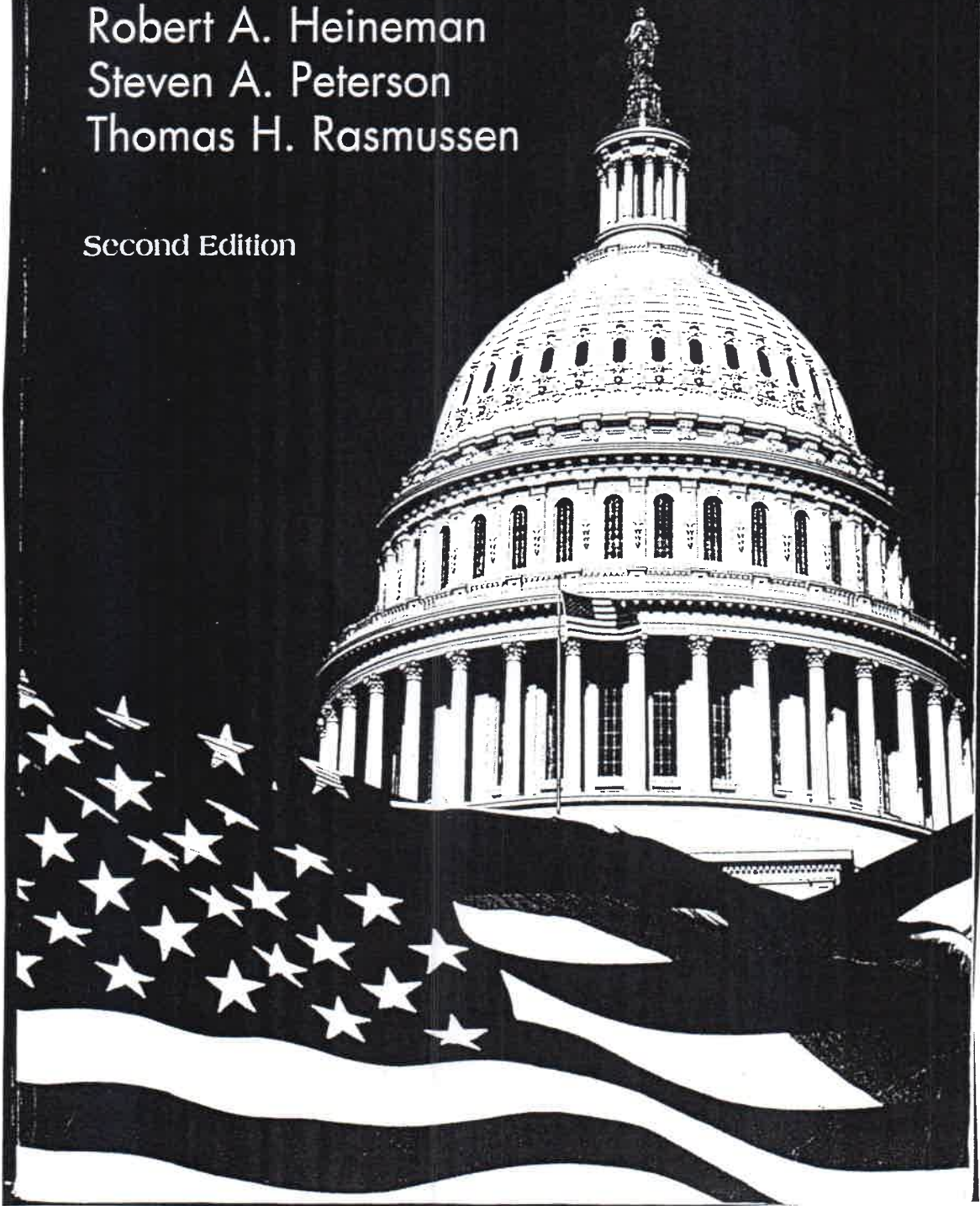


American Government

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Second Edition



Recommended Reading

- Paul Allen Beck and Frank Sorauf: *Party Politics in America*, 7th ed., HarperCollins, New York, 1992.
- John F. Bibby: *Politics, Parties, and Elections in America*, 2d ed., Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1992.
- Walter Dean Burnham: *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, Norton, New York, 1970.
- Everett Carl Ladd, Jr.: *American Political Parties*, Norton, New York, 1970.
- Martin P. Wattenberg: *The Decline of American Political Parties*, 2d ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986.

CHAPTER 6

Voting and Elections

If there is any single institution that both scholars and the mass population consider central for democracy it is elections. The United States has a near mania for them; it is unlikely that any other country has so many. Not only do Americans have the opportunity to elect officials to numerous offices at all levels of government, in some states they can also take part in a special type of election known as a recall, to remove elected officials from office. In addition, some states provide for initiative; if enough signatures are obtained by petition, that issue can be put on a ballot. Once the proposal is on the ballot, the citizens will have the chance to vote for or against it in a referendum. The referendum allows citizens to make laws directly.

The ideal civics textbook model of a citizen is the issue-oriented voter. This person examines the positions of competing candidates on the issues of the day and then votes for the one closest to his or her own views. Most political scientists do not believe that this accurately describes American voters. Weighing against this characterization, they point out, are citizens' low levels of political information, the importance of a person's habitual party identification, and the relative lack of interest in politics.

This chapter examines the structure of elections and the nature of the electorate, presidential and congressional election politics, and some basic issues involved with the American electoral process. The final section considers what elections can say about where power lies in the United States.

The Electorate

Changes in the Electorate

Over time, the American electorate has expanded greatly. In the early years of the republic, adult white men were the eligible electorate; some free black men in northern states were also able to vote. Property requirements in some states further reduced the franchise. In the early third of the nineteenth century, property requirements were loosened, increasing further the right to vote.

