

- Establish how elections may affect public policy and how public policy may affect elections.
- Analyze how elections influence the scope of government in a democracy.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Elections *socialize* and *institutionalize* political activity, making it possible for most political participation to be peacefully channeled through the electoral process. Because elections provide regular access to political power, leaders can be replaced without being overthrown. American voters rarely question the fairness of election results, allowing officeholders to govern with a **legitimacy** they can take for granted. This chapter focuses on how elections work in the United States, who votes, and how individuals make their voting decisions.

HOW AMERICAN ELECTIONS WORK

Unlike most other democracies, the United States has *three kinds of elections*: those which select *party nominees*, those which select *officeholders* from among the nominees, and those in which voters engage in *making or ratifying legislation*. Elections in most other countries perform only the function of selecting officeholders.

At present, there is no constitutional provision for specific policy questions to be decided by a nationwide vote. Procedures allowing the public to pass legislation directly have been in effect for quite some time in many American states. There are two methods for getting items on a state ballot. The first is via a **referendum** whereby voters are given the chance to approve or disapprove some legislative act, bond issue, or constitutional amendment proposed by the legislature. The second method is through an **initiative petition**, which typically requires gaining signatures on a proposed law equal to 10 percent of the number of voters in the previous election.

A TALE OF THREE ELECTIONS

Elections have changed dramatically since 1800 when Adams ran against Jefferson. In 1800, there were no primaries, no nominating conventions, no candidate speeches, and no entourage of reporters. Both incumbent President John Adams and challenger Thomas Jefferson were nominated by their parties' elected representatives in Congress (caucuses). Once nominated, the candidates did not campaign; they let their state and local organizations promote their causes. Although the election had to be decided in the House of Representatives, the transition from Adams to Jefferson marked *the first peaceful transfer of power between parties via the electoral process* in the history of the world.

By 1896, **national nominating conventions** had become well established. William Jennings Bryan broke with tradition and actively campaigned in person, traveling through 26 states. William McKinley ran a front-porch campaign from his home in Ohio, and managed to label the Democrats as the party of depression. The *Republicans* won overwhelmingly in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, and became firmly entrenched as *the nation's majority party for the next several decades*.

Barack Obama catapulted to national prominence as the result of a debut speech that electrified the Democratic Convention in 2004. Obama's message was one of unity and multi-culturalism. Obama became the primary alternative to Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination in 2008. His call for change resonated slightly more effectively than Clinton's experience. His strong support from young people, the highly educated, and African-Americans helped him win the nomination. John McCain had an easier time winning the Republican nomination. His reputation as a maverick had special appeal.

The campaign began as a close race. Obama's perceived advantages were on economic issues and personal intelligence. McCain's perceived advantages centered on his foreign policy issues and political experience. The credit crisis in late September proved a turning point in the campaign. The intense focus on the economy from the rest of the campaign provided Obama with opportunities to emphasize his popular plans. Furthermore, McCain's choice for vice president, Sarah Palin, although an effective campaigner, failed to appeal to the larger electorate. Obama was also able to effectively link McCain to the widely unpopular President George W. Bush. Final results gave Obama 53 percent of the vote and McCain 46 percent. The people's verdict in 2008, just as in 1800 and 1896, was that it was time for a change in Washington.

WHETHER TO VOTE: A CITIZEN'S FIRST CHOICE

Nearly two centuries of American electoral history include greatly expanded **suffrage** (the right to vote). Ironically, *proportionately fewer of those eligible* have chosen to exercise that right. The highest turnout of the past 100 years was the 80 percent turnout in 1896; in 2000, only 51 percent of the adult population voted for president.

Individuals with high levels of political efficacy and civic duty are more likely to vote, as are individuals who see policy differences between the two parties. **Political efficacy** is the belief that ordinary people can influence the government. Some people will vote simply to support democratic government, that is, to make a long-term contribution toward preserving democracy. This is called doing one's **civic duty**.

Before voting, citizens in most states must register to vote, often a cumbersome procedure. Largely to prevent corruption associated with stuffing ballot boxes, states adopted **voter registration** laws around the turn of the century, which require individuals to first place their name on an electoral roll in order to be allowed to vote. Although these laws have made it more difficult to vote more than once, they have also discouraged some people from voting at all. The **Motor Voter Act**—which allows individuals to register to vote when they receive or renew their drivers' license—has made registration a little easier since 1993.

