or about politicians’ actions once they are elected. In fact, the incentives to be highly knowledgeable are minimal. In a nation of 185 million registered voters or even a district of 700,000 voters, surely one’s own ballot is unlikely to make a difference in the outcome and the cost of making a mistake is nil. Why, then, go to great lengths to find out the details of the candidates’ backgrounds and personalities or to learn about the goings-on in Congress?

Voters use simple rules to solve these problems. Politicians caught in scandals are usually voted out of office. One need not know the details about the inner workings of government to hold politicians accountable for large-scale malfeasance. Voters also usually take economic downturns as evidence of mismanagement of economic policy, and they vote against the incumbent president’s party, as occurred in 2008, 2010, and 2014. They will also reward a party for economic good times and express their desire to continue with current economic policies, as occurred in 2004. In other years, like 2012, when economic signals are mixed, elections are quite close. But given the simplicity of these rules, how do we hold politicians accountable for the details of legislation?

Ultimately, elections work through competition. The public relies on competition among politicians, the parties, interest groups, and the media to inform them. This chapter focuses on the politicians; later chapters go into greater detail about parties, interest groups, and the media.

In the United States politicians are central. Rival politicians or teams of politicians (parties) seek to hold elective office—we consider that their primary motivation. They try to formulate positions on important policies that appeal to the greatest number of voters; they develop personal appeals; they advertise their own ability to do the job at hand, their honesty and strength of character, and their fidelity to the public. Likewise, politicians draw attention to the failings of their rivals. Candidates and parties use advertisements, press conferences, speeches, and other modes of reaching the public to highlight policy decisions made by their opponents that are out of step with the wishes of a majority of voters, and they expose scandalous behavior and play up political gaffes. Politicians themselves bear much of the cost of informing the public about their own performance and ideas and those of their opponents. Competition, then, creates strong incentives for those vying for office to reveal information to the electorate.

Competition alone does not cure all. Proponents of electoral reform criticize many features of U.S. election laws, including the campaign finance system, redistricting procedures, the lack of third parties, and the relatively low levels of voter turnout. In this chapter, we look at how the institutional features of American elections shape the way that citizens’ goals and preferences are reflected in their government and how voters decide among the candidates and questions put before them on the ballot. Democracy is a work in progress. Americans constantly tinker with the rules to try to make it a better system.
INSTITUTIONS OF ELECTIONS

Elections don't just happen. They are not spontaneous affairs but formal institutions for making collective decisions. As in Congress, the executive branch, and the courts, rules (institutions) determine the operations of elections—who is allowed to vote, how votes are cast and counted, and how we determine who wins office. Election rules consist of a mix of state and federal laws, legal decisions, and local administrative practices. Federal laws regulate the time of congressional and presidential elections, the qualifications for office, the allocation of seats, the structure of electoral districts, and the qualifications and rights of voters. State laws determine a wider range of factors, including how votes are cast and counted, the procedures for registering voters, candidate qualifications for all elected officials other than members of Congress and the president, the procedures for nominating candidates and getting on the ballot, the operations of the parties, and the conduct of all state and local elections. The responsibility for making all of this go smoothly on Election Day falls, in turn, on the roughly 5,000 local election offices in counties and municipalities. Workers in local election offices manage the registration lists, prepare the ballots and voting machinery, set up polling places, recruit and train poll workers, and tally and certify the votes. And at the polling places on Election Day the poll workers, roughly 1 million volunteers across the country, administer the election.

The laws and procedures governing elections have important consequences. They can skew the electorate toward one interest or another; they can create barriers to some sorts of political organizations; and they can create a legislature that reflects the diversity of the population or one in which one segment of society dominates.

Four features of U.S. election laws deserve particular emphasis:

• **First, the United States provides for universal adult suffrage—all citizens over the age of eighteen have the right to vote.**

• **Second, Americans vote in secret and choose among candidates for particular office using a form of the ballot called the “Australian ballot.”**

• **Third, the United States selects almost all elected offices through single-member districts that have equal populations—one person, one vote.**

• **Fourth, what it takes to win. For most offices in the United States, the candidate who wins the most votes among all of those competing for a given seat wins the election.**

We consider each matter and its consequences in turn. In short, we will see that in the United States these rules create a two-party system that broadly

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3 In addition, there is the restriction that those currently serving sentences for felonies cannot vote; some states prohibit ex-felons from voting.
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3 In addition, there is the restriction that those currently serving sentences for felonies cannot vote; some states prohibit ex-felons from voting.
encompasses the entire adult population but that exaggerates the political power of the majority. Other features of American election laws and procedures, including rules governing campaign expenditures and fund-raising, party nominations, and ballot access, further shape political competition in the United States.

Also notable are rules that the United States does not have. Federal and state laws do not limit the amount of television and other forms of advertising, total campaign spending, the activities of groups and parties on behalf of candidates, or how the media cover the campaigns. Most other countries limit the use of television or forbid it altogether, restrict how candidates can campaign and how much they can spend, and tightly regulate the activities of organized interest groups. Compared with other countries, then, the United States has a relatively unregulated electoral system that allows candidates to run on their own, separate from the parties, and allows candidates to spend relatively freely on media and other aspects of their campaigns. We turn to these campaign activities in the next section, especially as they bear on the important question of voter learning through campaigns. The features of election law considered here regulate the nature of the electorate and the choices that voters face.

The rules governing elections are not static. The features of American electoral institutions have evolved over time through legislation, court decisions, administrative rulings of agencies, and public agitation for electoral reform. The nation has gradually converged on our present system of universal suffrage with secret voting and to the use of single-member districts with plurality rule. The future will likely bring further innovations in voting and elections. With waves of immigration, new communication technologies, and other changes reshaping society, the institutions of democracy must change as well. Perhaps the most dramatic change under way involve the rise of "convenience voting"—voting by mail or voting early at a polling center or town hall. In 1972, approximately 3 percent of all votes nationwide were cast in absentee; in 2012, almost 40 percent of all votes were absentee or early ballots. The rate of absentee and early voting more than doubled over the past decade alone. Both Oregon and Washington State vote entirely by mail. A few states, such as Virginia, accept absentee ballots by e-mail, which is particularly convenient for military personnel. The rise of these new modes of voting presents new questions about secrecy and about the form of the ballot; it also provides new opportunities for reform and modes of voting (such as instant runoff voting). Such changes rarely come about through carefully planned federal legislation. Rather, new election institutions emerge out of the experiences and experiments of local election officials and state laws.

Who Can Vote: Defining the Electorate

Over the course of American history the electorate has expanded greatly. As discussed in Chapter 5, the United States has gradually extended the right to vote, both on paper and in practice. At the beginning of the Republic, voting rights in most states were restricted to white men over 21 years of age, and many
states further required that those people own property. Today, all citizens over 18 years of age are allowed to vote, and the courts and Department of Justice and activist organizations actively ferret out discrimination in elections.1

While the right to vote is universal, the exercise of this right is not. In a typical U.S. presidential election, approximately 60 percent of those eligible to vote in fact do so. The rate of voting is lower still in midterm elections for Congress, with typically around 45 percent of the eligible electorate voting. And in local elections the percent of people who vote can be quite low: in some locales, city elections conducted in odd years attract only 10 to 20 percent of the eligible electorate. Some of the most basic questions concerning the functioning and health of our democracy concern the exercise of the franchise. Who votes and why? How does nonparticipation affect election outcomes, and would election outcomes be different if everyone voted? Does low voter turnout threaten the legitimacy of government?

It is also important to point out that voting in the United States is a right, not a requirement. Voting, like most other activities in our society, is voluntary. If we do not feel strongly about government, we do not have to participate. If we want to send a message of dissatisfaction, one way to do so is not to vote. Of course, if no one voted, it would be a disaster for American democracy; it would signal the end of Americans' commitment to their form of government. And when large numbers of people do participate in elections, it is evidence of a robust democracy.

Not all nations take the same view of democracy. While most democracies view voting as a right and a voluntary act, some also treat it as a responsibility of citizenship. In Mexico and Australia, for example, adult citizens are required to vote in national elections, and if they fail to vote they must either receive a medical exemption or pay a fine. That guarantees turnout rates in the range of 90 percent of the eligible electorate and it makes election results a reflection of the preferences of all people. Universal voting in the United States, however, is not viewed favorably. Those who don't vote don't want to face a potential fine, and those who do vote may not want the "nonvoters" diluting their power. And most Americans simply do not like the notion that the government can compel us to do something, even without being compelled to participate, the United States is one of the most participatory democracies in the world. There are many other ways that we can participate in electoral politics, such as blogging and speaking with others, joining organizations, giving money, and of course voting. On nearly all of these activities, Americans participate in politics at much higher rates than people in nearly every other country.2

That said, levels of voter participation in the latter half of the twentieth century were quite low in the United States, as compared with voter participation

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1 There are further restrictions in some states that prohibit ex-felons from voting and impose residency requirements.


Institutions of Elections 451
in other democracies (Figure 11.1). And voter participation was low compared to earlier eras of American history, especially the late nineteenth century (Figure 11.2). Over the five decades after World War II there was a steady erosion of voter turnout in the United States. Voter participation in presidential elections in the United States fell below 50 percent in 1996. That decline alarmed many observers and even stirred Congress to reform voter registration rules in the mid-1990s. Turnout rates have grown since then, in response to legal

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6 See Walter Dean Burnham, “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe,” American Political Science Review 90, no. 1 (March 1996): 1–28. It should be noted that other democracies, such as India and Switzerland, have even lower turnout rates, as do some of the new democracies in eastern Europe.

Figure 11.2  
VOTER TURNOUT IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Data reflect the population of eligible voters; the percentage of the voting-age population that voted would be smaller.  

changes and in response to the observation by the political parties and candidates that there was an opportunity to influence elections by bringing people back to the polls. In 2012, 56.3 percent of adult citizens in the United States voted.

The question “who votes” is partly explained by the behavior of individuals and partly explained by the laws of democracy, which are the institutions of elections. Later in this chapter we will discuss the correlates of voting to understand who chooses to vote. We discuss here the institutions and how they define and constrain behavior.

It is worth a brief detour to explain one term—the turnout rate. That quantity is handled about quite a bit. It is simple to define, but worth understanding some of the subtleties, especially when making comparisons over time or across...
countries. The turnout rate is the number of people who vote in a given election divided by the number of people who are allowed to vote. The first part of this ratio is relatively uncontroversial—it is the number of individuals who cast ballots in the election, at polling stations or through absentee ballots.\(^8\) The appropriate baseline in the turnout ratio is more difficult to define. Most commonly, the turnout rate presented for the United States (and other countries) is turnout as a percentage of the voting-age population (all adults). This underestimates the true turnout rate, because it includes noncitizens and people who are institutionalized or not allowed to vote in some states because they are ex-felons. It is possible to estimate from census reports the numbers of noncitizens and institutionalized populations. Such calculations are somewhat controversial because of difficulties in getting reliable figures on populations of institutionalized people and noncitizens. Following the usual conventions, we focus here on the voting-age population. However, it is worth understanding the size of the eligible electorate and the effects of current restrictions on the franchise.\(^9\)

How big is the U.S. electorate? There are approximately 319 million people in the United States today. But not all of them are allowed to vote. First, children under eighteen are not allowed to vote. Second, noncitizens are not allowed to vote. Third, people in prison are not allowed to vote, and in most states ex-felons are not allowed to vote. The biggest restriction on the size of the electorate is age. There are approximately 77 million people under age eighteen in the United States. Citizenship reduces the eligible electorate further, by another 13 million adults.\(^10\) Finally, the total ineligible prison and felon population is approximately 2 million persons. Hence, the eligible electorate is approximately 227 million persons, or about two-thirds of the people living in the United States.

To put the changes in election laws in perspective, suppose that the restrictive rules of the nineteenth century were in place today, and that only white male citizens over 21 were allowed to vote. If that were the law of the land in 2014, the eligible electorate would total only about 75 million people. That is, only about one in four people in the United States today would be eligible to vote if the nineteenth-century restrictions on voting remained in place today. Those restrictions surely would have made for a very different electorate in terms of its interests, values, and preferences; they would have altered the strategies of the political parties; and they would have surely resulted in very different election outcomes.

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\(^8\) Not all states report such figures in their certified tally of the vote. In fact, 11 states do not report the number of ballots cast, and researchers must substitute the total votes for all candidates for the presidency or another office on the top of the ballot. So, for example, if an individual votes in one of those states does not cast a vote for president but does turn out to vote on other questions on the ballot, this voter might not be counted in the total. However, since nearly all voters who turn out do vote on the races at the top of the ticket, counting those totals is a reasonably accurate substitute for official turnout records.


\(^10\) These figures exclude undocumented, illegal immigrants, of which there are estimated to be another 12 million persons.
Other restrictions on the franchise arise from the ways that local election officials run elections. As Figure 11.2 indicates, voter turnout declined markedly in the United States between 1890 and 1910. These years coincided with two changes in the institutions of elections. First, many states imposed rules such as literacy tests to keep immigrants, blacks, and other groups out of the electorate. Second, many states began to create formal registration systems and lists, so that people had to be on a formal list of eligible voters in order to establish that they were allowed to vote on Election Day. Personal registration was one of several “progressive” reforms of political practices initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The ostensible purpose of registration was to discourage fraud and corruption. At that time, “corruption” was also code language that referred to machine politics in large cities, where political parties had organized immigrant and ethnic populations. Election reforms not only tried to reign in corruption but also weaken the power of urban factions within parties and keep immigrant and blacks from voting.

Over the years, voter registration restrictions have been modified somewhat to make registration easier. In 1993, for example, Congress approved and President Bill Clinton signed the “motor voter” bill to ease voter registration by allowing individuals to register when they applied for driver’s licenses, as well as in public-assistance and military recruitment offices.1 In many jurisdictions, casting a vote automatically registers the voter for the next election. In Europe, there is typically no registration burden on the individual voter; voter registration is handled administratively by the government. This is one reason that voter turnout rates in Europe are higher than those in the United States.

The mere requirement that people register in order to vote has a significant effect on turnout rates. Today, we can get reliable counts of the number of persons who are actually registered as well the percentage of registered persons who vote. (In earlier years, the states were not very good at purging their lists of obsolete registrations; today they are much better at this.) Studies of contemporary voter registration lists find that almost 90 percent of registered voters in fact vote, but only about 80 percent of the eligible electorate is currently registered to vote. In other words, the eligible electorate is really only about 182 million people—those who are actually registered and vote. There are approximately 45 million eligible voters who have not yet registered. They are disproportionately those ages 18–29 (Figure 11.3). Getting those people into the registration system, and keeping them on the rolls, is viewed by many as an important way to increase the turnout rate. If you are not registered to vote, you cannot vote.12

Why then, have a registration system? Registration systems contain a fairly reliable list of all people who are interested in voting. Local election offices and campaigns use the registration lists to communicate with voters about when, where, and how to vote. Campaigns also use these lists to prepare grassroots

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### Voter Registration Rates by Demographic, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Annual Family Income</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20,000</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000-$29,999</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$39,999</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000-$49,999</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$74,999</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000-$99,999</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 and over</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Education</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>63.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Employment</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic American</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By Age</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
<td>79.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 and over</td>
<td>79.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

organizing efforts and direct-mail campaigns. Indeed, the registration system was originally developed in the nineteenth century in cities such as New York so that political organizations could target their supporters and get them to vote.