The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, approved in 1870, specifically granted the franchise to recently freed black slaves. Some decades after this, southern states moved to restrict blacks from voting, using methods ranging from beatings to literacy tests. Over time, though, the Supreme Court and, later, Congress took initiatives to restore the constitutional right of blacks to vote. The Voting Rights Acts of 1965 had a particularly dramatic effect on black voter turnout in the South. This law called for U.S. government registrars to enter counties with a persistent record of thwarting black voters to register blacks. Shortly after the act went into effect, black voter turnout rates jumped significantly.

Although some states allowed women to vote, it was only in 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, that American women as a group were empowered to vote. This further expanded the size of the electorate. Finally, in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment lowered the voting age to 18.

Who Votes?

Considerable data have been generated to describe the types of people most likely to vote in general elections. Major forces shaping likelihood of voting are education, income, age, government employment, region, and minority status.

Those with more years of education participate in elections at a noticeably higher rate, as do the wealthier. Age has a less clear-cut impact. Looking at the simple relationship between age and voting, we find that turnout goes up until the sixties and drops off thereafter. If, however, we take into account the fact that older Americans are less educated, then the statistics show that turnout rates continue to increase until people enter their late seventies.

Government employees are quite a bit more likely to vote than people in other lines of work, perhaps because their jobs may be at stake. People living in the South vote at lower rates than people elsewhere in the United States.

Minorities, including blacks and Hispanics, turn out less in general elections. Currently, there is no difference in voting rates between men and women.¹ People's political views have a modest impact on turnout rates, even when education and income are taken into account. Republicans are somewhat more likely to vote than Democrats; conservatives or liberals are more likely to vote than moderates. Generally, on their basic political positions, those who vote are similar to the entire population. There is no particular bias.

Recent Trends in Voter Turnout

Turnout rate in presidential elections declined markedly from 1960 to 1988, from about 63 percent to about 50 percent. In 1992, that figure rebounded to 55 percent. Why did turnout decrease steadily only to rise somewhat in 1992? One argument has it that the decline is primarily due to the failure to vote of low-income whites, who have been dropping out of the electorate faster than those who are financially better off. Howard Reiter contends that the poor are turned off or alienated from politics, believing that the system is not responsive to them.² However, this does not appear to be the major factor in turnout decline.

Another perspective points to the effects of two factors—the declining strength of party identification and lowered feelings of political efficacy.³ The stronger one's partisan support, the more likely one is to vote. As Americans' identification with the parties weakened throughout the 1960s and 1970s, so, too, did their turnout. This accounts for about one-quarter of the decline in voting rates. In addition, the belief among Americans that government would respond to them declined. As this aspect of political efficacy declined, so did turnout. If you do not think that government will respond to you, why vote? This trend explains about one-half the decline in presidential election turnout over a 20-year period.

These explanations of the 1960 to 1988 voter turnout decline are in terms of an individual's likelihood to vote. Several characteristics of elections themselves are important in shaping overall turnout rates. First among these is the type of election. Presidential elections produce the highest turnout of all, doubtless because of the extensive media coverage and attendant interest generated. Midterm congressional elections tend to run about 10 percent lower in turnout rates. Primaries lead to the lowest turnout.

Second, if competition between the candidates is great, more people vote. If, on the other hand, one candidate is a runaway leader, turnout tends to drop. Third, registration laws have an impact. Some states make it easier to regis-

ter to vote than others. For instance, in those states with evening and weekend hours and minimal residency requirements (the amount of time one has to reside in an election district before becoming eligible to vote), larger proportions of citizens actually vote.

A fourth element is the effort of parties and groups to mobilize voters to participate in elections. For instance, from 1956 through 1988, if a party contacted a voter, that increased the odds of that person turning out by about 8 percent.⁴

Evidence indicates that the bulk of the decline in turnout from the 1960s through 1988—about 90 percent of the 11 percent drop—can be accounted for by lower “mobilization” as parties and groups put less emphasis on getting out the vote and presidential elections became less competitive. Other factors contributing to the decline were a younger electorate, weakened social involvement, declining sense of political efficacy, and loosened bonds with the political parties. Easing of voter registration and increasing educational levels worked to increase turnout, but their effects were swamped by those contributing to the decline.

Why the rebound in 1992? Mobilization seems important. The race for president was competitive—with the added spice of a popular third-party candidate in Ross Perot. Also, the parties and groups appeared to put extra emphasis on getting people to vote. Finally, of course, voters seemed to care about the election, with change as the mantra in many people’s minds.

The Structure of Elections

The path to elected office has two central obstacles—getting nominated and getting elected.

Getting Nominated

Before getting elected to office, one must become a candidate. This ordinarily means having to win a political party’s nomination. Normally, incumbents are nominated with little opposition. If no incumbent is interested in the nomination, then the struggle to get the party’s label for the general election is more spirited.

The Primary

The basic method for nominating candidates is the primary. A primary is a type of election in which voters select one from among all contenders for a nomination. The primary has weakened the party organization, since a candidate can gain nomination under a party label if he or she garners enough votes

in the primary. Consequently, one can become a party’s nominee without the party organization’s support. This renders candidates less beholden to the organization.

The primary began as a reform to “democratize” the nomination process around the turn of the century. However, relatively few voters turn out, and those who do are not necessarily typical of party supporters as a whole. Other problems may crop up, too. Candidates hostile to a party’s positions may get nominated under the party banner; primaries may produce candidates who can get the support of nonrepresentative primary voters but who are unpopular with the general rank and file; primary contests between candidates may be so heated that the party’s chances of winning the general election decline as bitterness remains. This type of nasty contest is called a divisive primary.

Getting Elected

The Campaign

Once a person is nominated for office, he or she campaigns to gain enough support to win the general election. Campaigns can be exciting, with debates, flashy advertising, speeches, and parades. However, as a rule, campaigns do not convert voters, that is, influence them to change their candidate preference. They are more likely to reinforce people’s preexisting preferences or activate people who may have been thinking about supporting the candidate into actually doing so.

