

APGoPo - Unit 3

CH. 9 – ELECTIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

Elections form the foundation of a modern democracy, and more elections are scheduled every year in the United States than in any other country in the world. Collectively on all levels of government, Americans fill more than 500,000 different public offices. Campaigns - where candidates launch their efforts to convince voters to support them - precede most elections. In recent years campaigns have become longer and more expensive, sparking a demand for campaign finance reform. No one questions the need for campaigns and elections, but many people believe that the government should set new regulations on how candidates and parties go about the process of getting elected to public office.

FUNCTIONS OF ELECTIONS

Elections serve many important functions in the United States. Most obviously, elections choose political leaders from a competitive field of candidates. But elections are also an important form of political participation, with voting in presidential elections one of the most common types of participation by the American public in the political process. Elections give individuals a regular opportunity to replace leaders without overthrowing them, thus making elected officials accountable for their actions. Elections legitimize positions of power in the political system because people accept elections as a fair method for selecting political leaders.

GUIDELINES FOR ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Constitution sets broad parameters for election of public officials. For example, the Constitution provides for the election of members of the House of Representatives every two years, and it creates and defines the electoral college. By law Congress sets the date for national elections - the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. However, most electoral guidelines and rules are still set by the individual states.

ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Candidates for political office almost always run with a political party label; they are either Democrats or Republicans, and they are selected to run as candidates for the party. The party, however, is not as important as it is in many other democracies. Running for the presidency or Congress requires the candidate to take the initiative by announcing to run, raising money, collecting signatures to get his or her name on the ballot, and personally appealing to voters in primary elections.

In many other democracies, the party controls whether to allow candidates to run and actually puts their names on the ballot. Campaigns become contests between political parties, not individuals. In United States history, parties once had much more control over elections and campaigns than they do today. In the nineteenth century, the Democratic and Republican members of Congress would meet separately to select their nominees for the presidency. Congressional candidates were often chosen by powerful local party bosses, and citizens were more likely to vote a "straight party ticket" than they do now. The power of the party has dwindled as campaign techniques have changed.

WINNER-TAKES-ALL

In most American elections, the candidate with the most votes wins. The winner does not have to have a majority (more than 50%), but may only have a **plurality**, the largest number of votes. Most American elections are **single-member districts**, which means that in any district the election determines one representative or official. For example, when the U.S. Census allots to each state a number of representatives for the U.S. House of Representatives, virtually all state legislatures divide the state into several separate districts, each electing its own single representative.

This system ensures a two-party system in the U.S., since parties try to assemble a large coalition of voters that leads to at least a plurality, spreading their "umbrellas" as far as they can to capture the most votes. The winner-takes-all system contrasts to proportional representation, a system in which legislative seats are given to parties in proportion to the number of votes they receive in the election. Such systems encourage multi-party systems because a party can always get some representatives elected to the legislature.

PRIMARIES AND GENERAL ELECTIONS

Political leaders are selected through a process that involves both primary and general elections.

Primaries

The **primary** began in the early part of this century as a result of reforms of the Progressive Movement that supported more direct control by ordinary citizens of the political system. A primary is used to select a party's candidates for elective offices, and states use three different types:

- **closed primaries** - A voter must declare in advance his or her party membership, and on election day votes in that party's election. Most states have closed primaries.
- **open primaries** - A voter can decide when he or she enters the voting booth which party's primary to participate in. Only a few states have open primaries.
- **blanket (or free-love) primaries** - A voter marks a ballot that lists candidates for all parties, and can select the Republican for one office and a Democrat for another.

The state of Iowa has a well-known variation of a primary - a **caucus**. Under this system, local party members meet and agree on the candidate they will support; the local caucuses pass their decisions on to regional caucuses, who in turn vote on candidates, and pass the information to the state caucus, who makes the final decision. In both the primary and caucus, the individual party member has a say in who the party selects to run for office. A number of other states make at least limited use of the caucus in making their choices of candidates.

General Elections

Once the candidates are selected from political parties, they campaign against one another until the general election, in which voters make the final selection of who will fill the various government offices. More people vote in a general election than in the primary, with about 50% voting in recent presidential year elections, as compared to about 25% in primary elections.

