AMERICAN ELECTIONS: BASIC FACTS, FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

* In presidential elections, there are two ways to count votes:
  + The **popular vote**is the number for votes *citizens* cast for each of the presidential candidates.
  + The **electoral vote** is the number of votes *electoral*[*college*](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/08/outline.aspx)*members* cast for each of the presidential candidates. If a candidate wins a certain state, the candidate wins the votes of[electoral college](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/08/outline.aspx) members. These votes are the ones that determine the winner.
* Congressional elections are generally classified in one of two ways:
  + A **normal election**has a relatively low **seat shift** and rather stable **party ratios**, ultimately leading to high reelection rates for both parties’ incumbents. These are the most common forms of Congressional elections.
  + **Nationalized elections** occur rarely, and typically bring about a large seat shift and low reelection rates for one party’s incumbents. These are often associated with a broad shift in the national political climate.
* **What Do Elections Do?**

Elections allow citizens the opportunity to choose who represents them and allow citizens to [reward](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/08/outline.aspx) or punish incumbent politicians.

* + Most races are an incumbent race, which is a race between someone who currently holds office (the incumbent) and a challenger (someone who does not hold the office).
  + When deciding between the two, voters often choose who to vote for by evaluating the incumbent’s performance in the past term, which is called **retrospective evaluation.**

HOW DO AMERICAN ELECTIONS WORK?

* **Two Stages of Elections**
  + In Congressional races, there are two steps to getting elected. First, the **primary**of each political party determines which of several candidates will receive the nomination to run in the general election. In the **general election** the voters determine who the actual officeholder will be.
  + In most circumstances, voters cast their votes in various polling places near their homes on Election Day. A recent trend, however, is **early voting,**in which citizens vote in advance of Election Day. Another recent trend is to cast **absentee ballots,**where voters mail their ballots rather than vote in a polling place.
* **Constituencies: Who Chooses Representatives?**

While senators represent the entirety of one state, House members represent specific districts.

* + These districts are often determined by state legislatures and are adjusted every ten years following the results of the census. Depending on how the district lines are drawn, state legislatures can dramatically change the outcome of a race.
  + Legislators from different districts face very different demands from their constituents, depending on what interests are important to people they represent
* **Determining Who Wins**
  + Most House and Senate races are determined using **plurality voting**, meaning that the person who received the most votes wins, while others use **majority voting,** which requires that a candidate has to receive more than 50 percent of the votes to be declared winner. In majority[voting systems](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/08/outline.aspx), when no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, a **runoff election**is held between the top two finishers.
  + Different counties use different forms of ballots: some use keypunch [paper](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/08/outline.aspx) ballots, some use mechanical hole punch ballots, while still others use touch-screen voting machines, and there are many more.
    1. The rules of voting instruments can influence the results.
       - The likelihood of an**undervote,**or ballot which is when a voter casts an unmarked ballot, is influenced by the type of voting instrument.
    2. The controversy between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000 over the “butterfly ballot” in Palm Beach County, Florida, demonstrates the potentially far-reaching effects that voting instrument selection can have.
* **Presidential Elections**
  + Many of the rules in presidential elections are similar to the rules of congressional elections, but there are important nuances.
  + **The Nomination**: primaries and caucuses

At the state level, the **primary** and **caucus** nominees win **delegates**, who subsequently cast votes in the national convention to determine their party’s candidate for the general election.

* + 1. The Democratic Party uses **proportional allocation** of delegates reflecting each candidate’s vote share.
       - In addition to these pledged delegates, Democrats also have **superdelegates**, who are party leaders and elected officials who are not committed to any candidate and can make their decision based on their own judgment.
    2. The Republican Party allocates delegates in two ways: **proportional allocation** and**winner-take-all**, depending on the state. There are no **superdelegates**in the Republican Party.

While success in the early contests is not a sure predictor of receiving the nomination, a poor showing in the early contests is likely to lead to an early exit.

Because of the importance of these early contests, many states **frontload,**or move their primaries and caucuses earlier in the year to exert more influence on the outcome.

* + The National Convention

Each party hosts its own national convention, where delegates vote for the party’s nominee.

* + 1. Vice presidential candidates are also officially named, and the party platform is voted on.
    2. The convention is heavily publicized and gives the party an opportunity to increase its visibility.
  + Counting presidential votes

Rather than voting directly for presidential candidates, voters actually vote for the candidate’s pledged supporters (electors), who then vote for the president.

* + 1. The number of electors each state has equals that state’s number of House and Senate members.
    2. Except for Nebraska and Maine, where they are allocated proportionally, state electors are determined through a winner-take-all system. This system leads candidates to focus on large states (with lots of electors) and **swing states,** at the expense of smaller and less competitive states.
    3. The rules of the **electoral college** do not require that a candidate receive a majority of the popular vote, only the majority of the electoral college votes.

ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

* **Setting the Stage**

Following each election, a party’s control of a seat is determined to be safe or vulnerable based on a number of calculations. Political parties and candidates make strategic decisions based on these assessments.

* + Is it possible for the out-party’s candidate to raise a significant amount of money for the campaign?
  + Will the upcoming election year be one that favors a particular party?
  + Will an incumbent be seeking reelection (which is generally considered safe) or will the seat be an**open seat** (which is more vulnerable)?
* **Before the Campaign**

There are many things incumbent politicians can do before the actual campaign to make themselves more secure.