Rules of the Election Game

On election day, citizens troop to the polls to cast their vote, using the Australian (secret) ballot.

Single-Member Districts. The elections for the national legislature in the United States feature single-member districts, in which one person is elected from a particular district. This technique of selecting representatives strongly militates against success by a third party,⁵ as discussed in Chapter 5.

One Person, One Vote. Another important rule of the election game is “one person, one vote.” In *Wesberry v. Sanders* (1964), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the number of voters in different congressional districts in a state ought to be as equal as possible. This means that each person’s vote has the same weight as that of each person in other districts. Prior to this decision, there could be, for instance, 100,000 people in one district and 50,000 in another in the same state. An individual’s vote in the second district would be worth twice that of a person in the first district.

Gerrymandering. Nonetheless, parties can still try to draw district lines in such a way as to benefit their candidates. According to the Constitution, the states define district boundaries for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. After a census, these boundaries may have to be redrawn to comport with the “one person, one vote” rule. If a party controls both houses of the legislature and the governorship, its officials might construct districts in such a way as to benefit candidates of that party. Such a practice is called gerrymandering. For example, if a Democratic incumbent were in a “marginal” district (one in which his or her margin of victory was habitually low) and the state’s officials were mainly Democrats, then the state legislature might add to the district an area from a neighboring district that is heavily Democratic and move a Republican area to another district. The House member would now be in a safe district. There are limitations on gerrymandering—drawing district lines for partisan gain—but a resourceful legislature can benefit one party, although the impact is often overestimated.⁶ Currently, gerrymandering on a partisan basis is mostly designed to help incumbents (an incumbent-protection policy).

Occasionally, one finds strange bedfellows in the battle over gerrymandering. After the 1980 census, the Republican National Committee supported a suit brought by Indiana Democrats against Indiana Republicans for improperly redistricting; simultaneously, the Republicans brought suit in California against the Democrats for precisely the same reason. In the court battle, the California Republicans and Indiana Democrats were, in effect, allied against the Indiana Republicans and California Democrats.

The “New Style” in Campaigning

At one time, the party organization was the central actor in campaigns. The party workers would canvass their precincts, wards, and neighborhoods to get out the vote on behalf of the party’s candidates. In return, the candidates who won would be beholden to the party organization.

Such is no longer the case. In the “new style” of campaigning, which began in the 1960s, the focus is on the candidate, *not* the party. The candidate is a kind of electoral entrepreneur, creating his or her own organization and generating his or her own support—perhaps completely independent of the party organization under whose banner the candidate is running. In a real sense, candidates now rent a campaign. They hire professional campaign consultants, public relations experts, media specialists, pollsters, and advertising people. An entire industry of campaign consultants awaits, eager and willing to be hired by candidates.

The campaign is based on marketing concepts, just as are efforts to sell cereal, deodorants, or party hose. Researchers conduct polls to determine prospective voters’ interests, what voters want in a candidate, and how citi-

zens evaluate different candidates. Then, a campaign is tailored to the specific “market” identified by the research. The media become the most important carriers of candidates’ messages in the new style—not the party faithful as before.

The new style has been defended as a more efficient way of getting information to the voters. Some claim that it enhances democracy by forging tighter links between voters and candidates. The people running for office try to find out the voters’ concerns and then address those concerns. In this sense, linkage is strengthened.

However, there are problems. For one thing, the new style is expensive (for example, buying television time quickly gobbles up huge chunks of campaign funds). For another, it may, as some critics fear, lead to a cynical packaging of candidates, with little care for getting the voters to know the real person behind the candidate. In the end, the new style may be decreed as manipulative. It seems clear that the party organization has suffered considerably at the hands of the new style. What the party can provide is less valued now, so candidates invest less energy in supporting that organization.

Presidential Elections

Presidential elections feature three key steps: party nomination, the campaign for votes in the general election, and the electoral college.

Party Nominations: Primaries, Caucuses, and Conventions

To get the nomination, technically, a presidential candidate must win a majority of delegates at the presidential nominating convention convening the summer before the general elections (the election itself is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November). Each state is allotted a set of delegates to vote for presidential candidates (the formula is different for Republicans and Democrats).

The two means by which delegates are selected in the state are the primary and the caucus.

Primaries

Those states with primaries provide for citizens to vote in a party primary for one candidate or another (the method by which this is done varies considerably across primary states). Normally, a person must be a registered voter of one of the parties to vote in its primary—the closed primary—although other states allow a person to vote in either party’s primary—the open or blanket primary. The votes are tallied and delegates are allocated from the state to the different candidates.

One question is how democratic the primaries actually are. A variety of evidence indicates that turnout is lower in primaries than in the general election. In 1976, about 29 percent of the voting-age population voted in primaries, whereas about 54 percent of the eligible electorate turned out for the Carter-Ford election. Data from other years show that turnout rates in primaries are only about half of those for the actual election.

Furthermore, primary voters are somewhat atypical of the rank and file in general. Those who take part in primaries tend to be middle- and upper-income citizens, more educated, and more strongly attached to their party. Scholars once thought that those who voted in primaries are more strongly liberal or strongly conservative and are more motivated to vote than moderates or slightly liberal or conservative people. That is, Republican candidates would have to appeal to the conservative population and Democratic candidates to liberal constituents, all of which would have distorted the nomination process by underweighing the moderate elements of both parties.⁷ However, more recent evidence indicates that there are no significant ideological differences between primary voters and rank-and-file party members.⁸

Caucuses

Caucuses provide a second mechanism for selecting delegates. One common approach is this: (1) party members meet at the local or precinct level to select delegates to a county convention; (2) a county convention selects delegates to a state convention; (3) the state delegation selects delegates to the national nominating convention.