CONGRESSIONAL VS. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

Presidential and congressional races follow the same basic pattern: they announce for office, the people select the party candidates in primary elections, party candidates campaign against one another, and the official is chosen in the general election. But presidential and congressional elections differ in many ways.

- Congressional elections are regional (by state for senators and by district for representatives); presidential elections are national.
- Elections to the House of Representatives are less competitive than are those for the Senate or for the presidency. Between 1932 and 1992, incumbents typically won with over 60 percent of the vote. In contrast, the presidency is seldom won with more than 55 percent, with George W. Bush winning with less than 49% of the vote in 2000 and 51% in 2004. During the 1990s, a record number of new freshmen were elected to the House, but the incumbency tradition is still strong.
- Fewer people vote in congressional elections during off years (when there is no presidential election). The lower turnout (about 36%) means that those that vote are more activist, and thus more ideological, than the average voter during presidential years.
- Presidential popularity affects congressional elections, even during off years. This tendency is known as the **coattail effect**. In recent years, presidential popularity does not seem to have as much effect as it used to, with the Democrats suffering a net loss of ten seats when Bill Clinton won the 1992 election. Two years later in 1994 the Republicans retook majorities in both the

House and Senate, proving Bill Clinton's coat to have no tails at all. In 2000 Republican George W. Bush narrowly won the White House, but Republicans lost seats in both House and Senate in that election year. However, in 2004, Bush's coattails were substantial, with Republicans gaining seats in both the House and the Senate.

- Members of Congress can communicate more directly with their constituents, often visiting with many of them personally and making personal appearances. The president must rely on mass media to communicate with voters and can only contact a small percentage of his constituents personally.
- A candidate for a congressional seat can deny responsibility for problems in government even if he or she is an incumbent. Problems can be blamed on other members of Congress or better still the president. Even though the president may blame some things on Congress, he must take responsibility ultimately for problems that people perceive in government.

THE ROAD TO THE PRESIDENCY

Campaigns can be very simple or very complex. If you run for the local school board, you may just file your name, answer a few questions from the local newspaper, and sit back and wait for the election. If you run for President, that's another story. Today it is almost impossible to mount a campaign for the Presidency in less than two years. How much money does it take? That is currently an open question, but it certainly involves millions of dollars.

Step 1: Deciding to announce

Presidential hopefuls must first assess their political and financial support for a campaign. They generally start campaigning well before any actual declaration of candidacy. They may be approached by party leaders, or they may float the idea themselves. Many hopefuls come from Congress or a governorship, but they almost never announce for the presidency before they feel they have support for a campaign. Usually the hopeful makes it known to the press that he or she will be holding an important press conference on a certain day at a certain time, and the announcement serves as the formal beginning to the campaign.

Step 2: The Presidential Primaries

Candidates for a party's presidential nominees run in a series of presidential primaries, in which they register to run. By tradition, the first primary is held in February of the election year in New Hampshire. States hold individual primaries through June on dates determined ahead of time. Technically, the states are choosing convention delegates, but most delegates abide by the decisions of the voters.

Delegates may be allocated according to proportional representation, with the Democrats mandating this system. The Republicans endorse in some states a winner-take-all system for its delegates. In several states, the delegates are not pledged to any certain delegate. No matter what the system, however, the candidates who win early primaries tend to pick up support along the way, and those that lose generally find it difficult to raise money, and are forced to drop out of the race. The tendency for early primaries to be more important than later ones is called **frontloading**. By the time primaries are over, each party's candidate is almost certainly finalized.

Step 3: The Conventions

The first party convention was held during the presidency of Andrew Jackson by the Democratic Party. It was invented as a democratic or "grass roots" replacement to the old party caucus in which party leaders met together in "smoke-filled rooms" to determine the candidate. Today national party conventions are held in late summer before the general election in November.

Before primaries began to be instituted state by state in the early part of this century, the conventions actually selected the party candidates. Today the primaries determine the candidate, but the convention formally nominates them. Each party determines its methods for selecting delegates, but they generally represent states in proportion to the number of party members in each state.