Today, registration lists serve another very important purpose: they are the basis for administering elections. Local election offices rely on their registration databases to format ballots, set up precincts, determine which voters should vote in which place, and communicate with people. Any given area contains many overlapping election jurisdictions, creating many different combinations of unique sets of offices. For example, one voter might reside in Congressional District 1, State Senate District 7, State Representative District 3, City Council District 1, and so forth. Variations in district boundaries may mean that a few blocks away, another voter lives in Congressional District 2, State Senate District 4, State Representative District 12, City Council District 6, and so forth. Although they live in the same city, these voters live in very different sets of political districts and must vote on different ballots. The first voter is not supposed to vote in Congressional District 2, for instance. Registration lists have become vitally important in sorting out where people should vote. Using the definitions of the boundaries, local election offices determine how many distinct ballots they must prepare. Each distinct ballot is assigned to a precinct; to avoid confusion there is only one ballot constellation per precinct. The local election office then uses the registration list to assign individuals to precincts and to communicate with the voter exactly where he or she is supposed to vote. Without this means of assigning voters to precincts and communicating to voters, there would be considerable confusion and practical difficulty running elections on Election Day. Efforts to get rid of or reform registration requirements must confront this very practical problem.

Some states, such as Minnesota and Wisconsin, allow registration at the polls on Election Day (called same-day registration or Election Day registration). These states have noticeably higher turnout but also must recruit additional poll workers to handle the new registrants in the precincts. Other states, such as Colorado, are trying to get rid of traditional precincts and have experimented with vote centers. Electronic voting equipment now makes it possible to program many different ballots on a single machine. The voter need only key in his or her address to get the appropriate ballot and vote. Such machines enable people to vote anywhere and lessen the need for lists to assign voters to precincts. Innovations such as these may lead ultimately to an election system that does not require or rely heavily on registration before Election Day but even these mechanisms still require the voter to register at some point. Wherever these innovations in voting may lead in the long term, the United States today relies heavily on registration to run elections, even though it creates a hurdle to voting.

Over the past decade, there has been a push to create new ways of authenticating voters at the polls. Half of all states require that voters provide some form of identification when voting, such as a driver’s license. Some states now require that all voters show government-issued photo identification. Such rules have been adopted out of fears of voter fraud. The other half of states either have no such formal requirement or prohibit election officials from asking for photographic identification. Legislators and voters in these states either do not judge the risk of voter fraud as great or they view the potential barrier to voting
or potentially discriminatory effects of such laws as greater than any possible fraud. Social scientists have tried to find minimal levels of fraud, minimal effects of such laws on voter turnout, and minimal effects on people's confidence in the electoral system.13

Laws alone, however, cannot explain the variations observed in turnout. Perhaps the biggest, systematic differences in turnout are between election years. When the president is on the ticket, which happens every four years, turnout exceeds 60 percent of the eligible electorate. But when the president is not on the ticket, turnout plummets. It drops 15 to 20 points in midterm congressional elections, and as many as 50 points in odd-year local elections. This pattern of surge and decline in turnout is a function of the election calendar, but it is certainly also a function of the activities of the campaigns and the interest of the voters in the outcomes of the elections. These are behavioral matters, which we will discuss later.

How Americans Vote: The Ballot

The way Americans cast their votes reflects some of our most cherished precepts about voting rights. Most people today view voting as a private matter. They may tell others how they voted or choose not to tell them, but that is their prerogative. Polling places provide privacy for voters and keep an individual's vote secret. In some respects, the secret ballot seems incongruous with voting, because elections are a very public matter. Indeed, for the first century of the Republic, voting was conducted in the open. However, public voting led to voter buying and voter intimidation. American history is full of lore involving urban party workers paying poor voters for their support or intimidating members of the opposing party to keep them from voting. The secret ballot became widespread at the end of the nineteenth century in response to such corrupt practices.

The secret ballot has important implications for how people see themselves as voters. The secret ballot is a strong assertion of the individual. The vote is meant to reflect the individual's own mind—what the individual knows about the choices and what his or her own preferences are about government—not the influences of others. In contrast, when voting is public, the choices individuals make reflect the group as well as their own thinking. American elections still have vestiges of public voting in town meetings in New England states and at party nominating caucuses, such as in Iowa, Nevada, and Minnesota.

Attend a caucus or town hall meeting and you will appreciate the difference between these events and voting in the seclusion of a voting booth. Town meetings and caucuses often exhibit what social psychologists call groupthink, the tendency of the pack to follow particular individuals or to reflect a public conversation rather than each individual's private information. Public voting

also demands more of the individual—more time and more attention to the decision-making process. Attending a caucus, for example, is an all-evening affair. As a result, public voting tends to draw in a much smaller and more committed electorate. These two methods can lead to very different results. A good example comes from the Democratic nominating process in Texas during the 2008 election. The Texas Democratic Party allocates one-half of its delegates through a primary election involving secret ballots and the other half through caucuses. Primary voting runs throughout the day; the caucuses begin in the evening immediately after polls close. In 2008, Hillary Rodham Clinton won a decisive victory over Barack Obama in the primary voting in Texas, but Barack Obama won the caucuses by an equally large margin. The caucuses are reminiscent of an older style of democracy in which people took a stand quite publicly for what they believed. Today, secrecy in voting is the norm.

With the secret ballot came another innovation, the Australian ballot. The Australian ballot lists the names of all candidates running for a given office and allows the voter to select any candidate for any office. This way of offering choices to voters was first introduced in Australia in 1851, and in the United States today it is universal. Before the 1880s Americans voted in different ways. Some voted in public meetings; others voted on paper ballots printed by the political parties or by classes of candidates distributed to the voters. Voters chose which ballot they wished to submit—a Republican ballot, a Democratic ballot, a Populist ballot, a Greenback ballot, and so forth. The ballots were often printed on different-colored paper so that voters could distinguish among them—and so that the local party workers could observe who cast which ballots. With these party ballots, voters could not choose candidates from different parties for different offices; they had to vote the party line.

In a 10-year period from 1885 to 1995, nearly every state adopted the Australian ballot and, with it, the secret ballot. This new form of voting came about in an era of administrative reform in government throughout the United States. County governments took on the job of formatting and printing ballots, and the conduct of elections became an administrative task of government rather than a political activity of the parties. The move toward this new way of casting votes also reflected the efforts of the state governments to break the hold of local political organizations. All ballots are identical under the Australian form, making it difficult to observe who votes for which party. More importantly, voters could choose any candidate for any office, breaking the hold of parties over the vote. The introduction of the Australian ballot gave rise to the phenomenon of split-ticket voting, in which some voters select candidates from different parties for different offices.14

The secret and Australian ballot creates the opportunity for voters to choose candidates as well as parties and, as we discuss in more depth later, created a necessary condition for the rise of the personal vote and the incumbency advantage in American electoral politics. (See the discussion of the incumbency advantage in Congress in Chapter 6.) The party ballot made it impossible to

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choose particular candidates without voting for an entire list of candidates nominated by a party or slate. Voters could not split their tickets, choosing, say, one party's nominee for president and another party's nominee for the House of Representatives. In the absence of a real possibility of split-ticket voting, the electorate could express a desire for change only as a vote against all candidates of the party in power. When the electorate voted to oust those in power at the national level, the election would sweep into power the opposing party or slate at the state and local levels as well. As a result, elections in the United States before 1896 were highly partisan affairs, often producing wholesale changes in control of government at all levels. The Australian ballot allows voters to cast a more sophisticated ballot that reflects both the performance of individual officeholders and assessments of the political parties as a whole.

The possibility of split-ticket voting created greater fragmentation in the control of government in the United States. With the party ballot, an insurgent party could more readily be swept to power at all levels of government in a given election. A strong national tide toward one of the parties in the presidential election would change not just the presidency but also political control of every state and locality that gave a majority of its votes to that presidential candidate's party. The party ballot thus reinforced the effect of elections on party control of government and public policy. In contrast, because the Australian ballot permitted voters to choose for each office separately, it lessened the likelihood that the electorate would sweep an entirely new administration into power. Thus, ticket splitting led to increasingly divided control of government as well as the rise of personal voting.

Where: Electoral Districts

Elected officials in the United States represent places as well as people. Today, the president, representatives, senators, governors, and many other state officials, state legislators, and most local officers are elected by the people through geographic areas called electoral districts. Generally speaking, the United States employs single-member districts with equal populations. This means that the U.S. House of Representatives, almost all state legislatures, and almost all local governments have their own districts and elect one representative per district, and all of the districts for a given legislative body must have equal populations.  

15 The exceptions in the state legislatures are Arizona, Idaho, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. These states use multimember districts in either their state house of representatives or their state senate. In some cases, legislators are elected en bloc: if there are two seats in a district, the top vote getter wins the seat, as in both chambers in Vermont and the lower chambers in Arizona, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, and West Virginia. In some cases, there are multiple posts for each district, candidates must declare which post they are running for, and the top vote getter for a given post wins that seat, as in the lower chambers in Idaho, Maryland (also uses bloc), South Dakota (also uses bloc), and Washington.
Elections for the U.S. Senate and the presidency are the odd cases. In the U.S. Senate, the states are the districts. Senate districts, then, have multiple members and unequal populations. In presidential elections, every state is allocated votes in the electoral college equal to its number of U.S. senators (two) plus its number of House members. The states are the districts, and each state chooses all of its electors in a statewide vote. The electors commit to casting their votes for a certain candidate in the electoral college. 19 Within the political parties, the nomination process in most states allocates delegates to the parties' national conventions on the basis of House districts, and thus population. However, some states choose their delegates on a statewide basis, with all districts selecting multiple delegates to the party conventions.

The system of single-member districts with equal populations was not part of the Founders' original design. Rather, it evolved over nearly two centuries, from 1790 to 1796. Article II of the Constitution designed the House to represent the people, with the number of seats elected by each state allocated on the basis of population following each decennial census, and the Senate to represent the states. The Constitution originally specified that the state legislatures would choose the U.S. senators, with each state choosing two senators to staggered six-year terms. That system was petitioned in 1913 with the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment, providing for direct election of senators.

The Constitution said nothing about the election of individual House members or electors to the electoral college. That task fell to the states, and in early times the states used many different electoral systems for choosing their House delegations. Most of the early state laws adopted single-member districts. The states divided their territory into as many districts as they had House seats, and each district elected one member. Some states created multimember districts, in which a district would elect more than one legislator. This was common in urban counties and cities, where the population exceeded the number required for two or more districts, but the legislature did not want to draw district boundaries. And some states elected all their House members in a single, statewide election (called an at-large election). An even greater hodgepodge of election procedures applied to the state legislatures and local councils. 17

Congress tried to bring order to the election of House members with the 1842 Apportionment Act. Following the sixth decennial census (of 1840), Congress had to pass a new apportionment bill to assign House seats to the states. Through an amendment from Representative John Campbell of South Carolina, the act included an additional requirement on districts:

[In every case where a State is entitled to more than one Representative, the number to which each State shall be entitled under this apportionment shall be]

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16 The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska, which choose the House electors in individual House districts and the Senate electors in a statewide vote.

17 For a history of districting politics, see Stephen Ansolabehere and James Snyder, Jr., *The End of Inequality: One Person, One Vote and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Norton, 2008).
elected by districts, composed of contiguous territory, equal in number to the number of Representatives to which said State may be entitled; no one district electing more than one Representative.¹⁸

Most states complied with this provision, even though it placed a new responsibility on the states of creating appropriate districts, especially around urban areas. Some states, however, insisted on using at-large and multimember districts up to the 1960s. Finally, in the 1967 Apportionment Act, Congress forbade the use of anything but single-member districts.

A second important change in the nature of political districts in the United States occurred at this time as well. In a series of decisions beginning with Baker v. Carr in 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all federal and state legislative districts must have equal populations: one person, one vote. That simple aphorism today rings as the very definition of democracy, but before 1962 state legislative districts often had highly unequal populations, which meant that some votes in effect counted more than others. In the California state senate, Los Angeles County elected as many seats as Alpine County, even though Los Angeles had almost 500 times as many people. As a result, voters in Alpine County had greater representation (500 times greater) relative to their population than did voters in Los Angeles County. Similar inequities reigned in every state legislature, producing a pattern of overrepresentation of rural areas and underrepresentation of most urban areas and, especially, suburban counties. In most states these inequalities arose from neglect. Most state constitutions require redistricting to keep district populations equal, but as urban populations grew, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, those in power realized that redistricting might jeopardize their own re-election. As a result, the legislatures chose to do nothing. With each successive decade, representation in the United States became more unequal, and there seemed to be no way to force the state legislatures to act. Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in a series of important cases, that unequal representation violated the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law. By 1971, nearly every legislative district in the United States elected one representative, and the populations of the districts for each legislative chamber were equal. Lawsuits brought by civil rights groups in the 1980s forced school districts and city councils to adopt single-member districts as well. Single-member districts with equal populations have become the rule in the United States, from city councils and school districts to the House of Representatives.¹⁹

The U.S. Senate and the electoral college remain the two great exceptions to the requirements of single-member districts with equal populations. The apportionment of Senate seats to states makes that chamber inherently unequal. California's 38 million people have the same number of senators as Wyoming's 575,000 people. The allocation of electoral college votes creates a population

¹⁹ The story of this transformation is told in Ansolabehere and Snyder, The End of Inequality.
inequity in presidential elections, with larger states selecting fewer electors per capita than smaller states. In the 1960s, the Supreme Court let stand the unequal district populations in the Senate and the electoral college, because the representation of states in the Senate is specified in the Constitution. The reason lies in the politics of the Constitutional Convention (see Chapter 2). That convention consisted of delegations of states, each of which held equal number of votes under the Articles of Confederation. In order to create a House of Representatives to reflect the preferences of the population, the large states had to strike a deal with the smaller states, which stood to lose representation with the initial plan of a single chamber that reflected population. That deal, the Connecticut Compromise, created the U.S. Senate to balance representation of people with representation of places and led to a clause in Article V of the Constitution that guarantees equal representation of the states in the Senate.

Nonetheless, the Senate and the electoral college share the salient feature of elections for the House and other elections in the use of districts to select representatives. All elections in the United States and all elected officials are tied to geographically based constituencies rather than to the national electorate as a whole. This is certainly true for the House and Senate. It applies also to presidential elections, in which candidates focus on winning key states in the electoral college rather than on winning a majority of the popular vote.

**Electoral Districts and Majority Rule.** Electoral districts have a particularly important political consequence: the use of districts tends to magnify the power of the majority. In a system like that of the United States with two parties and single-member districts, the party that wins a majority of the votes nationwide tends to win a disproportionate share of the seats. In 2010, Republicans won 53.5 percent of the two-party vote nationwide for the U.S. House, but 55.6 percent of the seats. As an empirical matter, in the United States, when the election is a tie, the parties win equal shares of the vote, and for every 1 percent of the vote above 50 percent a party gains an additional 2 percent of the seats. This pattern has been observed in data on U.S. House elections over the last 60 years. In 2012, however, Democrats and Republicans finished in a virtual tie for popular votes cast for the two parties in House races, but the GOP won 54 percent of the seats. This anomaly was in part the result of the Republican advantage in redrawing district boundaries. These boundaries are drawn by the state legislatures, and in 2010 the GOP won control of a majority of these bodies. Candidate recruitment, retirement, and reapportionment also played a role. The electoral college tends to magnify the vote majority even more dramatically. In 2012, Barack Obama won 51 percent of the vote nationwide, but he captured nearly 62 percent of the electoral college delegates. Electoral districts, then, create a very strong tendency toward majority rule.