The key for a candidate to do well in caucus states is to have his or her supporters turn out at the local level to ensure that delegates supporting the candidate are selected to the county convention. A good organization is necessary to get out the voters at the local level.

Participants at local-level caucuses are unrepresentative of the parties' rank and file. In 1976, only about 2 percent of the eligible electorate took part in the caucuses. Those who are involved are more likely to be middle- or upper-class, strongly partisan, and very ideological.⁹

Democratic "Superdelegates"

In 1982, the Democratic party added a new wrinkle to the presidential selection process—the addition of "superdelegates" to the convention roster. Among these superdelegates, allocated to the different states, are governors, big-city mayors, members of Congress, and state party chairs. These people will act as unpledged delegates at the convention, although they may well in actual fact be committed to one candidate or another. In 1984, the superdelegates went predominantly for Walter Mondale, turning a rather narrow vic-

tory in primaries and caucuses into a convincing victory in the convention. Thus, it now seems possible—although probably not very likely—for a candidate to win the nomination who receives fewer delegates via caucuses and primaries but wins the great bulk of the superdelegates,¹⁰ although normally the outcome has been decided by the primary and caucus routes well before the convention.

The Nominating Convention

The convention itself has less significance than it used to in carrying out its primary function—selecting a presidential candidate. Now a majority of delegates normally are pledged to a single candidate before the conventions begin. The conventions are not without value, though. The two parties get considerable free media coverage because networks and newspapers define conventions as news.

The Political Campaign: Presidential and Congressional

The Campaign Organization

Once the parties' candidates are named for the presidency or for Congress, the campaign begins in earnest. The employment of a solid campaign organization is crucial. Key personnel might include a campaign manager, who helps organize and carry out an overall campaign strategy; a fund raiser, who gathers funds on a full-time basis; a lawyer, who advises the campaign on what is demanded by the complex campaign finance laws; consultants, such as media advisors, pollsters, and public relations experts, who provide advice for devising and carrying out a successful campaign strategy; an advance person, who makes arrangements so that candidates get to where they are supposed to be; and the general staff, including policy advisors and researchers who help candidates come up with concrete policy proposals and can "dig up dirt" on opponents and their positions.

Campaign Expenditures

Campaigns cost money—and the new style of campaigning with its emphasis on media has a voracious appetite. Campaign expenditures have increased faster than inflation in recent years. To prevent abuses in raising money for campaigns, Congress passed the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 and several amendments thereafter, with the 1974 amendments being the most central. This act includes the following provisions:

1. *Disclosure reports.* Candidates and campaign committees must file detailed reports outlining sources of funds and where money is spent.

2. *A presidential campaign fund.* Taxpayers check a box on their income tax returns if they wish to have \$3 of their taxes go into a general campaign fund to be allocated among eligible presidential candidates.
3. *Federal funding of presidential campaigns.* Candidates can receive money from the campaign fund, up to 50 percent of their expenses in prenomination campaigning and 100 percent for the general election. In return, candidates must limit total spending to a certain amount stipulated by the law. Candidates who do not use federal funds may spend unlimited amounts.
4. *Creation of a Federal Election Commission.* This body oversees the law to make sure that its requirements are observed by the candidates.
5. *Approving the creation of political action committees (PACs).* Previous laws prohibited corporations and unions from directly contributing money to campaigns. Now, such organizations can create PACs to raise and disburse funds to parties and candidates.

The results of the reform laws are fairly clear. Greater monitoring of where candidates get money and how they spend it reduces the odds of corruption, since all monies have to be accounted for. The reforms have slowed the increase in spending on presidential elections. Finally, and most unexpectedly, PACs have exploded in number. Many more organizations and groups formed PACs than had been anticipated, and they now provide a major portion of campaign contributions, a fact which has led to much controversy.

Do campaign contributions affect government officials' decisions? One study suggests that PACs can influence roll-call votes of U.S. representatives.¹¹ Members of the House who received contributions from PACs tended to become more supportive of PACs' positions on legislation. The effect was most pronounced for those who had been relatively neutral before. It is not proper to infer that the votes were bought, however. What probably happened was that the PACs "bought" access to the legislator, who, out of courtesy to a supporter, allowed PAC representatives to make their case directly to him or her. Information can be persuasive; hence, this access increases the chances of a member of Congress coming to support the group. One factor diminishing the impact of contributions was that PACs generally supported those who already voted for their interests rather than those who were neutral. Significantly, the great bulk of contributions went to incumbents.

Moneyed interests may also influence Congress in other ways. For instance, it appears that interest-group lobbying may affect committee work by members of Congress more than do the voters themselves.¹²

Media and Campaigns

Media, including advertising, newspaper endorsements, and televised debates, are important forces in elections.

Advertising. Generally, ads reinforce preexisting preferences; few people change their minds because of advertising. This is especially so in presidential elections. More important, advertisements may provide potential voters with knowledge about the candidates. In fact, Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure found that televised presidential ads gave more information on issue positions to voters than did television newscasts.¹³ The latter tends to focus on the "horse race" aspects of elections and ignore issues and candidate qualifications. Television ads may even help diminish the knowledge gap between the most and least informed voters.

In congressional elections, television advertising also has an important role to play. The more that people are exposed to ads, the greater is their knowledge of the candidate being "sold," the greater is their interest in the campaign, and the more likely they are to come to like the candidate being advertised. Candidate advertising also helps set the election agenda; issues emphasized in commercials tend to be issues voters come to deem as most important. Incumbents can spend more money on television advertising; hence they receive a further advantage over challengers. Ads have greater impact if they are repeated often and are entertaining. However, last-minute television programs paid for by parties or candidates affect more voters' choices. Tactically, then, a last-minute television blitz in a close election can make a difference.¹⁴

Media Endorsements. Normally, the Republican candidates for president receive more newspaper endorsements than Democratic candidates. The candidate being endorsed receives a modest boost in support (although if competition exists in a newspaper market and different papers endorse different candidates, there is no net change). In congressional elections, endorsements affect the vote indirectly, by raising a candidate's name recognition. Since to know a candidate is to like him or her, endorsements translate into votes.¹⁵

Televised Debates. Six presidential campaigns have featured televised debates—1960, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992. While the debates may not change the course of an election, they do have an impact on voters.