Even though the real decision is made before the conventions begins, they are still important for stating party platforms, for showing party unity, and for highlighting the candidates with special vice-presidential and presidential candidates' speeches on the last night of the convention. In short, the convention serves as a pep rally for the party, and it attempts to put its best foot forward to the voters who may watch the celebrations on television.

Step 4: Campaigning for the General Election

After the conventions are over, the two candidates then face one another. The time between the end of the last convention and Labor Day used to be seen as a time of rest, but in recent elections, candidates often go right on to the general campaign. Most of the campaign money is spent in the general campaign, and media and election experts are widely used during this time. Because each party wants to win, the candidates usually begin sounding more middle-of-the-road than they did in the primaries, when they were appealing to the party loyalists.

Since 1960 **presidential debates** are often a major feature of presidential elections, giving the candidates free TV time to influence votes in their favor. In recent campaigns, the use of electronic media has become more important, and has had the effect of skyrocketing the cost of campaigns.

CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION REFORM

Two major types of criticisms have emerged in recent years concerning U.S. campaigns and elections: campaign spending and local control of the voting process.

CAMPAIGN SPENDING

Spending for campaigns and elections are criticized for many reasons. Major reforms were passed in 1974 largely as a result of abuses exposed by the Watergate scandal. Other important milestones have been the **1976 Amendments**, ***Buckley v. Valeo***, and the **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002**. **The Reform Act of 1974** has several important provisions:

- A six-person Federal Election Commission was formed to oversee election contributions and expenditures and to investigate and prosecute violators.
- All contributions over \$100 must be disclosed, and no cash contributions over \$100 are allowed.
- No foreign contributions are allowed.
- Individual contributions are limited to \$1,000 per candidate, \$20,000 to a national party committee, and \$5,000 to a political action committee.
- A corporation or other association is allowed to establish a PAC, which has to register six months in advance, have at least fifty contributors, and give to at least five candidates.
- PAC contributions are limited to \$5,000 per candidate and \$15,000 to a national party.
- Federal matching funds are provided for major candidates in primaries, and all campaign costs of major candidates in the general election were to be paid by the government.

The 1976 Amendments allowed corporations, labor unions, and special interest groups to set up **political action committees** (PACs) to raise money for candidates. Each corporation or labor union is limited to one PAC.

Also in 1976 the Supreme Court ruled in ***Buckley v. Valeo*** that limiting the amount that a candidate could spend on his or her own campaign was unconstitutional. The candidate, no less than any other person, has a First Amendment right to engage in the discussion of public issues and vigorously and tirelessly to advocate his own election.

After the election of 1996 criticisms of campaigns became so strong that special congressional hearings were called to investigate them. Among the criticisms was the overall expense of both Democratic and Republican campaigns, since more money was spent in 1996 than in any previous campaign. President Clinton and Vice-President Gore were criticized for soliciting campaign funds from their offices and the

White House, and Attorney General Janet Reno was called on to rule on the legality of their activities. Another major accusation was that contributions were accepted from foreigners, who were suspected of expecting favors for themselves or their countries in return.

Election finance reform was the major theme of Senator John McCain's campaign for the presidency in 2000. McCain particularly criticized **soft money** - funds not specified for candidates' campaigns, but given to political parties for party building activities. McCain and many others claimed that this money made its way into campaigns anyway.

Although McCain did not win the Republican nomination, he carried his cause back to the Senate where he had championed the cause for several years previous to the election. Partly as a result of the publicity during McCain's campaign, a major reform bill passed in 2002.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 banned soft money to national parties and placed curbs on the use of campaign ads by outside interest groups. The limit of \$1000 per candidate contribution was lifted to \$2000, and the maximum that an individual can give to all federal candidates was raised from \$25,000 to \$95,000 over a two-year election cycle. The act did not ban contributions to state and local parties, but limited this soft money to \$10,000 per year per candidate.