This magnifying effect has been a particular problem for smaller parties and minority groups. Just as districts magnify the number of seats won by the majority party, they shrink the representation of small parties. If a party wins 5 percent of the vote nationwide, it is difficult for it to win any seats or electoral college delegates unless the support for that party is highly concentrated in a particular geographic area. The most successful third party in recent U.S. history
was the Reform Party, started by Ross Perot in 1992. Perot won 19 percent of the presidential vote nationwide that year, a very strong third place throughout the country, but he won no electoral college delegates.

The majoritarian tendency of districts also makes it very difficult for racial minorities to gain representation. Blacks and Hispanics constitute roughly a quarter of the population. Districts crafted without regard to race would spread the minority vote across many districts, making it unlikely that those groups would be a sufficiently large segment in any one district to elect proportionate numbers of blacks or Hispanics to the legislature. This problem, compounded by the historic discrimination against blacks and Hispanics, led Congress to amend the Voting Rights Act in 1982 to provide for the creation of legislative districts with sufficient numbers of black and Hispanic voters to elect House members representative of those groups. This law has been interpreted and implemented to mean that the state legislatures must create districts, called majority-minority districts, containing majorities of black or Hispanic people, whenever possible. As we discuss later, that provision has proved highly controversial in each subsequent round of districting, but the Voting Rights Act has been renewed repeatedly by Congress and has withstood legal challenges.20 It is a direct reaction against the majoritarian pressures created by districts. Even with this rule, blacks and Hispanics make up only 15 percent of members of the Congress, even though they accounted for 26 percent of the vote in 2012.

House districts and state legislative districts are not static. In order to comply with the dictum of equal population representation, they must be remade every decade. Responsibility for drawing new district boundaries rests, in most states, with the state legislatures and the governors, with the supervision of the courts and sometimes with the consultation of commissions (Figure 11.6). Every 10 years, the U.S. census updates the official population figures of the states, as well as population counts, to a fine level of geographical detail. The politicians, their staffs, party consultants, and others with a stake in the outcome use the census data to craft a new district map; ultimately, the legislatures must pass and the governor must sign a law defining new U.S. House and state legislative districts. This job is forced on the legislatures by their constitutions and by the courts. As the history of unequal representation suggests, most legislatures would, if left to their own devices, leave the existing boundaries in place. Periodic redistricting, although it corrects one problem, invites another. Those in charge of redistricting may try to manipulate the new map to increase the likelihood of a particular outcome, such as the election of a majority of seats for one party or social interest. This problem arose with some of the earliest congressional district maps. A particularly egregious map of the 1812 Massachusetts House districts drawn with the imprimatur of Governor Elbridge Gerry prompted an editorial writer in the Boston Gazette to dub a very strangely shaped district the “Gerry-Mander.”

20 In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which determined which states were automatically subject to preclearance. The remaining sections, including this one and the prohibition against intentional discrimination (Section 2), were not affected. See Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder, 570 U.S. ___ (2013).
Decennial census

Census bureau applies mathematical formula called "method of equal proportions" to determine the number of congressional seats to which each state is now entitled. Some states gain seats, some states lose seats, others remain unchanged.

Party strategists examine census findings, seat gains and losses, and voting data to try to develop state-by-state redistricting formulas that will help their party. Strategists also examine election laws and recent court decisions.

National parties invest money and other resources in state legislative races to try to exert maximum influence over the reapportionment process.

Party strategists brief state legislators on possible redistricting schemes.

Members of Congress lobby state legislators for favorable treatment.

State legislatures and legislative commissions hold hearings to develop rules and procedures for redistricting.

New district boundaries are drawn.

Bill voted in state legislature—sent to governor.

Governor accepts or vetoes.

Losers appeal to state and federal courts, who make final decision.

Parties begin planning for next round.
The term *gerrymandering* refers broadly to any attempt at creating electoral districts for political advantage. It is easy to draw intentionally an unfair electoral map, especially with the sophisticated software and data on local voting patterns and demographics that are available today. To facilitate districting, the Census Bureau divides the nation into very small geographic areas, called census blocks, which typically contain a few dozen people. U.S. House districts contain over 700,000 people. Political mapmakers combine various local areas, down to census blocks, to construct legislative districts. Those seeking political advantage try to make as many districts as possible that contain a majority of their own voters, maximizing the number of seats won for a given division of the vote. There are constraints on political cartography: the district populations must be equal, and all parts of the district must touch (be contiguous). Even with those constraints, the number of possible maps that could be drawn for any one state's legislative districts is extremely large.\(^{21}\) The Analyzing the Evidence unit on page 468 shows how this works, using a hypothetical state to explain some basic strategies that politicians might implement to influence elections through the manipulation of district lines, as well as a real-world example of how redistricting affects election outcomes.

Political scientists examine the fairness of plans by assessing quantitatively the features of any given districting plan. Such measures are widely used by state legislatures, commissions, and courts in assessing districting plans. Of central importance is the notion of bias. In a hypothetical election where the vote is divided equally between the two major parties, what share of seats do we expect each party to win? An unbiased or fair districting plan would give both parties half of the seats in this hypothetical election. To gauge the magnitude of the bias, political scientists then simulate such hypothetical elections among a state's electorate under a given districting plan. A bias of, say, 5 points means that when the two parties split the vote evenly, one of the parties wins 55 percent of the seats and the other 45 percent. With each round of districting, experts weigh in with their assessments of the bias in the plan. Those who want fair elections will try to achieve no bias. Those who want to gain the upper hand try to inject bias into elections with a cleverly constructed map.

Empirical study of U.S. House and state legislative elections has documented several very important patterns in the bias of electoral districts. First, there is significant evidence of partisan bias in redistricting maps passed today. In the 1990s and 2000s, the bias in the average state legislative district map was approximately 5 points.\(^{22}\) Second, while bias remains, it is notable that bias has dropped substantially over the past 50 years since the courts became involved in the process. In 1960, the typical state legislative electoral map had approximately a 10- to 12-point bias in favor of one of the parties (depending on who drew

\(^{21}\) For definitions of these units, see Bureau of the Census, Geographic Area Reference Manual, www.census.gov/geo/www/garm.html (accessed 3/27/03).

\(^{22}\) See Annalavesi and Snyder, *The End of Inequality*, chap. 11.
the map). That means that around 1960, a dead-even election would actually produce a large majority for one of the parties in the legislature. Since the 1960s, frequent redistricting and court oversight has forced state legislatures to create districts that treat both parties more fairly. Third, the bias is in the largest states where the legislature conducts redistricting and one party controls both chambers of the legislature and the governor's office. When the legislature and executive are controlled by the same party, the legislature can create a map heavily biased toward that party, and the governor will likely sign it. However, when the legislature and executive are controlled by different parties, then the legislature might face a veto from the governor and must create districts that will be acceptable to the other party. This is one of the benefits of divided party control of the legislature and executive.

Politicians can use gerrymandering to dilute the strength not only of a party but also of a group. Until recently, many state legislatures employed gerrymandering to dilute the strength of racial minorities. One of the more common strategies employed was to redraw congressional district boundaries in such a way as to divide and disperse a black population that would have constituted a majority within the original districts. This form of gerrymandering, sometimes called "cracking," was used in Mississippi during the 1960s and 1970s to prevent the election of black candidates to Congress. Historically, the black population of Mississippi was clustered in the western half of the state along the Mississippi River Delta. From 1882 until 1966, the Delta constituted one congressional district. Although blacks were a clear majority within this district, discrimination against them in voter registration and at the polls guaranteed the continual election of white congressmen. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, this district would almost surely be won by a black candidate or one favored by the black majority. To prevent that from happening, the Mississippi state legislature drew new House districts in 1965 in order to minimize the voting power of the black population. Rather than a majority of a single district that encompassed the Delta, the black population was split across three districts and constituted a majority in none. Mississippi's gerrymandering scheme was preserved in the state's redistricting plans in 1972 and 1982 and helped prevent the election of any black representative until 1986, when Mike Espy became the first African American since Reconstruction to represent Mississippi in Congress.

Continuing controversies about the legislators' involvement in drawing their own districts have raised deep concerns about the fairness of the process. Many states have created commissions to draw plans or appointed "special masters" to draw the maps. California and Arizona conducted their redistricting in 2012 using independent commissions. Both of these procedures were adopted via ballot measures, not by the state legislatures. Political scientists' analyses of the underlying electoral bias indicates that these commissions produced very fair maps.

The Electoral Impact of Congressional Redistricting

District boundaries can have subtle but significant effects on the partisan division of a legislature. If a party can control the redistricting process, it may be able to craft the lines in such a way that the party wins more seats for the same number of Republican and Democratic votes.

**Drawing District Lines**

**Scenario 1**

Consider a hypothetical state where Republicans represent 60 percent of voters and Democrats represent the remaining 40 percent of voters. As a result of population changes during the preceding decade, this state now has five congressional districts. A state legislature controlled by a Republican majority could draw congressional districts in such a way that Republicans are 60 percent of voters in each seat and expected to win every seat.

Now suppose that the Democrats are in control of the state legislature. With the same distribution of voters in the state, they could draw the districts to favor the Democrats as much as possible (with Democratic voters dominating three of the districts).

**Scenario 2**

Consider a real-world example. Reapportionment following the 2010 census allotted Texas four new districts. The shifting demographics of the state required considerable redrawing of the congressional district lines. The Democrats and Republicans in the Texas state legislature each proposed new district plans. The Republican-controlled legislature passed the Republican plan (Plan C18S), and Republican governor Rick Perry signed that plan into law.

**U.S. House Districts, Texas, 2011**

*PLAN C18S*
In a state of 25 million people, comparing different districting plans is more complicated than in our simple models, but comparing the Republican plan (C185) and the main Democratic plan (C166) in Texas revealed a significant difference. Political scientists started by calculating each party’s share of the two-party vote in statewide and federal elections over the decade from 2002 to 2010: the average was 47.3 percent Democratic and 52.7 percent Republican. This average is called the normal vote. Using the normal vote as the measure of the Democratic and Republican strength in each area, Democrats comprise 42.3 percent of the electorate and they are the minority in 27.8 percent of districts (10 seats) and Republicans the majority 72.2 percent of districts (26 seats).

Political scientists analyzing this case also estimated the bias toward one party or the other. A districting plan is said to be unbiased if the parties each win 50 percent of the votes statewide, they also each win 50 percent of the legislative seats. A plan is biased in favor of one party if that party wins more than half of the seats in an election in which it wins just half of the votes. A plan is biased against the party if it wins less than half of the seats when it wins half of the votes. Of course, most elections do not end up with each party winning 50 percent of the vote. More generally, a districting plan is unbiased if a party wins half of its seats by the same margin that it wins the statewide vote, and the plan is biased in favor of a party if it wins more than half of its seats by the margin it wins the statewide vote. Hence, if a party wins 60 percent of the vote statewide, one expects, under an unbiased plan, that the party will win half of its seats with at least 60 percent of the vote. If the map is biased in favor of that party, it will win more than half of its seats by at least 60 percent.

### Expected Share of Seats: Democrats

The graph shows the expected Democratic share of Texas U.S. House seats won at 42.3 percent and for percentages of the statewide vote above and below that, including at the 50 percent point. We can see the partisan biases of each plan in the graph by looking at the expected Democratic seat share at 60 percent of the vote. The plan passed into law (the red line) has a 12-point bias: under Texas’s new districts, Democrats are expected to win 35 percent of seats if they win half of the vote statewide (the difference between 37 and 50 is the partisan bias). Under the Democrats’ own plan (the blue line), the bias is just 5 points.

**Expected seats share: Democratic.**

**Source:** Texas Legislative Council, [www.tlc.state.tx.us/redist/redist.html](http://www.tlc.state.tx.us/redist/redist.html) (accessed 10/23/11) and author calculations.
It has proved difficult to find a satisfactory reform for redistricting. Perhaps the most unusual and creative attempt to engage the public is that proposed by Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner. Working with the League of Women Voters of Ohio, Common Cause, and state representatives Joan Lawrenece and Dan Stewart, the Ohio Secretary of State created a public contest in 2009 to develop the best redistricting plan—the Ohio Redistricting Competition. The purpose of the competition was not to produce a new redistricting law but to show how "a robust public conversation about the process can occur, leading to the development of the best possible redistricting recommendations for consideration by the Ohio General Assembly." This was a way to inform the legislature and courts about what the public wanted in the redistricting plans and to produce a blueprint to guide those who would draw the official maps.

The Ohio experiment was just the beginning in an important transformation in redistricting. In 2011, the Public Mapping Project, led by Professor Michael McDonald and Harvard researcher Micah Atman, conducted similar contests in a dozen states. And independent software developer David Bradley developed Dave's Redistricting App, a powerful tool that is easy to use and free. The State of Texas and the State of Florida made available on their redistricting websites all of the redistricting tools and data that were available to the legislative committees that drafted the maps. The technology has created a new era of open redistricting.

During the redistricting process in 2010 and 2011, these new tools and public mapping projects generated many different plans that the legislatures and commissions examined as part of their deliberations. Interest groups and the minority party within legislatures now wield the information and technology to propose their own alternative configurations of districts during the legislative process (not just after the fact), and to argue for their interests. Before the 2013 redistricting, the redistricting committee in the legislature and, even more specifically, the majority party in most states controlled the technology and shaped the political debate in the legislature and afterward. As controversies over district plans moved into the courts, the public mapping projects and open-source districting tools empowered plaintiffs and the courts. The plaintiffs could point to alternative and (arguably) fairer maps. The courts, who traditionally have not had the resources and staff to do their own districting plans, could see the range of possible maps that could have been constructed and contrast those with what the legislatures produced. Such evidence is especially powerful when allegations of racial discrimination are at stake.

For two centuries, the redistricting process has been closed off to the public, to interest groups, even to members of the minority party within the legislature. Now, new developments in geographic information systems (GIS) software and provision of census data make it possible for anyone to draw credible district

24 The contest was available at www.ohioredistricting.org, sponsored by the Ohio Secretary of State (accessed 8/3/11; site discontinued).
What It Takes to Win: Plurality Rule

The fourth prominent feature of U.S. electoral law is the criterion for winning. Americans often embrace majority rule as a defining characteristic of democracy. However, that is not quite right. The real standard is plurality rule. The candidate who receives the most votes in the relevant district or constituency wins the election, even if that candidate doesn't receive a majority of votes. Suppose, for example, three parties nominate candidates for a seat and divide the vote such that one wins 34 percent and the other two each receive 33 percent of the vote. Under plurality rule, the candidate with 34 percent wins the seat, even though he did not win a majority of votes (more than 50 percent). There are different types of plurality systems. The system currently used in the United States combines plurality rule with single-member districts and is called first past the post.

The electoral college is a plurality system in which the candidate who receives the most votes wins all of the delegations' winner take all. Some states set an even higher standard and require a candidate to receive at least 50 percent of all votes in order to win. This is majority rule. Louisiana and Georgia, for instance, require a candidate to receive an outright majority in an election in order to be declared the winner. If no candidate receives a majority in an election, a runoff election is held about one month later between the two candidates who received the most votes in the first round. Other systems also use plurality- and majority-rule criteria. For instance, some city councils still have multimember districts.

The top vote getters win the seats. If there are, say, seven seats to fill, the seven candidates who win the most votes each win a seat.

Plurality rule is often criticized for yielding electoral results that do not reflect the public's preferences. The votes of the losing candidates seem wasted, because they do not translate directly into representation. Indeed, as the example of the three-candidate race above suggests, it is possible that a majority of voters wanted someone other than the winner. In the aggregate, plurality rule with single-member districts tends to inflate the share of seats won by the largest party and deflate the others' shares. A striking example of the effects comes from Great Britain. In 2005, the British Labour Party won 35 percent of the vote and 55 percent of the seats; the Liberals finished second, with 31 percent of the vote and 31 percent of the seats; the Liberal Democrats garnered 22 percent of the popular vote, but won just 8 percent of the seats. Nevertheless, plurality rule offers certain advantages. It gives voters the ability to choose individuals to represent them personally, not just political parties, and it picks a definite winner without the need for runoff elections.