1. Debates may enhance or diminish candidates' images. John F. Kennedy no longer was seen as too young and inexperienced in 1960; Ronald Reagan's performance in 1980 helped dispel the notion that he could not keep facts straight; Michael Dukakis's dispassionate rendering

of what he would do if his wife were murdered hurt his image in the 1988 election; Bill Clinton came across as the overall debate winner in 1992, dispelling some doubts that people had about him.

2. Debates can yield higher information levels. Studies of the 1976 and 1984 debates conclude that viewers learned more about the candidates and had a clearer sense of the differences between them. Debates also seem to stimulate political discussion, as they did in 1960.

Not surprisingly, viewing debates diminishes the knowledge gap between the most and least informed citizens. Those who followed politics least in 1976 gained the greatest amount of information about the candidates; those who read papers regularly and already had elevated levels of information learned much less.

Data suggest that the major effects on voters' choices are reinforcement and activation; little conversion takes place.¹⁶

People's preexisting candidate preferences shape their judgments of who won or lost a debate. For instance, in 1980, individuals believed that their preferred candidate won.¹⁷ An exception to this is 1984's first debate. Ronald Reagan did very badly, as even his supporters recognized. Nonetheless, voter preferences remained relatively unchanged.

The Electoral College

In presidential elections, voters do not directly elect the winner. Rather, their votes select electors, who, in turn, select the president. Each state is allotted a set of electors equal to the number of senators (2) plus the number of representatives from that state. The largest states consequently have the greatest weight, with California holding the most (54). Lightly populated Alaska and Wyoming have 3 electoral votes each. The Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution details the process. Electors meet in their home state and note their votes for president and vice president. Since selection of electors is on a winner-take-all basis, the electors' vote from the state is unanimous. The results are sent to Washington, where the president of the Senate counts the electoral votes. Whichever slate wins a majority is named the winner.

What if there is no majority? The House of Representatives steps in to choose a president. Each state casts one vote, so its delegation meets to decide for whom to cast that state's vote. The candidate who gets a majority (26) of all the states becomes president. A similar process works in the case of a vice president, except that here the Senate selects the winner. Each senator casts his or her vote, and the person receiving the majority (51) of all senators' support becomes vice president.

Today a candidate must receive 270 electoral votes to gain the necessary majority. The last time an election went to the House of Representatives was 1824, when John Quincy Adams defeated Andrew Jackson. Close contests in 1960, 1968, and 1976 led some to fear that there would be no clear victor in the electoral college; however, in each of those elections a majority emerged for the winning candidate.

For presidential candidates, the electoral college shapes campaign strategy. One has to "go where the ducks are," the most populous states. Indeed, presidential candidates do spend more time in such states than in the less populated ones.

What Shapes Voters' Choices?

Presidential Elections

The Three-Factor Explanation of Voting

The standard approach to analyzing voter choice is to weigh the long-term force of *party identification* (called long-term because it tends to persist in individuals from election to election) against the short-term forces of *issue positions* and *candidate evaluation* (called short-term because they can change from election to election).

In the 1950s, party identification was the dominant force shaping individuals' voting choices. However, its importance has declined since then. By the middle 1960s, issue voting began to increase. Issue voting refers to voters' examination of the issue positions of candidates and comparison of those with their own stance. Such voters select the candidate who ranks closest to their own views. Issue voting in elections from 1952 to the present peaked in 1972, but it seems to have declined since then. In fact, in 1984 many voted for Ronald Reagan despite their policy/issue disagreement with him. The third factor, candidate evaluation, has been a powerful force all along.

The Six-Factor Explanation of Voting

A more recent approach to explaining how people vote considers candidates' past performance (retrospective evaluations), their likely future performance, their past issue positions, their future policy stands, their attributes (such as personal integrity), and the voter's party identification. With these six factors, as Miller and Borelli contend, one can statistically examine what is most important for predicting voter's choices at the polls.¹⁸

How has this six-factor approach worked in recent presidential elections?

1980. Jimmy Carter gained votes from party identification (there were more Democrats than Republicans) and perceived candidate attributes (voters were uncertain about Reagan's command of facts and his age, for instance).

On other factors, Ronald Reagan had the advantage over President Carter. Most significant of all factors was retrospective performance. Simply, voters felt that Carter had not done a good job. On the remaining factors, Reagan enjoyed some advantage over Carter. Reagan reflected a more conservative mood among the public, although his mandate was only modest. He did receive 51 percent of the popular vote (Jimmy Carter and third-party candidate John Anderson split the rest)—but 49 percent of the American people who bothered to vote did *not* support him.

In the final analysis, 1980 represents a rejection of Jimmy Carter by voters on the grounds of his perceived poor record as president and a reflection of a conservative mood (to end shortly thereafter).¹⁹ Reagan was not viewed in particularly positive terms. One could conclude that the outcome was to a considerable extent “ABC”—“Anyone but Carter.”

1984. Oddly enough, in 1984, only one of the six factors operated in President Reagan’s favor—retrospective performance. Americans evaluated Reagan’s past performance very positively and Walter Mondale’s very negatively (voters associated him with what they saw as a flawed Carter presidency—Mondale, after all, had been Carter’s vice president).