* + Most incumbents maintain a **permanent campaign,** meaning that they never stop working to build support by traveling around their district and talking with constituents.
  + Politicians may try to do what they can to boost the economy when they go into the election in an attempt to increase their support, known as the **political business cycle.**
  + Candidates compete in the “**money primary**” by starting fund-raising well in advance of an election to simultaneously run a good campaign and keep strong competitors at bay.
  + Candidates also work in the **talent primary**to attract talented people to join their campaign staff.
* **The General Election Campaign**

During the actual electoral campaign, candidates utilize a number of strategies to win their election.

* + Candidates may contact voters directly through **retail politics** or indirectly via **wholesale politics**.
    1. Doing so helps build name recognition, which simply means that voters are familiar with the candidate.
  + Basic campaign strategies

In addition to building name recognition, candidates seek to **mobilize** their supporters: making sure that they get to the polls on Election Day (which is known as getting out the vote, or **GOTV**).

* + Promises and Platforms

Candidates also work hard to publicize their **campaign platform**, which is their list of issue stances.

Candidates have to balance their support for issues that their party is concerned about with support for issues that voters are concerned about. The issues that candidates support have important implications for everything from what groups offer campaign support to which candidates the voters support.

* + Confronting other candidates

Candidates utilize several strategies to challenge their opponents:

* + 1. They can address each other on policy issues in debates and swapping columns in newspaper op-ed pages.
    2. They can also use negative campaign tactics, such as doing **opposition research**to uncover damaging information about opponents then running **attack ads.**
* **Campaign Advertising: Getting the Word Out**

Campaign advertising is one of the primary methods for candidates to reach the electorate.

* + Each year, parties, candidates, organized interests, and business spend over a $1 billion in campaigns, primarily to fund advertisements.
    1. Nearly every group runs campaign ads, and while most candidate ads are positive, advocacy groups run uniformly negative campaign ads.
    2. Most ads rely on arresting images that evoke an emotional response by the viewer.
  + The effect of campaign advertising is contested.

Some argue that it depresses turnout and reinforces negative stereotypes about government, but research shows that advertising has beneficial effects.

* + 1. People exposed to campaign ads generally report higher interest in campaigns.
    2. Campaign ads highlight differences between the candidates, helping voters make informed choices.
* **Campaign Finance**

Among other responsibilities, the **Federal Elections Commission** is tasked with regulating how much money political campaigns spend and how they can spend it.

* + Campaign finance rules have changed significantly over time, but one of the most recent set of rules was passed in 2002, known as the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA; known colloquially as the McCain-Feingold Act).
  + The recent Supreme Court ruling on the case *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission*effectively removed restrictions for independent efforts funded by corporations.
    1. **Hard money** is the money political action committees (PACs) give directly to candidates and is limited under the BCRA.
    2. **Soft money**is money that PACs can use to support campaign advertising and the mobilization of voters, as long as it does not explicitly support or oppose a candidate.
    3. Political parties are limited in the amount of hard money they can give to candidates, but they are not limited in their “independent expenditures” to support a candidate.
  + Campaign finance reform is difficult because it requires balancing the right to free speech with the idea that the rich should not dominate campaigns and decide outcomes.
* **Making Sense of Campaign Finance**

Raw fund-raising figures do not tell the whole story about campaign fundraising.

* + Most campaign contributions do not come from big businesses, but rather from small donations by everyday Americans.
  + The majority of the money spent in campaigns is allotted to television ads, which can be extremely expensive.
  + Campaign financing is not a predictor of success: to have a chance at winning, candidates have to raise money, but raising a lot does not guarantee outcomes.
  + There is little evidence that campaign contributions alter legislator behavior, or that contributors “buy votes.”

HOW DO VOTERS DECIDE?

* **The Decision to Vote**
  + Voting is rather paradoxical: it is a costly activity, as time spent learning about the candidates and going to the polls could be spent elsewhere. Furthermore, individual people have a very small influence on the electoral outcome.
  + The number of people in the **turnout** is generally around 50 percent of eligible citizens for general elections and about 30 percent for primaries and caucuses.
    1. Turnout is lower among younger citizens, nonwhite citizens, and less educated citizens.
    2. Many people who vote do so because they feel an obligation of citizenship.
    3. Many people who do not vote are angry with the government and feel that the government’s actions will not help them.
* **How Do People Vote?**

Gathering information on all the candidates is costly, so citizens rely on **voting cues** as shortcuts to a**reasonable vote**.

* + Some use incumbency, partisanship, or personal economic experience as a way to inform vote choice.
  + Others vote based on the candidate’s backgrounds or life experiences.
* **Voting in Normal and Nationalized Elections**
  + Generally, vote decisions for presidential and congressional elections are made independently, particularly in normal elections.
    1. **Split ticket**voting occurs because voters often focus on the candidate, not the party.
  + In nationalized elections, voters focus more on the party that is in power and vote against most of the candidates of that party.

ELECTIONS MATTER

* The Republican and Democratic parties provide clear and systematic differences on a wide range of issues, offering voters a choice.
* Although most voters do not take the time to read all the candidate platforms and inform themselves on all the candidates, they are able to make reasonable votes based on cues and shortcuts.
* Elections provide a mechanism for citizens to control how politicians behave and to hold them accountable for their actions.