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26 Over the centuries, many systems for voting and determining electoral outcomes have been devised. For an excellent analysis of voting systems and a complete classification, see Gary Cox, Making Votes Count (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
Among the democracies of the world, the main alternative to plurality rule is **proportional representation**, also called PR for short. Under proportional representation, competing parties win legislative seats in proportion to their share of the popular vote. For example, if three parties running for seats in the legislature divide the vote such that one wins 34 percent and the other two receive 33 percent of the vote, the first party receives 34 percent of the seats and the other two receive 33 percent of the seats.

PR is used rarely in the United States. The most substantial elections in which it is employed are the Democratic presidential primary elections. During the 1988 primary season, Jesse Jackson routinely won 20 percent of the vote in the primaries but ended up with only about 3 percent of the delegates. To make the Democratic National Convention and the party more representative of its disparate voting groups, Jackson negotiated with other party leaders to change the delegate allocation rules so that delegates within congressional districts would be assigned on a proportional basis. If a district elects five delegates, a candidate wins a delegate if the candidate receives at least 20 percent of the vote in the district, two delegates if the candidate wins at least 40 percent of the vote, and so forth. Prior to this rule change the Democratic Party awarded all delegates from a given congressional district to the candidate who won a plurality of the vote. Like any districted system with plurality rule, this created a strong majoritarian tendency.

Plurality rule in single-member districts has a very important consequence. It is the reason for two-party politics in the United States. Around the world, countries with plurality rule in single-member districts have far fewer political parties than other nations. Typically, elections under plurality rule boil down to just two major parties that routinely compete for power, with one of them winning a majority of legislative seats outright. Proportional representation systems, on the other hand, tend to have many more than two parties. Rarely does a single party win a majority of seats. Governments form as coalitions of many different parties. The political scientist Maurice Duverger described that pattern in a pathbreaking book, *Party Politics*, first published in 1951. Duverger formalized his law of politics quite simply: plurality rule creates two-party politics; proportional representation encourages more than two parties.

The rationale behind Duverger's Law has two components. The strategic behavior of politicians and the behavior of voters. Consider, first, how politicians would think about the prospects of forming a new party. Suppose that there already are two parties, a center-right party and a center-left party. A politician from the far right, for example, might be unhappy that the parties do not represent the ideals he espouses. She wants a far-right policy mix, a center-right policy less, and least of all a center-left policy. One solution for the far-right politician is to leave the center-right party and form a far-right party. The problem with doing that is that it helps the center-left party. A far-right party in this circumstance splits the vote of those on the right without affecting the vote for the center-left party. Under plurality rule, the center-left party would almost certainly win, an outcome that the far-right politician likes even less.

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Thus, politicians on the extremes cannot gain by forming a new party. A politician with a centrist orientation also cannot win the election if the center-right and center-left parties are not too extreme. The center-right party would win all votes of voters on the right and on the center right. The same is true for the center-left party. That would leave only a small segment of true centrists for a potential centrist party. Hence, if the current parties are not too extreme, there is no incentive for a third party to enter a two-party system when plurality rule is the criterion for winning.

Voters follow a similar logic. They do not want to waste their votes. If voters understand that the extremist party or candidate cannot win, they will vote for the more moderate alternative. Although second best for extremist voters, the moderate has a better chance of winning. This logic leads the extremist voters to choose the moderate party or candidate in order to have a better chance of selecting a candidate more to their liking. Extremist parties and candidates, then, have little incentive to enter a race, and when they do they usually attract few votes.

Such sophisticated voting occurs often in U.S. primary elections. John McCain was significantly more moderate than Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney in the 2008 Republican presidential primaries, and he was more moderate than the typical Republican voter. Nevertheless, he won the nomination easily because many Republicans understood that McCain represented their best chance in the general election. Mitt Romney was the most moderate candidate in the 2012 field and, again, the most moderate candidate prevailed.

Proportional representation (PR), in contrast, creates an incentive for more parties and candidates to enter, because they will win seats in proportion to their support among the national electorate. PR systems often have a multitude of parties, none of which represents a decisive majority. Elections in PR systems rarely decide which party will lead the government and often lead to coalition governments, because no one party wins enough seats to govern. In the Democratic Party, proportional representation has the further effect of stretching out the nominating season. If a candidate wins a plurality of 40 percent of the vote in a state’s Democratic primary, he wins roughly 40 percent of the delegates. As a result, it takes many more victories in the Democratic primaries to accumulate sufficient delegates to lock the nomination. In 2008, Obama and Clinton split the votes and delegates almost equally, and Obama won by the barest of majorities. By contrast, plurality rule and winner-take-all in the Republican primaries means that even when there are many candidates, as in 2008 and 2012, the primary elections are decided rather quickly. John McCain had won a smaller share of the vote in the primary elections through March 5, 2008, than either of the two main Democratic contestants, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, but by the beginning of March, McCain had virtually sewn up the Republican nomination.

How votes are cast and counted and what it takes to win a seat, then, have very substantial consequences for American politics. Plurality rule with single-member districts creates strong pressures toward two-party politics and majority rule in the legislature.
Direct Democracy: The Referendum and the Recall

In addition to voting for candidates, 24 states also provide for referendum voting. The referendum process allows citizens to vote directly on proposed laws or other governmental actions. Referendums may come about two ways. First, some state constitutions and laws require that certain types of legislation (such as bond or property tax increases) be approved by popular vote. Second, people may get a measure put on the ballot by obtaining enough signatures of registered voters to a petition. In recent years, voters in several states have voted to set limits on tax rates, block state and local spending proposals, define marriage, and prohibit social services for illegal immigrants. Although it involves voting, a referendum is not an election. The election is an institution of representative government. Through an election, voters choose officials to act for them. The referendum process, by contrast, is an institution of direct democracy; it allows voters to govern directly without intervention by government officials. The validity of referendum results, however, are subject to judicial action. If a court finds that a referendum outcome violates the state or national constitution, it can overturn the result. For example, in 2008 California voters passed Proposition 8, which stated, “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid and recognized in California.” A federal district court in California ruled Proposition 8 unconstitutional in 2010, and the Supreme Court let stand the district court’s ruling in 2013.27

Referendums are by far the most common way that issues are placed on the ballot for public consideration, but there are other means as well. Twenty-four states also permit various forms of the initiative. Whereas the referendum process described above allows citizens to affirm or reject a policy produced by legislative action, the initiative provides citizens with a way forward in the face of legislative inaction. This is done by placing a policy proposal (legislation or a state constitutional amendment) on the ballot to be approved or rejected by the electorate. To have a place on the ballot, a petition must be accompanied by a minimum number of voters' signatures—a requirement that varies from state to state—that have been certified by the state's secretary of state.

The initiative process has both potential advantages and disadvantages. Ballot propositions involve policies that the state legislature cannot (or does not want to) resolve. Like referendum issues, these are often highly emotional and, consequently, not always well suited to resolution in the electoral arena. On the other hand, one of the "virtues" of the initiative is that it may force action. That is, leaders in the legislature may induce recalcitrant legislators to move on controversial issues by using as a threat the possibility that a worse outcome will result from inaction.28

Legal provisions for recall elections exist in 18 states. The recall is an electoral device that was introduced by early twentieth-century Populists to allow

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voters to remove governors and other state officials from office before the expiration of their term. Federal officials such as the president and members of Congress are not subject to recall. Generally speaking, a recall effort begins with a petition campaign. For example, in California—the site of a tumultuous recall battle in 2003—if 12 percent of those who voted in the last general election signpetitions demanding a special recall election, one must be scheduled by the state board of elections. Such petition campaigns are relatively common, but most fail to garner enough signatures to bring the matter to a statewide vote. In California in 2003, however, a conservative Republican member of Congress, Darrell Issa, led a successful effort to recall Governor Gray Davis, a Democrat. Voters were unhappy about the state’s economy and dissatisfied with Davis’s performance; they blamed him for the state’s $35 billion budget deficit. Issa and his fellow Republicans secured enough signatures to force a vote, and in October 2003 Davis became the second governor in American history to be recalled by his state’s electorate (the first was North Dakota governor Lynn Frazier, who was recalled in 1921).

Under California law, voters in a special recall election are also asked to choose a replacement for the official whom they dismiss. Californians elected the movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger to be their governor. Although critics charged that the Davis recall had been a “political circus,” the campaign had the effect of greatly increasing voter interest and involvement in the political process. More than 400,000 new voters registered in California in 2003, many drawn into the political arena by the opportunity to participate in the recall campaign. More recently, labor unions campaigned to recall Wisconsin governor Robert Walker following cuts in state employee benefits and collective bargaining rights of unions. In the June 2012 special election, Governor Walker managed to fend off the challenge from Milwaukee mayor Tom Barrett.

Direct democracy, even if it is not used aggressively, can change legislative, executive, and even judicial decision making. The referendum, initiative, and recall all entail shifts in agenda-setting power. The referendum gives an im-passioned electoral majority the opportunity to reverse legislation that displeases it, thus affecting the initial strategic calculations of institutional agenda setters (who want to get as much of what they want without it being subsequently reversed). The initiative has a similar effect on institutional agenda setters, but here it inclines them toward action rather than inaction. Combining the two, an institutional agenda setter is caught on the horns of an institutional dilemma: Do I set, risking a reversal via referendum, or do I maintain the status quo, risking an overturn via initiative? The recall complements both of these choices, keeping institutional agenda setters on their toes to avoid being ousted. As the institution principle implies, these arrangements do not just provide citizens with governance tools. They also affect the strategic calculations of institutional politicians—legislators and governors.

While initiatives and referendums are often pointed to as a means of making sure that the legislature represents the public’s preferences, they are also criticized for being expensive, for slowing down government action, and for making bad laws. The issues brought before the public are often emotional matters, which require deliberation and reflection, and many more complicated questions, such as public spending, might be better dealt with in a legislative setting.
where it is necessary to make tradeoffs in order to maintain balance in the overall policy area (such as the budget). Many critics of direct democracy point to the fiscal problems that confront California, where a long history of ballot measures restrict how California can raise revenue and how it must distribute expenditures. This leaves the legislature and governor little flexibility when facing an economic downturn.

**HOW VOTERS DECIDE**

An election expresses the preferences of millions of individuals about whom they want as their representatives and leaders. Electoral rules and laws—the institutional side of elections—impose order on that process, but ultimately, elections are a reflection of the people, the aggregation of many millions of individuals' expressions of their preferences about politics.

The voter's decision can be understood as really two linked decisions: whether to vote and for whom to vote. Social scientists have examined both facets of the electoral decision by studying election returns, survey data, and experiments conducted in laboratories as well as field experiments conducted during actual elections. Out of generations of research into these questions, a broad picture emerges of how voters decide. First, the decision to vote or not to vote correlates very strongly with the social characteristics of individuals, especially age and education, but it also depends on the electoral choices and context. An individual who does not know anything about the candidates or dislikes all of the choices is unlikely to vote. Second, which candidates or party voters choose depends primarily on three factors: partisan loyalties, issues, and candidate characteristics. Partisan loyalties have been found to be the strongest single predictor of the vote, though party attachments also reflect issues and experience with candidates. Party, issues, and candidates act together to shape vote choice.

**Voters and Nonvoters**

As we saw earlier in the chapter, turnout in modern American presidential elections ranges from 50 to 60 percent of the voting-age population. The Census Bureau's Current Population Survey provides the most comprehensive and trusted data about the demographics of voting. According to that survey, 65 percent of adults were registered voters in 2012, and 57 percent of adults voted that year. Excluding noncitizens, who are ineligible to vote in federal elections, 80 percent of the adult citizen population is registered, and 62 percent of citizens of voting age turned out in 2012. Thus, almost 40 percent of those who could have voted did not. Why do so many people not vote? This phenomenon has long puzzled social scientists and motivated reformers. A general explanation is elusive, but what social scientists do know about
this phenomenon is that a few demographic characteristics routinely prove to be strong predictors of who votes. The most important of these characteristics are age, education, and residential mobility. Other factors, such as gender, income, and race also matter, but to a much smaller degree. According to the 2012 Current Population Survey, only 41 percent of those under age 25 voted that year, fully 20 points below the population average. By comparison, 71 percent of those over 65 years of age voted. The difference between these groups was 30 percentage points, and the effect of age on voting surely translated into an electoral difference. The interests of retirees are much more likely to receive attention by the government than are the interests of those in college or just entering the labor force.

Education shows similarly large differences. Those without a high school degree voted at half the rate of those with a college education. More than three in four people with a college education voted, and the rate was 81 percent among those with a professional degree. In contrast, slightly fewer than 40 percent of those without a high school diploma voted, and 52 percent of those with only a high school degree voted. Finally, consider residency and mobility. Only 51 percent of people who had lived in their current residence less than a year reported voting, compared with 76 percent of people who lived in their residence at least five years. Those who own their home or apartment vote at a 67 percent rate, but only 47 percent of those who rent vote.29 Politicians listen to those who vote, and those who vote are disproportionately older, better educated, and more rooted in their communities.

As discussed earlier, election laws have historically had a large effect on the size and character of the electorate. Those interested in encouraging greater participation today have focused on voter registration requirements, which are thought to create an unnecessary hurdle and thus to depress turnout. The decision to vote itself consists of two steps: registration and turnout. In 2012, 87 percent of those who reported that they registered said they voted. Weakening registration requirements may increase participation. One approach to minimizing such requirements is Election Day registration. As of 2013, 10 states plus the District of Columbia allow people to register on Election Day at the polls or at a government office. The three states with the longest experience with same-day registration—Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Maine—do have higher turnout than most other states, and most studies suggest that in a typical state adopting such a law would increase turnout by about 3 to 5 percent.30

29 The most reliable source of information about the demographics of voting is the Current Population Survey, conducted by the Census Bureau. For these and other statistics see U.S. Census Bureau, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2012," www.census.gov/hhes/www/hhesdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012 /tables.html (accessed 3/12/13).

Demographics and laws are only part of what accounts for voting and non-voting. The choices presented to the voters are also quite important. The problem is not that many people have a hard time making up their minds but that many people do not feel engaged by current elections or dislike politics altogether. People who are disinterested, "too busy to vote," or do not like the candidates tend not to vote. The Census Bureau survey asks registered nonvoters why they did not vote. The top four reasons are "too busy," "sick or disabled," "not interested," and "did not like the choices."

Not voting may also stem partly from a sense that the election does not hinge on how any individual votes. As advanced by Anthony Downs in An Economic Theory of Democracy, rational citizens may decide whether to participate in voting based on the calculation of potential benefits and costs of voting plus their personal sense of civic duty or psychological compulsion to vote.

There are, however, strong differences across demographic groups in their voting rates, and these might have political consequences. One hypothetical to consider is, what if everyone voted? In some specific domains, universal voting would certainly alter government policy. Increasing the voting rate of younger cohorts would probably affect government policy on Social Security, for instance. But would 100 percent turnout lead the country to elect a different person for president or put a different party in control of Congress? Interestingly, the answer seems to be no. Voters and nonvoters, for all of their demographic and political differences, hold fairly similar partisan views, ideological orientations, and preferences about the candidates.32 Voters are somewhat more conservative and more Republican than nonvoters, as a result of the higher income levels and higher home ownership incidence of voters, but the median voter would be only slightly more liberal if everyone voted.