All the other factors worked on Mondale’s behalf. Voters’ party identification (again, 1984, more people defined themselves as Democrats than as Republicans) was most important. Next was retrospective policy; voters indicated that they were not enchanted with Reagan’s policies. They felt that he had moved too far toward conservatism, and this yielded an electoral benefit for Mondale. With prospective policy, voters had a mild preference for Mondale’s future policy proposals over Reagan’s. The conservative mood that had peaked in 1980 had begun receding by 1982, and Reagan was no longer in complete tune with this change in mood.²⁰ Least influential of all was prospective performance, for which Mondale, by the tiniest amount, was preferred over Reagan. Consequently, although Reagan benefited from only one item, retrospective performance, approval of his work (and disapproval of Mondale’s performance as associated with Carter) was enough to provide a resounding victory.

Miller and Borrelli conclude by noting of 1984:

While Reagan received the most positive evaluation for retrospective performance of any incumbent president during the past three decades, he was also the most negatively assessed on the retrospective policy dimension. The preponderance of 19 percent more negative than positive comments regarding the policies he enacted during his first term in office represents, by all historic comparisons, an astounding rejection of his con-

servative program. No other presidential candidate, incumbent or challenger, received such a clearly negative appraisal from the public of either past or prospective policies. Yet he was reelected to the office in a landslide. How did that happen?

Contrary to much speculation . . . that landslide victory cannot be accounted for by Reagan’s supposedly overwhelming personal appeal. No doubt Reagan received predominantly positive evaluations for his strong leadership and charismatic style . . . , but that appeal was offset by the public perception that he lacked compassion and was unconcerned and uninformed about much of what went on in government. . . .

Reagan’s popular appeal rests on his past performance and success in office, rather than his personal characteristics or conservative policies, as the media have tried to suggest.²¹

1988. By 1988, the mood in America, as reported in Chapter 4, was rapidly becoming more liberal—yet George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis. How could this be? It appears that Dukakis had the advantage primarily in two areas: party identification (more Americans called themselves Democrats than Republicans, but by a smaller margin than prior to the Reagan years) and candidate attributes (Bush was seen as cool and distant and removed from the affairs of ordinary people). On the other hand, Bush’s single greatest strength was retrospective performance. People associated him with the Reagan administration, and they still evaluated the former president’s performance positively. Although the mood of the country was moving to the left, people felt Bush’s positions to be closer to theirs than were Dukakis’s. The “Willie Horton” ad, for example, reinforced many people’s sense that Dukakis was out of step on the issue of crime. Prospectively, the mood was becoming more liberal, but Dukakis was unable to take advantage of this.²²

1992. This election has some similarities to that of 1980. At least one element of this election might be referred to as the “ABB” (“Anyone but Bush”) effect. One analyst was uncharitable enough to refer to George Bush as “the most ineffective person to occupy the White House since the creation of the modern presidency by Franklin Roosevelt.”²³ This kind of commentary suggests that retrospective performance would *not* play in favor of the Republicans this time around. Kathleen Frankovic simply notes that “1992 turned out to be a very simple election. It was a referendum on the incumbent president—and George Bush lost.”²⁴

In this election, despite his encounters with stories of marital infidelity and draft evasion, Bill Clinton was viewed more positively than either George Bush or Ross Perot in terms of his personal attributes; Clinton “caught the

“wave” of the more liberal mood (introducing a mandate quality into the election results, much as with Ronald Reagan in 1980); Clinton was closer to the American people on the issues that the public wanted addressed (prospective policy); Clinton gained a slight advantage on party identification.²⁵ This election was, in two key respects, similar to that in 1980: first, retrospective performance evaluations torpedoed an incumbent president; second, the challenger better captured the public’s ideological mood. Thus, in both elections, performance (“What have you done lately?”) and ideology (the public’s mood) played a role. Both elections can be seen as laying the groundwork for rather weak mandates—but mandates nonetheless.

Third-Party Presidential Voting

Sometimes, of course, Americans vote for neither the Republican nor the Democratic candidate for president. Why would people seemingly throw away their vote for a candidate who has normally no chance of winning? Voting for a third-party candidate is hardly a common event. Still, Eugene McCarthy received 756,691 votes in 1976; John Anderson won 5,720,000 in 1980; David Bergland (Libertarian party) had 228,314 in 1984; Ron Paul (Libertarian) garnered 432,179 votes in 1988; H. Ross Perot (United We Stand) picked up an astonishing 19,741,048 in 1992. The electorate’s perception that the two major parties are not addressing major problems goes with increased voting for third-party candidates in the 50 American states. More populous states have lower levels of third-party voting; closer contests for president reduce third-party voting.²⁶

Congressional Elections

As with presidential elections, both short- and long-term forces influence voting choices in congressional elections. Especially with respect to the House of Representatives, incumbency must be accorded great weight. Voters have less information about Senate races than presidential races, however, and even less about contests for the House of Representatives. Congressional elections are just not that important to them. In 1972, for instance, 63 percent of a sample of Americans said they cared a lot about the presidential election—but only 39 percent cared a lot about congressional races.

It is to be expected, then, that issues are not as important in congressional races as in presidential elections. Issues have only half the impact in elections for the House as for president (the Senate ranks in between). Candidate evaluations play a limited role, too. When voters are asked what they do or do not like about House candidates, perceptions of personal characteristics (especially trustworthiness and competence) were found to weigh very heav-

ily—more so than for senatorial or presidential contenders. Since House incumbents work so hard to gain the trust of their constituents, this is hardly a surprising finding.

A key variable influencing people’s votes in congressional elections is party identification. Voters tend to rank candidates sharing their party label more positively than those under the opposition’s banner. However, over time, an increasing number of voters have “defected” from their party identification to support the other candidate. Why? It seems that defecting is tied to voter support for incumbents. Many people are willing to vote against their party if the incumbent represents the other party. This incumbency effect is less pronounced in the Senate than in the House, although it still exists.

