

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The long and arduous campaign required of presidential hopefuls is unique to the United States. While some argue that this extended period is a useful testing ground, others question its effectiveness in helping citizens choose the best candidate. This chapter discusses the structure and dynamics of presidential election campaigns, with special attention given to the role of money in campaigns.

THE NOMINATION GAME

There are two types of campaigns in American politics: campaigns for party nominations and campaigns between the nominees. A **nomination** is a party's official endorsement of a candidate for office. Success in the nomination game generally requires money, media attention, and momentum. Candidates attempt to manipulate each of these elements through **campaign strategy**. The goal of the nomination game is to win the majority of delegates' support at the **national party convention**.

From February through June of election year, the individual *state parties* choose their delegates to the national convention through caucuses or primaries. At one time, all states selected their delegates to the national convention in a meeting of state party leaders, called a **caucus**. Today, caucuses are open to all voters who are registered with the party. The Democrats also require strict adherence to complex rules of representation. Only a minority of states hold caucuses today, with the earliest caucus traditionally held in Iowa.

Today, most of the delegates to the national conventions are selected in **presidential primaries**, in which voters in a state go to the polls and vote for a candidate or for delegates pledged to a candidate.

The most recent restructuring of Democratic party primaries began in 1968. Riots at the Democratic National Convention that year led to the creation of the **McGovern-Fraser Commission**, which established open procedures and quota requirements for delegate selection. The party has since replaced most of its quota requirements with affirmative action guidelines, with the exception that each delegation must be half male and half female. Many believe that the divisiveness of the Democrats' open procedures has hurt their ability to unite for the fall campaign, and the party has tried to restore a role for its party leaders by setting aside a portion of delegate slots for party leaders and elected officials (known as **superdelegates**).

The primary season begins in the winter in New Hampshire. At this early stage, the campaign is not for delegates but for *images*. **Frontloading** refers to the recent tendency of states to hold primaries early in the calendar in order to capitalize on media attention. A wide variety of different procedures are used because *state laws* (not federal) determine when primaries are held, and each state party sets up its own rules for how delegates are allocated.

There are a number of criticisms of the primary system, including the disproportionate amount of attention that is given to the early caucuses and primaries. Running for the presidency has become a full-time job, and prominent politicians find it difficult to take time out from their duties to run. Money plays too big a role in the caucuses and primaries. Participation is low and is not representative of the voting population. There are also numerous defenders of the system, including most of the candidates—many of whom feel that the primary contest keeps candidates in touch with the public.

The idea of holding a **national primary** to select party nominees has been discussed virtually ever since state primaries were introduced. According to its proponents, a national primary would bring directness and simplicity to the process for the voters as well as the candidates. The length of the campaign would be shortened, and no longer would votes in one state have more political impact than votes in another. Critics claim that because Americans would not want a candidate nominated with 25 percent of the vote from among a field of six candidates, in most primaries a runoff election between the top two finishers in each party would have to be held. Another common criticism of a national primary is that only well-established politicians would have a shot at breaking through in such a system.

Perhaps more feasible than a national primary is holding a series of **regional primaries** in which, say, states in the eastern time zone would vote one week, those in the central time zone the next, and so on. Recently, the National Association of Secretaries of State (the organization of the leading election officials of the states) endorsed a plan to establish regional primaries for the 2004 campaign. The major problem with the regional primary proposal, however, is the advantage gained by whichever region goes first.

The winners of presidential nominations are usually a foregone conclusion by the time of the national party conventions. The preferences of delegates selected in primaries and open caucuses are known before the conventions begin. Nevertheless, conventions are a *significant rallying point* for the parties and they are important in *developing the party's policy positions* as expressed in the **party platforms** and in *promoting political representation*.

THE CAMPAIGN GAME

Modern campaigning is *heavily dependent on technology*. As one of its most important uses, computer technology targets mailings to prospective supporters. The technique of **direct mail** involves locating potential supporters by sending information and a request for money to huge lists of people who have supported candidates of similar views in the past. Direct mail induces millions of people each year to contribute to various candidates and political causes, totaling over \$1 billion. The accumulation of mailing lists enables a candidate to pick almost any issue and write to a list of people concerned about it.

The media focuses heavily on the “horse race,” meaning who is leading and who is winning. Usually, less attention is given to substantive policy issues.