Partisan Loyalty

The single strongest predictor of how a person will vote is that individual's attachment to a political party. The American National Election Study (ANES), exit polls, and media polls have found that even in times of great political change in the United States, the overwhelming majority of Americans identify with one of the two major political parties and vote almost entirely in accordance with that identity. Survey researchers ascertain party identification with simple questions along the following lines: Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?33 Survey researchers further classify people by asking of those who choose a party

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33 This is the wording used by the Gallup Poll. Others ask "is politics today...? or offer "or another party" instead of "or what."

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whether they identify strongly or weakly with that party, and by asking independ-
dents whether they lean toward one party or another.

Over the past three decades party identifications have broken evenly between
the Democrats and Republicans. Figure 12.2, in Chapter 12, shows the historical
fluctuations in party identifications. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Democratic
 identifiers outnumbered Republican identifiers. In the 1980s, the parties
reached parity in identifications, especially because younger Americans at that
 time identified very heavily with the Republican Party. The balance in party
identifications remained fairly stable through 2000, even though from 1992 to
2004 those ages 18 to 25 chose the Democrats by a sizable margin. From 2002
through the summer of 2009, Democrats gained overall party identification and
Republicans lost ground, because of generational change and the backlash
against the Iraq War. By July 2009, 50 percent of Americans identified as
Democrats or as independents who leaned toward the Democratic Party, while
42 percent identified as Republicans or leaned toward the Republican Party.34
In Obama’s first term, however, the partisan battle over health care and other legis-ative initiatives, the
continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and unemployment ranging from 8 to
10 percent dragged down public support for the Democrats. Today, public sup-
port for the parties is fairly evenly split, with a slight edge for the Democrats.
In 2014, approximately 33 percent of Americans identified with the Democratic
Party, 25 percent with the Republican Party, and almost 40 percent with no
party or as independents. Since 2003, the percentage of independents has crept
steadily upward—and is now the single largest group in the electorate.35

Party identifications capture the voters’ predisposition toward their party’s
candidates. Many of these predispositions are rooted in public policies, such as
the parties’ positions on taxes or abortion or civil rights. Those long-standing
policy positions lead to divisions in party identifications and voting patterns
among different demographic groups. Large majorities of African Americans
and Hispanics, for example, identify and vote with the Democratic Party. Since
1980 there has also been a gender gap in voting. Women identify more and vote
more with the Democrats than men do. In 1980, Ronald Reagan won 55 percent
of the vote of men and 47 percent of the vote of women. That gap was novel in
1980, but it has persisted, averaging 7 percentage points over the past three
decades. In 2012, the gender gap jumped to 10 points: Barack Obama received
55 percent of the vote of women, but only 45 percent of the vote among men.
That difference is not as large as the difference across racial groups, but it is
significant because women now comprise a majority (53 percent) of voters.

35 Marc Hetherington, “Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization,”
American Political Science Review 95, no. 3 (September 2001): 319–35. Pew Research
Center for the People and the Press, “Obama Leads McCain 59% to 40% in Campaign’s
It is a subject of considerable debate as to why the gender gap arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s and why it has persisted. The timing of the emergence of the gender gap is consistent with the alignment of the two political parties on a range of civil rights issues that affect women. On issues such as pay equity, divorce law, abortion, and women's health, the Democratic administrations and Congress have pursued policies much more favorable to the interests of women. Barack Obama's first major piece of legislation in 2009 was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. Abortion and other issues of women's health have also separated the party's platforms and legislative agendas. During the 2012 Republican presidential primaries, the candidates debated whether to restrict birth control, an issue that had been seen as settled in the 1960s. The very fact that this was openly considered alienated many women voters and likely contributed to the increase in the gender gap in the fall election. It is, however, hard to pin down the exact causes of the shifts as so many of these issues emerged at the same time (the 1970s) and shifts in party attachments tend to be subtle and complex. Issues played some part in the rise of the gender gap, but cultural, racial, and regional differences might also explain some of this phenomenon.

Although specific features of the choices and context matter as well, party identifications express how the voter would likely vote in a "neutral" election. Party identifications are extremely good predictors of voting behavior in less prominent elections, such as for state legislatures or lower-level statewide offices, about which voters may know relatively little. Even in presidential elections, with their extensive advertising and very thorough news coverage, party predispositions predict individual voting behavior. Figure 11.5 displays the percentages of Democratic identifiers, Republican identifiers, and self-described independents who voted for Romney, Obama, or someone else in 2012. Approximately 92 percent of party identifiers voted for their own party's standard bearer. Independents (excluding independents who lean toward either party) broke 50 to 45 for Romney. The 2012 election was typical in that partisanship loyalty is usually in the range of 90 percent. Sometimes, the independent vote decides the election. However, because more Americans are Democrats than Republicans, this election Obama still won even though more independents voted for Romney.

Since the discovery of its importance in the 1950s, party identification has raised deeper questions about its origins and meaning. There are three distinct views about what party identification is: They are not necessarily exclusive of each other, but they point to very different understandings of the nature of party identification and its effect on elections. Debate over the meaning of party identification cuts to the heart of the meaning of elections.


37 For an excellent treatment of the meanings of party identification and analysis of the implications of different theories, see Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, Partisan Hearts and Minds (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
Party Identification as Psychological Attachment. First, party identification is a psychological attachment that individuals hold, often throughout their adulthood, to one of the parties. Individuals learn as children and adolescents from parents, other adults, and even peers about politics, and as part of that socialization they develop attachments to a party, not unlike religion and community. Party identifications continue to form into early adulthood. The first few presidential elections that an individual experiences as an adult are thought to have particularly profound influence on that individual’s understanding of the parties and politics. And as different cohorts come into politics, their experiences carry forward throughout their lives. Those who were 18 to 24 years old in 1984, for example, identify overwhelmingly with the Republican Party, because those elections marked the triumph of Ronald Reagan’s presidency and political philosophy, the rise of a revitalized Republican Party, and the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Those 18 to 24 years old in 2008, on the other hand, identify disproportionately with the Democratic Party, because the Obama campaign galvanized young voters around a new vision for the future. However, it is developed, an individual’s psychological affinity for a party makes that person want that party to win and want to support that party, even when she disagrees with the party on important policies or disapproves of the party’s nominees for office.

Party Identification as Ideological Affinity. Of course, the Democratic and Republican parties are quite different entities today than they were 40 years ago or 80 years ago. On matters of race relations, for example, the
Democratic Party has moved over the past century from supporting segregation to spearheading civil rights. The Republican Party, once a bastion of economic protectionism, now champions free trade. However, strong generational transmission of party identifications may be, the dissonance between identities and issues must surely weaken the pull of party, which suggests a second theory of party. This second idea is that party identification reflects underlying ideologies of voters and policy positions of parties. Parties in government, as we discussed in Chapter 6, are meaningful organizations for producing public policies. The relatively high degree of party loyalty in Congress and other branches of government means that voters can reasonably anticipate how politicians will act in office. Citizens identify with parties that pursue public policies more to their liking. For example, a union worker will feel a stronger attachment to the Democratic Party because the Democrats have historically protected union interests. A high-income earner may feel a stronger pull toward the Republican Party because that party pushes lower taxes overall, whereas the Democrats promote higher taxes for higher-income households. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, elections present an informational problem of adverse selection. The party labels act as brand names and help voters choose the candidates that will best match their preferences. Voters need not know the details of an individual candidate's voting record or campaign promises in order to understand how that politician will likely behave on important matters. As such, party labels provide an informational shortcut for voters. Party identification means, in part, that a voter feels that party represents his interests better than other parties; hence, an identifier is highly likely to vote for that party.38

Over the past two decades, the ideological alignments of voters and parties have shifted. Republicans have lost many of their moderate identifiers, especially in the Northeast, and conservative Southerners, who a generation ago would have called themselves Democrats, now overwhelmingly identify with the Republican Party. This shift reflects long-term changes in the ideological orientations of the parties at the elite level and thus their brand names. The 1994 election was critically important in establishing a new label for the Republicans, because that election swept into office large numbers of Republican members of Congress in the South and eliminated much of the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. The parties, then, became more distinctive, presenting a much clearer choice to voters.39

Not all people fit neatly into one ideological camp or another. Some people do not think about politics in ideological or policy terms. Others are indifferent to the parties ideologically. A significant portion of Americans consider themselves to be centrists and feel that the Democrats are somewhat too liberal

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38 For a detailed assessment of the political use of information-recombining devices such as party labels, see Arthur Lupia and Matthew D. McCubbins, The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know? (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

39 See Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship."

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and the Republicans somewhat too conservative. They may turn one way or the other, but they do not have a strong affinity for either party. Other people feel pulled in different directions by different issues and concerns. A union member who strongly opposes abortion, for example, is drawn to the Democrats’ labor policies and the Republicans’ abortion policies. Campaigns target such cross-pressured voters, who are often pivotal in elections.40

**Party Identification as Tally of Experiences.** A third explanation is that party identification reflects experiences with political leaders and representatives, especially the presidents from each of the parties. As the political scientist Morris Fiorina put it, party identifications are running tallies of experience. Americans hold their presidents, and to a lesser extent Congress, accountable for the economic performance of the country and success in foreign affairs. A bad economy or a disastrous military intervention will lead voters to disapprove of the president and to lower their assessment of the president's party's ability to govern. Parties are, by this account, teams seeking to run the government. They consist of policy experts, managers, and leaders who will conduct foreign policy, economic policy, and domestic policies (such as environmental protection and health care). When things go well, voters infer that the incumbent party has a good approach to running national affairs, but when things go badly, they learn that the party lacks the people needed to run the government competently or the approach needed to produce economic prosperity, international peace, and other outcomes desired by the public. With each successive presidency and their experience of it, individuals update their beliefs about which party is better able to govern.

Psychological attachments, ideological affinities, and past experiences add up to form an individual's current party identification. But party is not the only factor in voting. Some partisans do defect, especially in elections when voters are dissatisfied with the incumbent party or are especially drawn to a particular candidate. Even in 2012, when 90 percent of partisans voted with their party’s presidential candidate, significant defections occurred down the ticket. Republican nominee Mitt Romney handily carried Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia by 15, 20, and 26 percentage points, respectively. But the Democratic Senate candidates in these states managed victories. Most strikingly, Joe Manchin won the West Virginia contest for U.S. Senate by 25 points, while Romney tacked up an equally large victory in the state. The issues at stake and the characteristics of the candidates overrode party attachments in these races and drew large numbers of independents to the Democratic Senate candidates in otherwise Republican territory. We consider next how issues and candidates shape voting behavior.

Issues and policy preferences constitute a second factor influencing voters' decisions. Voting on issues and policies cuts to the core of our understanding of democratic accountability and electoral control over government. A simple, idealized account of issue voting goes as follows. Governments make policies and laws on a variety of issues that affect the public. Voters who disagree with those policies and laws on principle or who think those policies have failed will vote against those who made the decisions. Voters who support the policies or like the outcomes that government has produced will support the incumbent legislatures or party. It is important to note that politicians choose what kinds of laws to enact and what kinds of administrative actions to take with the express aim of attracting electoral support. Voters choose the candidates and parties that produce the best results or most preferred laws. Even party identifications reflect the policy preferences of the voters and the policies pursued by the parties and candidates.

Voters' choice of issues usually involves a mix of their judgments about the past behavior of competing parties and candidates and their hopes and fears about candidates' future behavior. Political scientists call choices that focus on future behavior prospective voting and those based on past performance retrospective voting. To some extent, whether prospective or retrospective evaluation is more important in a particular election depends on the strategies of the competing candidates. Candidates always endeavor to define the issues of an election in terms that will serve their interests. Incumbents running during a period of prosperity will seek to take credit for the economy's happy state and define the election as revolving around their record of success. This strategy encourages voters to make retrospective judgments. By contrast, an insurgent running during a period of economic uncertainty will tell voters it is time for a change and ask them to make prospective judgments. Thus Barack Obama focused on the need for change in 2008, but the White House repeatedly stressed the need to stay the course in 2010 and 2012. In 2014, Obama's popularity had fallen because of uneven economic growth and other issues, and the Republicans campaigned against the president's handling of these issues.

Not all issues, however, are alike. There are, as discussed in the previous chapter, different sorts of issues and dimensions to politics, such as economic concerns, moral questions, and foreign affairs. Voters may hold different views on each. Some voters might favor low taxes and no government restrictions on abortion (a libertarian perspective), while others want low taxes but also prohibit abortion; still others may see a need for high taxes and no restrictions on abortion; and so on. And voters differ according to how important they judge each issue to be. Some voters weigh economics more heavily; others give the greatest weight to social issues; still others are national security voters. According to 2012 exit polls, the economy was viewed as the most important issue facing the country. An Edison Research poll that presented voters with four issues—foreign policy, federal budget deficit, the economy, and health care—found that 75 percent of those who identified health care as most important
voted for Obama, while 65 percent who identified the budget deficit as most important voted for Romney. Among those who identified the economy as most important, the vote was close, with 47 percent for Obama and 51 percent for Romney.  

Issues differ politically in another important respect, and that is the extent to which the policy principle is invoked. Broadly speaking, issues may be distinguished as spatial issues and valence issues. Spatial issues are issues on which voters have preferences over what policy is pursued. On many issues voters have beliefs about which policies will lead to the best outcomes, or they have moral convictions that lead them to value the means, not just the ends. Valence issues are issues on which voters do not care about the means (the policy) only the ends (the outcome). Voters care about having peaceful and prosperous lives, quite apart from how they are achieved.

**Spatial issues.** Many issues are characterized by a range of different policies and conflicting preferences over policies and outcomes. We call these spatial preferences because the choices can be mapped along a continuum or line, such as tax rates or size of government. Minimum wages offer an excellent example. Low-wage workers and unions favor minimum wages because they benefit from them. Low-wage workers will earn higher wages, and union members expect all wages to be pushed up with the minimum wage. Employers and investors tend not to like the minimum wage because it increases labor costs and reduces profit margins. Abortion rights provide another often-discussed example of a spatial issue. At one extreme are those who defend the legality of abortion under all circumstances; at the other extremes are those who want to ban the procedure under all circumstances. Between those two poles lie a range of policy alternatives, from putting some restrictions on access, to regulations on the time during pregnancy and procedures used, to allowing the practice only when the life of the mother is threatened. Public-opinion research (as discussed in Chapter 10) has demonstrated that public preferences are distributed across such policy options, with many people favoring a moderate approach of placing some restrictions on the practice. Minimum-wage laws and abortion laws exemplify the features of spatial issues—a range of policy options and a lack of consensus on the right policy.

Politicians compete for votes by pursuing particular policies that they think will attract the most voters. Romney promised to cut taxes and reduce government expenditures and regulations in order to stimulate economic growth. Obama proposed to increase taxes on those making over $250,000 a year but cut taxes on all others. On health care, the choice was starter still. President Obama touted the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act as essential for containing health care costs in the United States over the long term. Mitt Romney promised to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, and Republicans-oriented Super

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PACs that aligned with the Romney campaign hammered away at the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act as a government takeover of the health care industry. Voters made judgments based on a head-to-head comparison of many of these issues and the overall ideologies of these candidates.