Incumbents, especially in the House, have much higher name recognition than their opponents. Most analysts of Congress conclude that to know anything about a candidate is to like him or her, so, consequently, incumbents have a huge built-in advantage. In the House, challengers of incumbents are generally not well known. One result is 90 percent or better reelection success rates for House incumbents—even in a year like 1992, in which there was said to be an “anti-incumbency” mood. The reelection rate is lower for Senate incumbents, apparently because their challengers are more likely to have considerable name recognition (such as former governors).²⁷

What leads to the incumbency effect? Two primary causes are normally identified: errand running for constituents and bringing back to the district federal funding for projects that will benefit the constituency. However, the picture is probably not quite this simple.

Incumbents often act as errand runners for their constituents, carrying out “casework” to help people with problems. For example, if a citizen on social security does not get his or her check on time, that person may contact the House member. The representative (or, more likely, an assistant), in turn, contacts the Social Security Administration to see what has gone wrong. Finally, the agency responds to the congressional inquiry and mails the check out. The result is one happy constituent who will now supposedly support the incumbent. An astonishing number of people ask for help from their representatives; one survey finds that 22 percent of those interviewed claim to have requested assistance from their representatives. Moreover, 28 percent said that they had heard of others who had asked for help.²⁸ Evidence indicates that casework does increase victory margins²⁹—but perhaps not in as straightforward a way as many believe.

Members of Congress also can try to bring federal dollars and jobs into their districts through “pork barrel” legislation and then claim credit for this bounty. One common means of “bringing home the pork” is to get support for

the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which builds dams, widens river channels, and constructs flood-control projects. Winning and losing elections (especially for House incumbents) is largely a local event, based on how good an errand runner, “pork” provider, and credit claimer the incumbent is.

However, the success of incumbents is probably not due directly to this hard work on behalf of constituents.³⁰ They scare off strong challengers by bringing home the pork, by errand running, by publicizing (advertising) their good deeds for the district. Incumbents also build up large campaign war chests. As a result, incumbents tend to face weak challengers with low name recognition, who serve as “cannon fodder” for the incumbent. Potentially strong challengers decide to wait for another time, when conditions are ripe for winning. After all, why endanger a promising career by running against an incumbent who has a satisfied constituency and formidable electoral financial resources?

In addition, there appears to be a party effect—with Republicans generally offering less attractive and weaker candidates to challenge incumbents than do the Democrats. Here may be one hidden reason for the continuing Democratic hegemony in the House of Representatives.³¹ Indeed, some Republican winners may not easily learn how to play the game of casework and district attentiveness—thus reducing their odds of reelection.

U.S. senators, for example, tend to vote their own way until the two years before their reelection quest; then they moderate their positions in order to gain electoral support.³² However, southern Republican conservatives elected for the first time to the Senate in 1980 did not moderate their positions and did not carry out any significant casework—and they went down in flames in 1986.³³ Other Republican conservatives, such as New York’s Alphonse D’Amato (known as “Pothead Al” for his virtuosity as a caseworker), who learned the casework lessons, went on to successful reelection. A related point: Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives tend to retire from that body sooner than their Democratic counterparts. Thus, incumbency is less of a resource for the House Republicans as a whole than for their Democratic peers.³⁴

There is some role for national concerns in congressional elections; they are not solely local events. If voters judge the country’s economic condition as bad, incumbents of the president’s party will lose some support; in some cases, this translates into defeat.³⁵ Some evidence suggests that if voters believe that the president is generally not doing a good job, they tend not to vote for candidates of the president’s party in midterm elections. This also adds a national component to congressional elections.³⁶

Divided Government: The Voters’ Choice?

As we noted in Chapter 5, in recent decades the norm has been a government divided between Democrats controlling Congress and Republicans holding the White House. Indeed, Bill Clinton’s election as a Democrat with a Democratic Congress appears unusual in these times. Is there any sensible explanation in terms of voter behavior for divided government’s having been so common in recent years?

One argument is quite straightforward: It is *not* gerrymandering; it is *not* simply casework; it is *not* presidential approval or disapproval; it is *not* coattails; it is *not* just the bursting campaign war chests of incumbents. Rather, it is political. As Gary Jacobson, a leading congressional election scholar, has put it, “You can’t beat somebody with nobody.”³⁷ And Republicans tend to field poor-quality challengers against Democratic incumbents.

Furthermore, the voters may be leery of entrusting full control of government to either party. While they see Republicans as more frugal and as wanting to put the lid on tax increases, they also see Republicans as not particularly concerned about ordinary citizens and as likely to cut popular programs. At the same time, they see Democrats as apt to tax and spend—but also to defend the programs that they like. In fact, according to this argument, Americans see both parties as too far from the middle of the road. Hence, one solution is to create gridlock—to elect the Republican candidate for president to restrain excessive Democratic taxing and spending, but to counter by electing Democrats to control Congress in order to prevent draconian Republican cuts in programs. Is this asking too much of the voters? The evidence is certainly not yet clear, but this is one argument that merits consideration.³⁸

What are the consequences of divided government? David Mayhew’s research suggests that divided government *per se* does not seem to reduce the amount of innovative policy-making enacted by the national government.³⁹ Other research indicates that when one party controls the presidency and the other Congress, Supreme Court decisions are apt to be more moderate in civil liberties and civil rights decisions, suggesting that divided government leads to more moderate justices being appointed.⁴⁰

Why, then, did voters end their romance with divided government in 1992? To a large extent, theirs was a retrospective performance evaluation of George Bush—and they did not like what he had done for them lately. Also, Bill Clinton did appear to catch the ideological mood of the public better than George Bush did. And, perhaps, voters became somewhat tired of what the media kept referring to as “gridlock.”