ELECTION 2000: LOCAL CONTROL OF THE VOTING PROCESS

The problems with counting the votes in Florida during the 2000 presidential election led to widespread criticism of a long accepted tradition in American politics: local control of the voting process. When Florida's votes were first counted, Republican George W. Bush received only a few hundred more votes than did Democrat Al Gore. An automatic recount narrowed the margin of victory even further. Since the outcome of the election rested on Florida's vote counts, the struggle to determine who actually won was carried out under a national spotlight.

America watched as local officials tried to recount ballots in a system where local voting methods and regulations varied widely. Some precincts had electronic voting machines known for their accuracy and reliability. Others used paper punch ballots that often left hanging chads that meant that those ballots might not be counted by the machines that processed them. The recount process was governed by the broad principle of determining intent to vote that precincts interpreted in different ways. Important questions were raised. Are all votes counted? Are votes in poor precincts that cannot afford expensive voting machines less likely to be counted than are those in affluent areas? Do variations in voting processes subvert the most basic of all rights in a democracy - the right to vote?

The fact that these problems exist in most states across the country caused many to suggest national reform of the voting process. Some advocate nationalizing elections so that all voters use the same types of machines under the same uniform rules. Others have pressured Congress to provide funds for poor precincts to purchase new voting machines. Even the Supreme Court - in its *Bush v. Gore* decision that governed the outcome of the election - suggested that states rethink their voting processes.

THE 527s OF THE ELECTION OF 2004

The 2002 restrictions of contributions to parties led to the 527 phenomenon of the 2004 presidential campaign. These independent but heavily partisan groups gathered millions of dollars in campaign contributions for both Democratic and Republican candidates. So named because of the section of the tax code that makes them tax-exempt, the 527s tapped a long list of wealthy partisans for money, and so set off a debate as to their legality. The Democrats were the first to make use of the 527s, largely because George W. Bush had a much larger chest of hard money for his campaign. However, the Republicans eventually made use of the 527s too. The groups included America Coming Together and the Media Fund on the Democratic side, and Swift Vets and POWs for Truth and Progress for America Voter Fund for the Republicans.

CRITICAL REALIGNING ELECTIONS

Elections may be important milestones in political history, either marking changes in the electorate, or forcing changes themselves. The strength of one political party or another may shift during critical or realigning periods, during which time a lasting shift occurs in the popular coalition supporting one party of the other. A **critical realigning election** marks a significant change in the way that large groups of citizens vote, shifting their political allegiance from one party to the other.

Realignments usually occur because issues change, reflecting new schisms formed between groups. Political scientists see several realignments from the past, during or just after an election, with the clearest realignments taking place after the elections of 1860, 1896, and 1932.

- **The election of 1860** - The Whig party collapsed due to strains between the North and South and the Republicans under Lincoln came to power. Four major candidates ran for the Presidency, but the country realigned by region: North vs. South.
- **The election of 1896** - The issue was economically based. Farmers were hit hard by a series of depressions, and they demanded reforms that would benefit farmers. The Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan, a champion of the farmers, and in so doing, alienated the eastern laborers, and creating an East/West split rather than the old North/South split of the post Civil War Era.
- **The election of 1932** - The issues surrounding the Great Depression created the New Deal coalition, where farmers, urban workers, northern blacks, southern whites, and Jewish voters supported the Democrats. As a result, the Democrats became the dominant party.

Since 1932 political scientists agree on no defining realignments, but a **dealignment** seems to have occurred instead. Rather than shifting loyalties from one party to another, people recently have seemed less inclined to affiliate with a political party at all, preferring to call themselves "independents." The trend may have reversed with the election of 2004, when voters lined up according to red states (Republicans) and blue states (Democrats). In that election the alignments were not only regional, but also urban vs. rural. Many analysts believe that a new alliance may have formed among highly religious people that cuts across traditional faiths, drawing from fundamentalist Protestantism, Catholicism, and even Judaism. These voters identified themselves through their regularly church-going habits, and tended to support Republican candidates for office in 2004.

The expense and length of modern American elections and campaigns have become major issues in politics today. Some recommend that political party spending be more closely monitored, and others believe that overall spending caps must be set. Still others advocate national, not state, control of the primary process in order to reduce the length and expense of campaigns. Whatever the criticisms, American elections and campaigns represent a dynamic and vital link between citizen and government.