Spatial voting is one way that voters solve the adverse selection problem. Adverse selection arises if we choose people for office who do not fit with our interests, due to a lack of information about the candidates. Party identities might lead us to vote for people with whom we fundamentally disagree or who will act contrary to our interests. The "one price fits all" label of the parties may not correctly reflect how an individual candidate will vote on legislation. If voters choose candidates on the basis of what policies those candidates represent or promise to support, then voters can choose the right people to represent their interests and values. Spatial voting also helps correct for moral hazard. Moral hazard arises if there is no accountability for legislative decisions made by legislators or executives. However, politicians must run for re-election. If people are attentive to what laws the politicians supported and opposed, then people can vote against politicians with whom they disagree. Recent research on congressional roll-call voting suggests that this is a strong factor in U.S. House elections and accounts for a significant portion of party identification.42

When voters engage in issue voting, competition between two candidates has the effect of pushing the candidates' issue positions toward the middle of the distribution of voters' preferences. This is known as the median-voter theorem.43 (Chapter 6 discussed the median-voter theorem in the context of congressional committees.) To see the logic of this claim in the context of elections, imagine a series of possible scores on a policy issue as points along a line, stretching from 0 to 100 (Figure 11.6). A voter is represented by an "ideal" policy and preferences, which decline as policy moves away from this ideal. Thus voters in group 1 prefer policy X, most, and their preference declines as the policy moves to the left or right of X. Voters whose ideal policy lies between 75 and 100 are conservative (groups 4 and 5), and those whose favorite policy is between 25 and 75 are moderate (group 3). An issue voter cares only about issue positions, not partisan loyalty or candidates' characteristics, and would, therefore, vote for the candidate whose announced policy is closest to his or her own most preferred policy.

Consider now an electorate of 125 voters evenly distributed among the five groups shown in Figure 11.6. The middle group contains the median voter

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44 For the sake of this illustration, 25 voters have been included in each group. This argument holds true with any distribution of voters among the groups.
because half or more of this electorate has an ideal policy at or to the left of \( X \) (groups 1, 2, and 3), and half or more has an ideal policy at or to the right of \( X \) (groups 3, 4, and 5). Group 3 is in the driver's seat, as the following reasoning suggests. If a candidate announces \( X \) as her policy—the most preferred alternative of the median voter—and if her opponent picks any point to the right, then the median voter and all those with ideal policies to the left of the median voter's (groups 1–3) will support the first candidate. They constitute a majority, by definition of the median, so this candidate will win. Suppose instead that the opponent chose as his policy some point to the left of the median ideal policy. Then the median voter and all those with ideal policies to the right of the median voter's (groups 3–5) will support the first candidate—and she wins, again. In short, the median-voter theorem says that the candidate whose policy position is closest to the ideal policy of the median voter will defeat the other candidate in a majority contest. We can conclude from this brief analysis that issue voting encourages candidate convergence (in which both candidates move to cozy up to the position of the median voter). Even when voters are not exclusively issue voters, two-candidate competition still encourages a tendency toward convergence, although it may not fully run its course.45

Valence Issues. Some issues lack conflict: all people want the same outcome. All people want less crime, more prosperity and less poverty, less inflation, better health, peace, and security. They may have different beliefs about what to do to attain these objectives, but they don't really care about the means, they care about the outcome.

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45 This convergence will also be a moderating force as candidates move toward what they believe will appeal to voters in the middle, but if the middle of the voters is on the right or the left, it may not be very moderate. If \( X \), for example, were barely to the left of \( X \), then the median voter would be fairly right wing rather than in the middle of the isses dimension.
Valence issue

An issue or aspect of a choice for which all voters prefer a higher value, in contrast to a spatial issue. For example, voters prefer their politicians to be honest, and honesty is a valence issue.

In the context of elections, economic conditions are the most important valence issue. If voters are satisfied with their economic prospects, they tend to support the party in power, while voters’ unease about the economy tends to favor the opposition. Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush won re-election easily in the midst of favorable economies. Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George H. W. Bush in 1992 ran for re-election in the midst of economic downturns, and both lost.

How bad must the economy be in order for the incumbent to get turned out of office? Social scientists have developed several rules of thumb based on historical correlations between economic performance and the vote. A common sort of empirical analysis uses economic growth (annual percentage changes in gross domestic product) to predict the vote. The idea is that large numbers of voters decide to vote against the incumbent party in bad times and with the incumbent party in good times. Every individual may have a different sense of the economy, but adding up the 100 million or so votes will aggregate every individual’s experiences and reflect roughly what is going on in the economy and how the economy affects his voting. Although the fit between economic growth and votes for the incumbent party is hardly perfect, correlation is sufficient to allow statistically minded political scientists to make forecasts. Roughly speaking, every additional 1 percent increase in GDP corresponds to a 1 percentage point increase in the incumbent president’s party’s vote.

Another approach relies on the Consumer Confidence Index, which has been calculated over the past quarter-century by the Conference Board, a business research group. The Consumer Confidence Index is based on a public opinion survey that administers a simple battery of questions about people’s sense of the economy in their area and their expectations over the coming months. A score above 100 means that most people are optimistic about the economy and that growth is strong. A score below 100 means that most people are pessimistic about the economy and job growth is weak. It has proven a fairly accurate predictor of presidential outcomes. A generally rosy view, indicated by a score greater than 100, augurs well for the party in power. An index score of less than 100, suggesting that voters are pessimistic about the economy’s trend, suggests that incumbents should worry about their job prospects (Figure 11.7).

In 2008, when the Republican Party held the White House, the Consumer Confidence Index fell below 90 in the months before the election, and the Republican candidate for president lost. In 2012, the Consumer Confidence Index was still below 100, but had risen considerably since 2008, to roughly 70, and Obama won re-election.

Economic voting is one way that voters solve the moral hazard problems inherent in representative democracy. They cannot monitor every policy that the government initiates. They do, however, have a rudimentary way to hold the government accountable—staying the course when times are good, and voting for change when the economy sours.

*Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the responsiveness of elections to fluctuations in the U.S. economy is Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson, *The Macro-Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).*
**Candidate Characteristics**

Candidates’ personal attributes always influence voters’ decisions. The more important characteristics that affect voters’ choices are race, ethnicity, religion, gender, geography, and social background. In general, voters prefer candidates who are closer to themselves in terms of these categories. Voters presume that such candidates are likely to have views and perspectives close to their own. Moreover, they may be proud to see someone of their ethnic, religious, or geographic background in a position of leadership. This is why, for many years, politicians sought to “balance the ticket,” making certain that their party’s ticket included members of as many important groups as possible.
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Just as a candidate's personal characteristics may attract some voters, so they may repel others. Many voters are prejudiced against candidates of certain ethnic, racial, or religious groups. And for many years, voters were reluctant to support the political candidacy of women, although this tendency appears to be changing.

Voters also pay attention to candidates' personality characteristics, such as their “competence,” “honesty,” and “vigor.” Voters want these skills and attributes because the politicians who have them are more likely to produce good outcomes, such as laws that work, fair and honest administration of government, and ability to address crises. Candidates will emphasize certain qualities that they think all voters will value. An excellent example arose in the 2008 primary election between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Clinton ran an ad that intended to show her experience and ability to solve crises. “It’s 3 a.m. and your children are safely asleep. But there’s a phone in the White House and it’s ringing. Something’s happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call . . . . Whether it’s someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world . . . .” Whether this ad had a lasting effect on perceptions of Obama is impossible to know, but it was designed to tap voters’ belief in the need for a certain set of competencies in the White House.

Other personal characteristics of candidates are quite important as well. Obama’s race weighed heavily for many voters. In 2004, George W. Bush won 43 percent of the vote of Hispanics, 12 percent of the vote of blacks, and 58 percent of the vote of whites. In 2012, Mitt Romney won 59 percent of the vote of whites (nearly the same as Bush), but he won only 27 percent of the vote of Hispanics and 6 percent of the vote of blacks. Obama’s race raised the support for the Democrats among Hispanics and black voters. It also increased their turnout. Blacks were 8 percent of voters in 2004; they were 13 percent of voters in 2012. Gender, religion, and other characteristics also matter.

One of the most distinctive features of American politics is the apparent advantage that incumbents have, as we saw in Chapter 6. Why the incumbency advantage has emerged and grown remains something of a puzzle. Redistricting is almost certainly not the explanation: incumbency effects are as large in gubernatorial elections, where there are no districts, as in House elections. It is thought that about half of the incumbency advantage reflects the activities of the legislator in office; it is the result of voters rewarding incumbents for their performance. The other half of the incumbency advantage evidently reflects not the incumbents but their opponents.7 The typical challenger in U.S. elections may not have the personal appeal of the typical incumbent; after all, the

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typical incumbent has already won office once. Moreover, challengers usually lack the experience and resources that the incumbent has for running a campaign. This is critical. The ability to communicate with the voters can give a politician the edge in close elections.

Although party, issues, and candidate characteristics are perhaps the three most important factors shaping voting decisions, there is much debate among political scientists as to the relative importance of each. Problems of measurement and the limitations of research methods have made it exceedingly difficult to assess the relative importance of these factors in voters’ thinking. Recent scholarship suggests that they have roughly equal weight in explaining the division of the vote in national elections. Part of the difficulty in understanding their importance is that the extent to which these factors matter depends on the information levels of the electorate. In the absence of much information, most voters rely almost exclusively on party cues. A highly informed electorate relies more heavily on issues and candidate characteristics.68

CAMPAIGNS: MONEY, MEDIA, AND GRASS ROOTS

American political campaigns are freewheeling events with few restrictions on what candidates may say or do. Candidates in hotly contested House and Senate races spend millions of dollars to advertise on television and radio, as well as direct mail and door-to-door canvassing. Those seeking office are in a race to become as well known and as well liked as possible and to get more of their supporters to vote. Federal laws limit how much an individual or organization may give to a candidate, but with the exception of presidential campaigns, place no restrictions on how much a candidate or party committee may spend.

Adding to the freewheeling nature of campaigns is their organizational structure. Most political campaigns are temporary organizations. They form for the sole purpose of winning the coming elections and disband shortly afterward. To be sure, political parties in the United States have a set of permanent, professional campaign organizations that raise money, strategize, recruit candidates, and distribute resources. These are, on the Republican side, the Republican National Committee, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and the National Republican Congressional Committee. On the Democratic side are the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. They account


for roughly one-third of the money in politics and have considerable expertise. But most campaigns are formed by and around individual candidates, who often put up the initial cash to get the campaign rolling and rely heavily on family and friends as volunteers. Thousands of such organizations are at work during an election. The two presidential campaigns operate 50 different state-level operations, with other campaigns competing for 34 Senate seats, 435 House seats, dozens of gubernatorial and other statewide offices, and thousands of state legislative seats. There is relatively little coordination among these myriad campaigns, though they all simultaneously work toward the same end—persuading as many people as possible to vote for their candidate on Election Day.

What It Takes to Win

All campaigns, big and small, face similar challenges—how to bring people in, how to raise money, how to coordinate activities, what messages to run, and how to communicate with the public. There is no single best way to run a campaign. There are many tried-and-true approaches, especially building up a campaign from many local connections, from the grass roots. Candidates have to meet as many people as possible and get their friends and their friends' friends to support them. In-person campaigning becomes increasingly difficult in larger constituencies. Candidates continually experiment with new ways of communicating with the public and new ways of organizing in order to more efficiently reach large segments of the electorate. In the 1920s, radio advertising eclipsed handbills and door-to-door canvassing, as broadcast advertising captured economies of scale. In the 1960s, television began to eclipse radio. In the 1980s and 1990s, cable television and innovations in marketing (especially phone polling and focus groups) allowed candidates to target very specific demographic groups through the media. The great innovation of the Obama campaign was to meld Internet networking tools with old-style organizing methods to develop a massive communications and fund-raising network, what came to be called a "barnstorming" campaign.

However they are organized, campaigns play an essential role in American democracy. They are the opportunity for the politicians to present themselves to the public to explain who they are, what they have accomplished, and what they will do in office. Television advertisements, get-out-the-vote efforts, direct mail, and the like provide voters with factual information about the personal characteristics and ideologies of the candidates, about the meaning of the party labels, and about what issues distinguish the politicians.

Campaigns are also a time when the foibles and failures of those in office may be revealed. Challengers must make the case that a new direction is needed, and that case rests on showing that the incumbent is the wrong person to represent the constituency (a case of adverse selection) or has failed to do the job as constituents wanted (a case of moral hazard). Incumbents, for their part, try to appeal to voters on the basis of their ideological fit with their constituents and their performance in office. It has become an assumption of American elections and election law that candidates and parties will mount competitive
campaigns to win office. They will spend millions, even billions of dollars, to persuade people to vote and how to vote. And because of those efforts voters will understand better the choices they face in the elections. In short, campaigns inform voters, and they do so through competition.

In addition to being costly, American political campaigns are long, often spanning years. Campaigns for the presidency officially launch a year and a half to two years in advance of Election Day. Serious campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives begin at least a year ahead of the general election date and often span the better part of two years. To use the term of the Federal Election Commission, an election is a two-year 506, not a single day or even the period between Labor Day and Election Day loosely referred to as "the general election."

The long campaigns in the United States are due in large part to the effort required to mount a campaign. There are roughly 319 million people in the United States, and the voting-age population exceeds 240 million people. Communicating with all of those people is an expensive and time-consuming enterprise. A simple calculation reveals the challenge. Suppose you ran for president of the United States. Sending one piece of mail to each household in the United States would cost approximately $100 million dollars. That is probably the minimum imaginable campaign effort. How long would it take to raise $100 million and mobilize such an effort to communicate with the American people? In the 2012 election cycle, the Barack Obama campaign and allied committees spent $1.20 billion; Mitt Romney's campaign and allied committees spent $1.25 billion—almost $2.5 billion total. Approximately half of that sum was spent to purchase airtime for television advertisements. That money was raised through personal and political networks that the campaigns built up over months, even years of effort. It takes extensive operations to reach out to so many people and to raise such vast sums. Simply putting such an organization in place takes months.

The campaign season is further extended by the election calendar. American elections proceed in two steps: the party primary elections and the general election. General elections for federal offices are set by the U.S. Constitution to take place on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. The first presidential caucuses and primaries come early in January and last through the beginning of June. State and congressional primaries do not follow the same calendar, but most occur in the spring and early summer, with a handful of some states waiting to hold their nominating elections until September of the election year. The immediate result of this yearlong calendar of elections is to stretch the campaigns over the entire election year.

American electoral campaigns contrast starkly with those in other democracies, such as Germany, France, Japan, and even the United Kingdom. Parliamentary systems have short campaigns. Once the government calls for an election, the campaign proceeds for a few months, and an election is held. The years-long gestation of an American election is unheard of and even considered unseemly in most other democracies. Most democracies also limit candidates' campaign expenditures and fund-raising activities, constraining the ability of individual politicians to develop personal campaign organizations and appeals. Money and other resources in other democracies flow through party organizations, often with little government oversight. Most democracies also regulate
how candidates and parties campaign. Very few countries permit television advertising, phone banks, or door-to-door canvassing. Posters and billboards are commonplace in other democracies, as are public campaign forums. These restrictions on campaign communications make the campaigns themselves less important and make media coverage of the parties, the candidates, and the government more prominent.

**Campaign Finance**

The expense, duration, and chaos of American campaigns have prompted many efforts at reform, including attempts to limit campaign spending, shorten the campaign season, and restrict what candidates and organizations can say in advertisements. The most sweeping campaign reforms came in 1971, when Congress passed the Federal Elections Campaign Act (FECA). It limited the amount that a single individual could contribute to a candidate or party to $1,000 per election for individuals and $5,000 for organizations (these limits have since been increased, as Table 11.1 indicates). It further regulated how business firms, unions, and other organizations could give money, prohibiting donations directly from the organization’s treasury and requiring the establishment of a separate, segregated fund—a political action committee (PAC). It established public funding for presidential campaigns and tied those funds to expenditure limits. And it set up the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to oversee public disclosure of information and to enforce the laws. 60 Congress has amended the act several times, most importantly in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA, also called the McCain-Feingold Act, after senators John McCain and Russell Feingold, its primary sponsors in the Senate). The McCain-Feingold Act prohibited unlimited party spending (called soft money) and banned certain sorts of political attack advertisements from interest groups in the last weeks of a campaign. See Table 11.1 for a summary of some of the rules governing campaign finance in federal elections.