Voting, Elections, and Public Policy

Do elections influence government decisions? To do so, several conditions would have to be met:

1. Candidates must take different positions on the issues of the day. If the candidates held the same views, it would make little difference who was elected.
2. Candidates have to try to carry out their campaign promises. If candidates do not, then those who vote for them on the basis of those promises will not have their preferences enacted.
3. Voters must be able to discern differences between candidates and vote on the basis of issue positions.

Differences between Candidates

An often heard comment is that “there ain’t a nickel’s worth of difference” between candidates or between parties. This can be called the “weedledum-weedledee” perspective. One argument on its behalf comes from the work of Anthony Downs.⁴¹ Figure 6.1 summarizes Down’s logic. If one assumes that most voters are ideologically moderate, then rational parties (or candidates) will take the middle-of-the-road position, where the votes are. This results in parties (or candidates) promulgating similar positions. Others point out that candidates will take ambiguous positions on controversial issues to gain support without arousing opposition. For instance, both Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon advocated “peace with honor,” an ambiguous position, in Vietnam in 1968. Thus, American voters were unable to distinguish between the two men on what the citizens saw as the most important issue of the day.⁴² However, other evidence suggests that there are often discernible differences between candidates. Certainly Ronald Reagan did not adopt middle-of-the-road positions in his quest for the presidency. More generally, in presidential elections, it seems that there are predictable divergences between the two parties’ platform promises. For example, Republicans tend to point toward better management of government, Democrats toward a pro-labor, sympathetic social welfare position.⁴³

Carrying Out Campaign Promises

Sometimes candidates, on being elected, do not carry out their promises. John Kennedy proposed to close the “missile gap” with the Soviet Union—a very difficult promise to carry out given that there was no missile gap (unless,

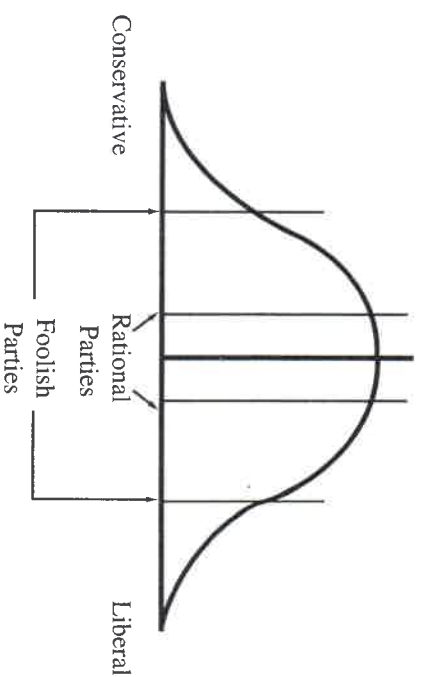


Fig. 6.1 Source: Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper & Row, New York, 1957.

of course, one notes that the United States had a substantial advantage over the Soviet Union)! Lyndon Johnson claimed that he would not introduce American troops into Vietnam in large numbers when, in fact, he and his advisors were planning to do exactly that. More recently, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both asserted that they would balance the federal budget (although this is probably not so much a broken promise as one beyond their ability to fulfill). George Bush wanted people to read his lips—“No new taxes.” Bill Clinton assured the middle class that they would receive a tax reduction.

Statistically, however, the evidence indicates that promises are generally redeemed. One study reports that in presidential elections, the party winning the presidency carries out 75 percent of its promises and ignores only about 10 percent. Indeed, even the losing party is able to carry out a reasonable proportion of its promises.⁴⁴

Voters’ Ability to Vote on the Basis of Differences

Voters also have a responsibility if elections are to guide public policy. One requirement is that they be aware of candidates’ positions on the issues. As described in Chapter 4 and in previous sections of this chapter, this criterion is, at best, only partially met. In presidential elections, as we have seen, voters tend to know something of basic issues; with House races, there is little issue awareness. Yet if a presidential incumbent is running for reelection, voting is likely to be based on “approval”—not issues. Although the electorate

was moving in a rather more conservative direction by 1980, that was only part of the reason that Ronald Reagan won. Ironically, in 1984, the president won big even though the public disagreed with his policy positions.

In House of Representative contests, where incumbency is a key factor, there seems to be rather little issue content. One can hardly blame the voter, by the way, for not doing a lot of issue voting in congressional races. After all, representatives serve as errand runners, bearers of “pork,” and the like. If incumbents tend not to emphasize issues, the electorate cannot be expected to do so. Indeed, in Senate elections, incumbents become much more moderate in their roll-call voting in the two years before the election—as if trying to “curry favor” with the voters, effectively “tricking” them,⁴⁵ thus making effective issue voting that much more difficult!

So What?

Do elections make a difference? Evidence indicates that the national economy is influenced. From 1950 to 1983, when a Democrat resided in the White House, unemployment rates were lower; a Democratic Congress goes with greater transfers in income from the better-off to the less well-off. The overall effect is a reduction in the income gap between rich and poor.⁴⁶ In those years in which there is a Democratic president and the number of nonsouthern Democrats in Congress increases due to electoral fortunes, social spending is stimulated.⁴⁷ Since World War II, we find that when Republicans control the White House, inflation seems to decline, as the administration places more concern on keeping the economy from overheating, whereas unemployment tends to decline with Democratic administrations, as they speak to the interests of their electoral base.⁴⁸

Elections are considered to be one prerequisite for representative democracy. That elected officials so assiduously court voters in the United States is one measure of the significance of elections. Two of the three requirements for the vote to serve as a guide to policy seem fairly well met, thereby supporting the idea that elections can be democratic instruments.

Elite theorists can point to the type of people who become candidates—upper-middle-class or upper-class, well-educated, white men. Those who run for office and hold office are not typical of Americans at large. Further, the voters who select candidates in primaries (and presidential caucuses) tend to be from higher strata and atypical of the larger citizenry.

Pluralists point out that candidates try to build coalitions large enough to attain electoral success. They seek the support of different groups.

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