There are several distinguishing demographic *characteristics of voters and nonvoters*: education, age, race, gender, marital status, mobility, and government employment. Research suggests that some political outcomes would change if this class bias in turnout did not exist. Politicians listen far more carefully to groups with high turnout rates, as they know their fate may well be in their hands. Who votes does matter.

HOW AMERICANS VOTE: EXPLAINING CITIZENS' DECISIONS

Many journalists and politicians believe the winner of an election has a **mandate** from the people to carry out the policies he or she promised during the campaign. Conversely, political scientists know that different kinds of people vote a certain way for different reasons. Political scientists focus instead on *three major elements of voters' decisions*: voters' party identification, voters' evaluations of the candidates, and the match between voters' policy positions and those of the candidates and parties (known as policy voting).

Because of the importance of **party identification** in deciding how to vote, the parties tended to rely on groups that lean heavily in their favor to form their basic coalition. Scholars singled out party affiliation as the *single best predictor of a voter's decision* in the 1950s. With the emergence of television and candidate-centered politics, the hold of the party on the voter eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s, and then *stabilized at a new and lower level* during the 1980s.

Political psychologists Shawn Rosenberg and Patrick McCafferty show that it is possible to manipulate a candidate's appearance in a way that affects voters' choices. Other research has shown that the three most *important components of candidate image are integrity, reliability, and competence*.

Policy voting occurs when people base their choices in an election on *their own issue preferences*. True policy voting can take place only when several conditions are met: voters must have a clear view of their own policy positions; voters must know where the candidates stand on policy issues; voters must see a difference between candidates on these issues; and voters must actually cast a vote for the candidate whose policy positions coincide with their own. Research based on the 2000 election suggests that about 50 percent of survey respondents met the first three criteria.

One recurrent problem is that candidates often decide that the best way to handle a controversial issue is to cloud their positions in rhetoric; *both* candidates may be deliberately ambiguous. However, since the demise of party-boss "brokered" conventions in the 1960s, candidates of both major parties tend to stray from the ambiguous center in order to appeal to their parties' activists who vote in the primary season. That is, Democrats must appeal to liberals and Republicans must appeal to conservatives. The presidency of George W. Bush has prompted an unusually great polarization of voters because of his strong and controversial stands.

THE LAST BATTLE: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

It is the **electoral vote** that actually determines the outcome of the presidential election. The founders created the **electoral college** because they wanted the president to be selected by the nation's elite. Nevertheless, it has been customary since 1828 for electors to vote for *the candidate who won their state's popular vote*.

The electoral vote may *distort* the popular vote. All states except Maine and Nebraska have a **winner-take-all** system in which electors vote as a bloc for the candidate who received the most votes in the states. One of the key reasons George W. Bush won the electoral college vote in 2000 without winning the popular vote was that he did better in the small states. The winner-take-all rule also means that candidates will necessarily focus on winning the states where the polls show that there appears to be a close contest.

UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

According to democratic theory, elections accomplish two tasks: they *select the policymakers*, and they are supposed to *help shape public policy*. In the hypothetical world of *rational choice theory* and the Downs model (see Chapter 8), elections do in fact guide public policy. Social science research on the question has produced mixed findings. Elections do affect public policy to some degree, and public policy decisions also partly affect electoral outcomes.

The greater the policy differences between the candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices. If elections can affect policies, then policies can also affect elections. Most policies have consequences for the well-being of certain groups or the society as a whole. Those who feel better off as a result of certain policies are likely to support candidates who pledge to continue those policies, whereas those who feel worse off are inclined to support opposition candidates. This is known as the theory of **retrospective voting**.

While the threat of election defeat constrains policymakers, it also helps to increase generalized support for government and its powers. Elections *legitimize the power of the state*, thereby making it easier to expand the size of the government. When people have the power to dole out electoral reward and punishment, they are more likely to see government as their servant instead of their master. As a result, citizens in a democracy often *seek to benefit from government* (rather than to be protected from it). As democracy has spread, government has come to do more and more, and its size has grown.