FECA also established public funding for presidential campaigns. If a candidate agrees to abide by spending limits, that candidate’s campaign is eligible for matching funds in primary elections and full public funding in the general election. The general election amount was set at $20 million in 1979 and allowed to increase with inflation. Until 2000, nearly all candidates bought into the system. George W. Bush chose to fund his 2000 primary election campaign outside this system and spent $500 million to win the Republicans nomination. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton ignored the public financing system in their 2008 primary contest, and Obama opted out of the public system in the general election as well, allowing him to spend several hundred million more dollars than the Republican nominee, John McCain. In 2012, neither Obama nor the Republican candidates for president used public funding.

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60 The FEC’s website is an excellent resource for those interested in U.S. campaign finance (www.fec.gov).

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Chapter 11: Elections
### Table 11.1

**FEDERAL CAMPAIGN FINANCE CONTRIBUTION LIMITS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual may give</th>
<th>To each candidate or committee per election</th>
<th>To national party committee per calendar year</th>
<th>To state, district, and local party committee per calendar year</th>
<th>To any other political committee per calendar year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$2,600*</td>
<td>$32,400*</td>
<td>$10,000 (combined limit)</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National party committee may give</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State, district, and local party committee may give</td>
<td>$5,000 (combined limit)</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>$5,000 (combined limit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC (multicandidate)** may give</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$5,000 (combined limit)</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC (not multicandidate) may give</td>
<td>$2,600*</td>
<td>$32,400*</td>
<td>$10,000 (combined limit)</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorized campaign committee may give</td>
<td>$2,000*</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>No limit</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These contribution limits are increased for inflation in odd-numbered years.
**A multicandidate committee is a political committee with more than 10 contributors that has been registered for at least six months and, with the exception of state party committees, has made contributions to five or more candidates for federal office.

3 Federal candidate’s authorized committee(s) may contribute no more than $2,000 per election to another federal candidate’s authorized committee(s).


FECA originally went much further than the law that survives today. Congress originally passed mandatory caps on spending by House and Senate candidates and prohibited organizations from running their own independent campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to a candidate (and not coordinated with any candidate). James Buckley, a candidate for U.S. Senate in New York, challenged the law, arguing that the restrictions on spending and contributions limited his rights to free speech and that FEC had excessive administrative power. In the 1976 landmark case Buckley v. Valeo, the U.S Supreme Court...
agreed in part. The Court ruled that “money is speech,” but the government also has a compelling interest in protecting elections from corrupt practices, such as bribery through large campaign donations. The justices declared the limits on candidate spending unconstitutional because they violated free speech rights of candidates and groups. However, the need to protect the integrity of the electoral process led the justices to lower contribution limits in place. The presidential public funding system was also validated because it is voluntary. Candidates can opt into the system, but they are not required to; hence, there is no violation of free speech. What survived Buckley is a system in which candidates, groups, and parties may spend as much as they like to win office, but donations must come in small amounts. In an expensive election, campaigns must accumulate their resources from large numbers of individuals and groups. This is a more democratic process of campaign finance, but it increases the effort and time needed to construct a campaign.

The Supreme Court’s decision in Buckley, though highly controversial, rests on an essential truth of American democracy and elections. The First Amendment right to free speech amounts to a “profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.” In a republic where the people are sovereign, the Court continued, “the ability of the citizenry to make informed choices among candidates for office is essential, for the identities of those who are elected will inevitably shape the course that we follow as a nation. . . . It can hardly be doubted that the constitutional guarantee has its fullest and most urgent application precisely to the conduct of campaigns for political office.” Without competitive political campaigns, voters would lack the information to make electoral decisions. Most of us might not even know when or how to vote; we would certainly lack basic information about the choices before us.

In 2010, the Supreme Court reinforced its reasoning in Buckley v. Valeo in the case Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. In Citizens United the justices ruled that the BCRA of 2002 had erred in imposing restrictions on independent spending by corporations. It overturned key components of the BCRA and reversed its ruling in the case that had upheld BCRA, McConnell v. Federal Election Commission. The majority opinion struck down limits on independent expenditures from corporate treasuries but kept in place limits on direct contributions from corporations and other organizations to candidates. The majority opinion went further than past decisions, however, in solidifying corporations’ right to free political speech, on par with the right to free speech of individuals. In the wake of this decision, two sorts of organizations formed—501c(4) organizations, 52  Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).
Congressional Campaigns

Congressional campaigns share a number of important features with presidential campaigns, but they are also distinctive. One of the salient features of congressional campaigns is the incumbent advantage. While there is an incumbent advantage for sitting presidents, the two-term limit on the president means that incumbency is a more important feature for congressional representatives, who have no term limits. Beginning around 1970, political scientists noted that congressional incumbents were winning re-election at higher rates than in previous generations and by wider margins. Closer examination of the election results revealed that this phenomenon appeared due to incumbency itself. As a simple natural experiment, Professor Robert Erikson compared the same politician running for election not as an incumbent and as an incumbent. In the first sort of election, the politician ran for a seat left vacant by an incumbent's retirement or against an incumbent and won. In the second sort of election, the politician had just won the previous election and had to defend the seat in the next election as a “sophomore.” Erikson called the increase in the politician's vote share from the first election to the second the “sophomore surge.” It is the increase in the vote attributable solely to the fact that the politician ran as an incumbent rather than as a non-incumbent. Erikson found an incumbency effect of approximately 5 percentage points around 1970. If the party division of the vote in a congressional district without an incumbent is, say, 50–50, then in a race where one candidate is the incumbent, that same district would vote for the incumbent with 55 percent to 45 percent.

The incumbency advantage has increased both in magnitude and in importance in U.S. elections. Incumbency advantages in House elections grew rapidly beginning in the mid-1950s, when they were worth only 1 to 2 percentage points, to 5 or 6 percentage points by the end of the 1960s. They have continued to inch upward, and today, almost every elective office at the state and federal level exhibits an incumbency advantage. Those advantages have ranged from about 5 percent in state legislative elections to 10 percent for U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and governor. A 10 percent incumbency advantage is a massive electoral edge. It turns a competitive race into a blowout for the incumbent.56


Campaigns: Money, Media, and Grass Roots
Congressional incumbents' advantages arise in campaign spending as well as votes. Like presidential campaigns, congressional campaigns have witnessed increasing amounts of spending over time. The average U.S. House incumbent in 2012 spent $1.6 million, to the $260,000 spent by the typical challengers. Once a campaign has enough money to initiate operations, it begins to communicate with the voters, often starting small by attending meetings with various groups. A successful campaign builds on early successes, bringing in more supporters and volunteers and culminating with intensive advertising campaigns in the final months or weeks before Election Day. Although the Democratic and Republican parties may help campaigns that have a good shot of succeeding, they typically come in late. Every campaign for Congress or president is built by the individual candidates and their close friends and associates from the ground up. The personal style of political campaigning that Americans have come to appreciate reflects an enormous investment of time and resources; an investment that takes the better part of a year to grow. Incumbent members of Congress have particular advantages in campaign fund-raising. They have already been tested, they have their campaign organizations in place, and they have connections in their constituencies, as well as in Washington, D.C.

Effectiveness of Campaigns

Campaigns address the information problems discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In mass elections, individual voters have little incentive or opportunity to find information about the many candidates and ballot measures at issue. This situation creates an opportunity for candidates and parties. Through advertising, get-out-the-vote activities, and other campaign efforts, politicians try to shape the electorate and the outcome of the election. Candidates and parties bear much of the responsibility and costs for gathering and disseminating electoral information and for creating an informed electorate. Through their campaigns, parties and candidates spend money in order to present voters with the information they need to make a decision come Election Day—what the candidates and parties have done and what they promise to do, who they are, and which person is right for the job and the challenges the country faces.

Political scientists have long wondered how much that money matters. After all, the high rates of party loyalty among most people would suggest that there is only so much that campaigns can do. Research on the effectiveness of campaign spending and advertising began in earnest in the 1970s with the pathbreaking studies of Professor Gary Jacobson. Jacobson found that challengers did better in races in which they spent more money, holding constant the underlying partisan division of the district, but that incumbents who spent higher amounts did no better. Part of the explanation, Jacobson reasoned, was that vulnerable incumbents would have to raise and spend more money, so the observation of high spending reflected the eventual outcome as much as it influenced it. It was impossible to tell how much money influenced votes and how much votes
A decades-long debate over how to measure the effectiveness of campaign spending has ensued, most of it focusing on the same sort of aggregate data that Jacobson used.

In the 1990s, political scientists turned to experiments. Rather than look at the correlation between how many votes candidates received and how much they spent, we could manipulate who sees TV commercials or receives mailers and then measure their attitudes toward the candidates, whether they vote, and how they vote. The first such study was conducted by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, who found that seeing a single TV commercial from a candidate in the context of a news program increased support for that candidate by, on average, 7 percentage points. Importantly, this holds constant how much the other candidate spends and other important features of the electoral context. Interestingly, the effect of advertising was found to vary across people. Those who were ideologically hostile to a candidate could not be persuaded to change their opinions and cross party lines. TV ads from Democrats had very little effect on Republican viewers, and ads from Republicans had very little effect on Democrats. Rather, the ads affected independent voters and people of the same party or ideological orientation as the candidate who aired the ad. This finding echoes a much older argument owing to the social psychologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld studied communications among people in the 1940s and found that political messages and communications tended not to persuade people but to reinforce their beliefs. Such is the case today. TV ads strengthen support for a candidate among those candidate’s partisans and among independents.

Following on this project, Alan Gerber and Donald Green initiated a new research program to measure the effectiveness of canvassing, direct mail, and other means of voter mobilization. Working with political campaigns, they conducted dozens of field experiments in which some households and precincts received get-out-the-vote messages and some did not. They then measured the participation rates and vote shares of households and precincts of those who received the messages and those who did not. Although the effects were somewhat smaller than the TV advertising studies, they too found significant effects of campaign advertising on rates of participation and candidates’ vote shares.

These research projects provide clear and strong evidence of the effectiveness of campaigns, a conclusion masked by studies of aggregate election patterns.

Elections, of course, fail to serve the important function of informing the electorate when competition is weak or lacking altogether. At times in our history, there have been prolonged outages of electoral competition. Perhaps the most infamous example took the form of Democratic dominance in the South

from the 1890s through 1960s—a political arrangement termed the Solid South. During this period, election laws were employed to exclude blacks and many poor whites from primary elections, and Republicans comprised a relatively small part of the electorate. As a result, Democrats won nearly every House seat, Senate seat, and gubernatorial race in the South from the end of Reconstruction through the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Shifting political alignments in the South during the 1960s and 1970s brought a rapid rise in Republican fortunes in the South and with that the benefits of electoral competition.

Today, some observers feel that the incumbency advantage stifles electoral competition. As we noted earlier, incumbents enjoy a sizable electoral advantage, a bonus of roughly 5 to 10 percentage points. Some of that advantage reflects the voters’ reward of the incumbents’ performance in office, but some of it may also reflect an imbalance in campaign policies. That imbalance is most obvious in campaign funds. The average House challenger in 2012 raised and spent a little over $260,000; the typical incumbent raised and spent more than six times as much, approximately $1.6 million. To put matters another way, incumbents could spend roughly $2.50 per voting-age person in the district; the typical challenger could spend only $0.38 per voting-age person. Incumbents’ funding advantages allow them to communicate more extensively with constituents than their opponents.

THE 2012 AND 2014 ELECTIONS

In the fall of 2012, more than 132 million Americans went to the polls to select a president, members of Congress, governors, and numerous other officials. Voters re-elected Barack Obama to the presidency and confirmed the Democratic Party’s control of the Senate and the Republican Party’s majority in the House of Representatives. Obama won 55 million votes, roughly 51 percent, while his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, received about 61 million votes, or 47 percent. Though the president’s margin of victory was a fifth less than in 2008, it was enough to give him 332 electoral votes, 57 more than the 270 needed to win a majority in the electoral college (Figure 11.8). The president’s margin of victory was built on a coalition of women, working-class voters, and minority voters in several key battleground states. Despite the billions of dollars spent by candidates and the hoopla of the campaign, the 2012 election was decided more by demographic realities than political rhetoric.

Generally speaking, incumbent presidents have a substantial advantage when they seek re-election to a second term. During the course of American history, incumbent presidents standing for re-election have won about 70 percent of the time. Despite this advantage of incumbency, the re-election of President Obama in 2012 was never a foregone conclusion. Although Obama scored major legislative successes early in his first term, these accomplishments, especially the Affordable Care Act, were controversial. To make matters worse, unemployment remained high throughout Obama’s first four years. The
A combination of controversial legislation and a weak economic record made the incumbent vulnerable coming into the 2012 election season.

In his 2008 campaign, Obama energized legions of young supporters who saw in the senator from Illinois a charismatic and energetic politician who would pursue a progressive social agenda and bring an end to America's wars in the Middle East. Many liberal voters had also been eager to elect America’s first black president and thus make a break with the nation's long and unhappy history of racial oppression and discrimination. Once in office, Obama was keen to make good on his promise of change. He worked to bring an end to the war in Iraq and to wind down the war in Afghanistan, partly in order to shift the nation's spending priorities from the military to domestic social needs. In the realm of domestic policy, between 2008 and 2010, with both chambers of Congress controlled by the Democrats, the president succeeded in passing a $700 billion economic stimulus bill, a law that guaranteed equal pay for women, new financial regulations, and an extensive overhaul of the nation's health care laws. President Obama also appointed two women to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Affordable Care Act, which came to be known as “Obamacare,” became a flashpoint for the 2010 and 2012 elections. The law sought to make access to health care universal; it required individuals without insurance to purchase insurance, it required businesses to provide insurance, it set up insurance pools to allow those without care to purchase inexpensive insurance, it required states
to extend their Medicaid coverage, and it forbade insurance companies from excluding people from coverage for preexisting conditions.

These successes came at a cost. The president appeared to push aggressively a liberal legislative agenda, and the opportunity for a corrective came at the 2010 midterm election. It is often the case that the president’s party loses some seats in the midterm elections, but in 2010 the Democrats lost a whopping 64 seats and ceded control of the House to the Republicans. A majority of Americans opposed Obamacare. They saw it as a costly government takeover of a major industry and an unwarranted intrusion into the lives of all Americans. Many people also saw financial reform and economic stimulus as policies that would impose too much regulation or create mounting debt problems. The backlash against Obama’s early legislative successes took the form of a loose but broad conservative movement called the Tea Party, whose organizations sponsored rallies and protests and recruited candidates to run for office. Against this background of dissatisfaction and dissent, Republican challengers in 2010 defeated numerous Democratic members of Congress and left the president with a Republican House of Representatives that vowed to block any new presidential initiatives.

All the while, the nation’s economy, which had been battered by recession in 2007 and 2008, showed only tepid signs of recovery throughout Obama’s first four years in office. For much of the president’s first term, unemployment remained in the uncomfortably high 8 to 9 percent range, with hundreds of thousands of recent college graduates finding themselves unemployed or underemployed; the housing market was weak; and a number of major financial institutions seemed to totter on the edge of failure. As a result, President Obama’s re-election hardly seemed assured. However, the Republicans needed to find a candidate who could defeat the president and appeal to the various factions of their party.