Once nominated, candidates concentrate on **campaigning** for the **general election** in November. Three ingredients are needed to project the right image to the voters: a high-tech media campaign, organization, and money.

MONEY, ORGANIZATION, AND CAMPAIGNING

Most voters imagine that campaigns are staffed primarily by people with great expertise in policy matters, government, and political science. Campaigns do hire such advisers. However, increasingly the modern “high-tech campaign” is staffed with people with professional skills in fund-raising, law, the media, volunteer recruitment and organization, logistics, polling, press relations, the Internet, etc. All of this, not to mention the media buys, takes a lot of money.

Thus, campaigns are growing more and more expensive. Candidates with the most money can build better campaign organizations and better get their message out. There is a common *perception that money buys votes* and influence.

In the early 1970s, momentum developed for *campaign financing reform*. Several public interest lobbies led the drive for reform. Congress subsequently passed the **Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA)** in 1974 with the goals of *tightening reporting requirements for contributions* and *limiting overall expenditures*. A bipartisan **Federal Election Commission (FEC)** was created to administer campaign finance laws and enforce compliance with their requirements. Among other provisions, the act provided public financing for presidential primaries and general elections, and limits were established for presidential campaign spending. The FEC and its subsequent amendments:

- Created the Federal Election Commission (FEC).
- Created the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.
- Provided public financing for presidential primaries and general elections.
- Limited presidential campaign spending.
- Required disclosures.
- Limited contributions.

Another amendment to the FECA made it easier for political parties to raise money for voter registration drives and the distribution of campaign material at the grass roots level or for generic party advertising. Money raised for such purposes was known as **soft money** and was not subject to any contribution limits. However, the soft money loophole was closed in 2002, only to prompt the rise of “**527 groups**” who are unlimited because they do not *directly* endorse candidates.

Campaign spending reforms have made campaigns more open and honest. All contribution and expenditure records are open, and FEC auditors try to make sure that the regulations are enforced. However, campaign reforms also encouraged the spread of **Political Action Committees (PACs)**. A PAC is formed when a business association, or some other interest group, decides to contribute to candidates whom it

believes will be favorable toward its goals. Any interest group can now form its own PAC to directly channel contributions of up to \$5,000 per candidate.

PACs have proliferated in recent years and play a major role in paying for expensive campaigns. Critics of the PAC system believe that this has led to a system of open graft. They fear that the large amount of money controlled by PACs leads to PAC control over what the winners do once they are in office. On the other hand, this chapter notes that the perception that PACs control officeholders may be misleading since *most PACs give money to candidates who already agree with them*. The impact of PAC money on presidents is even more doubtful since presidential campaigns are partly subsidized by the public and presidents have well-articulated positions on most important issues.

Money is critical to electoral victory. In this era of high-tech politics, pollsters, public relations people, direct-mail consultants, and many other specialists are crucial to a campaign. Perhaps the most basic complaint about money and politics is that there may be a *direct link between dollars spent and votes received*.

THE IMPACT OF CAMPAIGNS

Political scientists have found that campaigns have three major *effects on voters*: reinforcement, activation, and conversion. Campaigns can reinforce voters' preferences for candidates; they can activate voters, getting them to contribute money or become active in campaigns; and they can convert by changing voters' minds. However, campaigns rarely convert—they *primarily reinforce and activate*. Political scientists' emphasis on reinforcement and activation reflects the fact that most people pay relatively little attention to campaigns in the first place. People have a remarkable capacity for **selective perception**, paying most attention to things they already agree with and interpreting events according to their own predispositions.

UNDERSTANDING NOMINATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

The American political system *allows citizens a voice at almost every point* of the election process, unlike many countries where a political elite controls nominations and elections. As a result, party outsiders can get elected in a way that is virtually unknown outside the United States. The process has also led to what some call "the permanent campaign" and what Martin Wattenberg has termed the "candidate-centered age." Some analysts believe the process of openness places numerous demands on citizens; many are overwhelmed by the process and do not participate.

States are the key battlegrounds of presidential campaigns. To secure votes from each region of the country, candidates end up supporting a variety of local interests. The way modern campaigns are conducted is thus one of many reasons why politicians usually find it easier to expand the scope of American government than to limit it.