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Voting, Campaigns, and Elections

Chapter 14

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In this chapter you will learn about

- What the founders were thinking when they established a role for elections, and the potential roles that elections can play in a democracy
- Americans' ambivalence about the vote and the reasons that only about half of the citizenry even bothers to exercise what is supposed to be a precious right
- How voters go about making decisions, and how this in turn influences the character of presidential elections
- The organization and strategic aspects of running for the presidency
- What elections mean for citizens

Voting in a democratic society

- The Constitution reflects the founders' fears of citizens' judgment about politics
- Senators not directly elected
- President not directly elected
- Only House of Representatives directly elected

Functions of elections

- Select leaders
- Direct policy
- Citizen development
- Inform the public
- Contain conflict
- Legitimacy and system stability

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Voting in America: who votes and who doesn't

- Age: younger Americans vote less frequently
- Income: poorer Americans vote less frequently
- Education: Americans with less education vote less frequently
- Race and ethnicity: minorities vote less frequently

Why Americans don't vote

- Legal obstacles
 - Registration, Tuesday voting, frequency of elections
- Attitude changes
 - Lower efficacy, decreased party identification
- Voter mobilization
 - Mixed level of effort by parties

Why Americans don't vote, cont'd.

- Decrease in social connectedness
 - Less participation in social groups and communities
- Generational changes
 - Active generations replaced by less politically engaged ones
- Rational nonvoter
 - Calculates that vote will not make a difference to outcome
 - But most people find other motivating reasons to vote

Does nonvoting matter?

- Unlikely that nonvoting significantly affects election outcome
- Consequences for democracy
 - May question legitimacy of election if so few vote
 - May deepen loss of efficacy of those who don't vote

How the voter decides

- Party identification is the biggest factor accounting for how people vote
 - Directly influences the vote
 - Indirectly influences the vote by affecting the perception of issues and candidate evaluations
- Social groups sometimes benefit one candidate

Election issues and policy

- Prospective voting: basing voting decisions on well-informed opinions and consideration of the future consequences of a given vote
- Retrospective voting: basing voting decisions on reactions to past performance; approving the status quo or signaling a desire for change
 - Evaluate economy, foreign policy, or domestic issues
- Prospective voting is idealized model of policy voting, but retrospective voting is more realistic

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The candidates

- Voters form clear opinions about candidate qualities that are relevant to governing
- Voters perceive differences between candidates on issues and on how they would handle aspects of presidency

Presidential campaigns

- Pre-primary season: raise money, raise credibility
- Primaries and caucuses
 - Party caucus: local gathering of party members to choose convention delegates
 - Presidential primary: an election by which voters choose convention delegates committed to voting for a certain candidate
 - Open primary vs. closed primary

Presidential campaigns, cont'd.

- Primaries and caucuses, cont'd.
 - Front-loading: the process of scheduling presidential primaries early in the primary season
 - Front-runner: the leading candidate and expected winner of a nomination or election
 - Momentum: the widely held public perspective that a candidate has gained electoral strength

Role of national conventions

- Conventions play changed role from past
 - Nominee is already known; merely make it official
 - Choose vice presidential candidate
 - Approve party platform

General election campaign

- The electoral college defines strategy
 - Visit large and competitive states
- Who runs the campaign?
 - Professional campaign managers
- Presenting the candidate
 - Convey clear understanding of candidate's strengths

Issues in the general election campaign

- Valence issue: an issue on which most voters and candidates share the same position
- Position issue: an issue on which the parties differ in their perspectives and proposed solutions
- Wedge issue: a controversial issue that one party uses to split the voters in the other party
- Issue ownership: the tendency of one party to be seen as more competent in a specific policy area

The media and general election campaigns

- Negative advertising: campaign advertising that emphasizes the negative characteristics of opponents rather than one's own strengths
- Favorable airtime on news
- Candidates appear on soft news or entertainment programs
- Debate performance is important because many people watch and they have significant effect on voters

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Money and general election campaigns

- Sources depending on period of campaign:
 - Government matching funds
 - Hard money
 - Soft money
 - Issue advocacy ads: advertisements paid for by soft money, and thus not regulated, that promote certain issue positions but do not endorse specific candidates

Trends and interpretations of general election campaigns

- Get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives by parties and groups
 - Grassroots efforts that have increased in recent elections
- Interpreting elections
 - Winner claims that victory provides a policy mandate
 - Media develop common story explaining outcome

The citizens and elections

- Fourth model of citizen activity
 - Democracy is better off with different types of voters
- Do elections make a difference?
 - Yes, it matters who wins for government and policy
 - Direct relationship between national elections and policies the government enacts