**Political Parties in 2012: Unity and Division**

The American political landscape experienced a national realignment of political forces in the 1960s and 1970s, as we will discuss in Chapter 12. Over time, the Democrats became a much more liberal party and the Republicans a much more conservative political force. This ideological realignment of the two parties is one reason that partisan struggles in Congress—and between Congress and the White House when party control of the two branches is divided—have become especially intense in recent years.

This growing ideological split between the two parties has not meant that each party is ideologically uniform, however. Rather, disputes among the various liberal groups within the Democratic Party and among the disparate conservative groups in the GOP have also been quite heated. In 2012, the divisions among the Democrats were relatively inconsequential for the simple reason that the party’s presidential nominee was a given. Like it or not, all the party’s factions had to line up behind President Obama, or risk losing the White House altogether. The divisions in the GOP, however, did matter, and the Republican nomination battle took place...
among candidates representing different factions within the party. Former Massachusetts governor and successful financier Mitt Romney spoke for the party's fiscal conservatives, who feel excessive taxation and regulation are the major issues facing the country. Former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum and Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann were the champions of the social conservatives, who seek to end abortion and prevent same-sex marriage. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich represented neoconservatives who favor a robust military policy, and former Texas congressman Ron Paul spoke for the libertarians and isolationists. Between May 2011 and February 2012, the Republican hopefuls engaged in a series of televised debates where each argued that he or she would be best able to defeat the Democrats.

From the beginning, Romney's superior organization and financial base made him the front-runner. The GOP's social and religious conservatives, though, were unenthusiastic about the former Massachusetts governor. Some saw him as a liberal in Republican clothing while others, particularly evangelical Protestants, were unhappy about the idea of a member of the Mormon faith leading the party. These groups gave their support to Rick Santorum, who eventually carried 11 states and more than 30 percent of the primary vote. By April 2012, though, Romney had clearly won the delegate votes needed for the nomination, and Santorum suspended his campaign.

Having won the Republican nomination, Romney moved to reassure the party's social conservatives that he was worthy of their enthusiastic support in the general election. One of the biggest challenges facing candidates is motivating likely supporters to actually cast a vote. Conservatives would not jump to the Obama camp, but anything less than enthusiastic participation in the campaign by social conservatives would doom the GOP's ticket. Accordingly, Romney endorsed a party platform that would appeal to this group. Its provisions included a constitutional amendment to ban abortion; elimination of government-funded family planning programs, with the exception of abstinence-only education; and a program of detention for "dangerous" aliens. Other provisions included repeal of the Affordable Care Act and reducing taxes. As icing on the conservative cake, Romney chose as his vice-presidential running mate Congressman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. Ryan had vigorously opposed Democratic fiscal and social policies and was enthusiastically supported by the GOP's social and fiscal conservatives.

The 2012 General Election

U.S. presidential elections are shaped by fundamental forces: the economy, foreign conflict, the underlying partisanship and composition of the electorate, and the approval rating of the incumbent president. The election in 2012 proved to be no exception. But the fundamentals in 2012 pointed in conflicting directions. Barack Obama was a fairly popular incumbent who boasted significant foreign policy successes; however, he also had to defend a record of four years of slow economic growth and, in some parts of the country, economic stagnation. No president has been re-elected with an unemployment rate exceeding
8 percent, but no president with an approval rating of 50 percent has failed to win re-election. Political scientists’ and economists’ forecasts based on these fundamentals predicted a very tight election, with a slight edge to the president.

In recent years, the bedrock base of GOP support has consisted of reasonably affluent, educated, middle-aged, middle-class white men living in suburban and rural areas. The Democrats, on the other hand, have been able to rely on the votes of a majority of women, less affluent Americans, urban residents, younger voters, African Americans, and, increasingly, Hispanic voters. While there are certainly poor Republicans and affluent Democrats, this split approaches a classic division between the “have more” and “have less.” Mitt Romney alluded to this division when he said, in what he thought to be a closed-door meeting with Republican donors, that 47 percent of Americans paid no taxes, depended on government handouts, and would never vote for him. When news of Romney’s comments leaked, Republicans sought to contain the damage but did not necessarily dispute the accuracy of Romney’s analysis.

The division of the electorate into “have more” and “have less” also dictated a major struggle in the campaign. In a number of states, Republican governors and legislators enacted voter ID laws requiring prospective voters to present valid, government-issued photo identification cards at the polls. Republicans said such laws were needed to prevent fraudulent voting. The GOP’s calculus, though, was that less-educated and minority voters (who tend to vote Democratic) were less likely to be able to produce valid ID at the polls and would thus be barred from voting. Two dozen states enacted voter ID laws, and though Democratic mounted court challenges, many of these laws were in effect on Election Day 2012.

While America, of course, consists of 50 states, presidential elections are usually fought in only a handful of “battleground” states. This is so because some states are solidly Republican (sometimes called the red states), while others are solidly Democratic (known as the blue states). The states of the Deep South and mountain West, for example, are so securely in the Republican camp that Democratic presidential candidates hardly bother to campaign there. Most of the states of the Northeast and West Coast, on the other hand, are heavily committed to the Democrats and receive little attention from the GOP. In 2012 opinion polls indicated that only 8 of the 50 states were actually toss-ups. These were Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania were seen as leaning toward Obama, while Arizona, Indiana, and North Carolina were viewed as leaning toward Romney. The remaining 35 states seemed to be solidly in either the Democratic or the Republican camp.

Thus, the 2012 presidential race was waged in 8 to 10 battleground states. Here the Obama and Romney campaigns and their various supporters spent each other dollar for dollar in an unprecedented amount of political advertising. All told, Team Obama and allied groups spent over $400 million on televised advertising across the United States, and Team Romney and allied groups spent almost $500 million on television advertising. Nearly all of it was concentrated in the battleground states.

The Debates. The candidates faced each other in one major set of national forums: three nationally televised presidential debates along with the one
vice-presidential debate. The first presidential debate, which was watched by 67 million people, was more remarkable for style than substance. Though both candidates made mistakes and factual errors, both seemed to possess a thorough knowledge of the details of major American domestic policies. In terms of style, however, Obama and Romney differed sharply. Governor Romney seemed alert and aggressive, making points assertively and methodically as he accused the president of increasing the nation’s debt, failing to bolster the economy, and undermining the private sector in favor of government-run programs. The president, for his part, appeared disengaged and listless. In the wake of the first debate, national polls, which had consistently shown Obama with a slim lead over his Republican opponent, now suggested that the race was neck and neck. Republicans were elated and Democrats dismayed by the debate and its results.

The president improved his performance in the next two debates and was generally judged to have been the winner, as was Vice President Biden in his confrontation with Republican vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan. However, in the 34 states that allowed early voting in 2012, hundreds of thousands of voices had cast their ballots after the first debate but before the other debates. With the damage done, Obama had two weeks after the debates to slow his opponent’s growing momentum.

Obama’s Victory. Obama responded by redoubling his efforts in battleground states, with speeches and campaign commercials labeling Romney a multimillionaire who was out of touch with ordinary Americans and who sent American jobs overseas. These efforts succeeded in shutting up Obama’s support among working-class Americans. According to exit polls, the president won 63 percent of the votes of those whose family incomes were less than $30,000 per year and 57 percent of those who earned between $30,000 and $49,000 per year. Among more affluent voters, by contrast, Romney was the winner, taking 52 percent of the votes of those who earned between $50,000 and $100,000 per year and about 54 percent of the votes of those whose annual family incomes exceeded $100,000.

The Obama campaign also redoubled its efforts among women voters. Democratic ads reminded women that it was the Democratic Party that supported such issues as equal pay. Foolish remarks on rape and abortion by GOP senatorial candidates in Indiana and Missouri were highlighted by the Democrats to underscore Republicans’ insensitivity to women. On Election Day, 55 percent of women voters supported Obama, while Obama received the votes of only 45 percent of America’s men. That is a gender gap of 10 percentage points. This is one of the largest gaps between men and women ever measured; it was up 3 points from 2008, and it was bad news for Romney because women comprise about 53 percent of the voters, while men comprise about 47 percent.

Finally, Obama campaign workers were determined to ensure high levels of turnout among minority voters, who potentially could be decisive in several battleground states. African American voters were a loyal Democratic constituency and could be counted on to turn out for the president. But the Democrats had been making enormous efforts to bring Asian and, especially, Latino voters into their camp too. Latinos are the most rapidly growing group in the American population and were responsible for about 10 percent of the votes cast in 2012.
The Democratic Party had made a major effort to court Latinos on such issues as immigration and, in 2012, Democrats had pushed for ballot initiatives in a number of states that offered undocumented young Latinos who had been raised in the United States the opportunity to attend public colleges at the in-state tuition rate. This strategy proved extremely successful. Not only did Obama capture 53 percent of the African American vote, but he also won approximately 71 percent of the Latino vote across the country. While African Americans usually vote at a very high rate for Democrats, Obama had a particularly strong showing among Hispanics. Four years earlier, Obama won 67 percent of the Latino vote, and in 2004 Democrat John Kerry won only 54 percent of the Latino vote. Among whites, by contrast, Romney received 59 percent of the vote (Figure 11.9).

Taken together, working-class voters, women, and minority constituents gave Obama the votes he needed for victory. Astonishingly, President Obama carried the eight toss-up battleground states, and in each one, exit polls suggested that the critical margin was provided by low-income groups, minorities, and women.

### Table 11.2A

**HOUSE ELECTION RESULTS, 1994–2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TURNOUT</th>
<th>PARTY RATIO</th>
<th>SEAT SHIFT</th>
<th>DEMOCRATS RE-ELECTED</th>
<th>REPUBLICANS RE-ELECTED</th>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>204 D, 220 R</td>
<td>+44 R</td>
<td>89.3%</td>
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<td>51.7%</td>
<td>207 D, 227 R</td>
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<tr>
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<td>211 D, 223 R</td>
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<td>54.2%</td>
<td>212 D, 222 R</td>
<td>+1 R</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>97.5</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>205 D, 229 R</td>
<td>+8 R</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>97.5</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>201 D, 232 R</td>
<td>+3 R</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>99.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>233 D, 202 R</td>
<td>+30 R</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>257 D, 178 R</td>
<td>+24 R</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>193 D, 242 R</td>
<td>+64 R</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>201 D, 234 R</td>
<td>+8 R</td>
<td>89.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>188 D, 247 R</td>
<td>+13 R</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>97.1</td>
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*Source: Michael McDonald, United States Election Project, www.electionproject.org (accessed 11/24/14).*
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The 2014 Midterms—and Beyond

The 2014 election left the U.S. government divided, with President Obama facing Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress. In the House elections, Republicans picked up 13 seats, increasing their majority to 247 seats—the largest Republican majority in the House since 1946. The GOP also gained control of the Senate in the 2014 midterm elections, picking up nine seats previously held by Democrats. Republicans also picked up a net of three governorships—gaining seats from the Democrats in Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts, but losing control in Pennsylvania.

The 2014 elections followed a historical pattern: the incumbent president’s party tends to do poorly in the sixth year of an eight-year presidency. By that time in a presidency, the administration may have run out of new policy initiatives; there are often increasing stresses on the coalition that helped elect the president; and voters are looking for something new. In the aftermath of the 2014 elections, it was clear that several factors contributed to Democratic losses.

Table 11.2B
SENATE ELECTION RESULTS, 1994-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>TURNOUT</th>
<th>PARTY RATIO</th>
<th>SEAT SHIFT</th>
<th>DEMOCRATS RE-ELECTED</th>
<th>REPUBLICANS RE-ELECTED</th>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>47 D, 53 R</td>
<td>+10 R</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>45 D, 55 R</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>45 D, 55 R</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>50 D, 50 R</td>
<td>+6 D</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>64.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>48 D, 51 R</td>
<td>+1 R</td>
<td>83.3</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>44 D, 50 R</td>
<td>+4 R</td>
<td>82.9</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>50 D, 49 R</td>
<td>+6 D</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>59 D, 41 R</td>
<td>+8 D</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>53 D, 47 R</td>
<td>+6 R</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>55 D*, 45 R</td>
<td>+2 D</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>46 D*, 54 R</td>
<td>+9 R</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes two Independents who caucus with the Democrats.
Figure 11.9
VOTE SHIFTS BETWEEN 2008 AND 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GENDER</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-44</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent or</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something else</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RACE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Just 36 percent of the adult population voted in 2014, the lowest turnout rate in a federal election since 1942. There were few national issues to energize the electorate. President Obama’s popularity had dipped into the low 40s, and ongoing civil conflict in Iraq and Syria dragged the administration down, especially because the administration had to reverse course on its policy to withdraw from the conflicts in the Middle East. Democratic candidates tried to distance themselves from the president and to keep the elections local, but Republicans campaigned strenuously against Obama and the Democrats, without offering a national policy agenda. Both parties, it appeared, needed a national message in 2014, and the electorate was especially demanding of such leadership from the Democrats because they held the White House. The lack of a clear message and vision for the next two years hurt Democrats nationwide.

The 2014 midterms set the stage for 2016. The election boosted the profile of several Republican presidential hopefuls—especially those aligned with the Tea Party faction within the Republican Party, such as Wisconsin governor Scott Walker and Kentucky senator Rand Paul. The defeat of several Democratic senators and governors also narrowed the pool of Democratic presidential hopefuls, which seemed to leave the field open to Hillary Clinton. The strengthening of the Tea Party faction seemed likely to shape the issues pushed by the Republicans Congress in the run-up to 2016, such as tightening rules governing immigration, repealing the Affordable Care Act, and reducing federal spending and federal income taxes. Immediately after the election, the Obama administration

promised to use the administrative and executive powers of the presidency to address policy areas where Obama expected to get little cooperation from Congress, such as immigration and greenhouse gas emissions. Two weeks later, the president announced that the administration would not seek to deport 5 million illegal immigrants who had family in the United States who were citizens or legal residents. These will be the policy legacies inherited by the parties' standard-bearers heading into the 2016 presidential elections. The conflict over immigration promises to be especially important for future elections, as Hispanic voters are an increasingly important segment of the electorate and rank immigration policy as one of their top issues.

**CONCLUSION: ELECTIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Elections should stir wonder in even the most jaded person. In an election, no one person matters much, and each person acts in apparent isolation, indeed secrecy. The individual voter's decisions reflect diverse experiences, opinions, and preferences about government and public policy. And the millions of votes cumulate into an expression of whom the majority wants to have as its representatives in state government, in Congress, and in the presidency.

The design of the institutions of American elections facilitate majority rule. Single-member districts and plurality rule create strong pressures toward a two-party system and majoritarianism. Even in elections in which one party wins a plurality but not a majority, that party typically wins an outright majority of legislative seats. The election itself, then, determines the government. Other systems often produce multiparty outcomes, resulting in a period of negotiation and coalition formation among the parties in order to determine who will govern.

The significance of elections derives not so much from the laws as from the preferences of voters. Voting behavior depends in no small part on habit and the tendency to vote for a given party as a matter of ingrained personal identity. If that were all there is to voting behavior, then it is not clear that elections would provide a meaningful way of governing. Elections would be reduced to little more than a sporting event, in which people merely rooted for their own team. However, voters' preferences are as strongly rooted in the issues at hand as in the choices themselves, the candidates. Voting decisions reflect individuals' assessments about whether it makes sense to keep public policies on the same track or to change direction, whether those in office have done a good job and deserve to be re-elected, or whether they have failed and it is time for new representation. The aggregation of all voters' preferences responds collectively to fluctuations in the economy, to differences in the ideological and policy orientations of the parties, and to the personal abilities of the candidates.
Selections highlighted in red are included in Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives, Third Edition.


