

Elections and Voting Behavior Notes

I. How American Elections Work

Elections institutionalize political activity and provide regular access to political power.

The United States has three general kinds of elections

primary elections in which voters select party nominees

general elections which are contested between the nominees of the parties

elections on specific policy questions in which voters engage in making or ratifying legislation.

Procedures allowing the public to pass legislation directly exist in many American states. These include the referendum whereby voters are given the chance to approve or disapprove some legislative act and the initiative petition, which typically requires gaining signatures on a proposed law equaling 10 percent of the voters in the previous

II. A Tale of Three Elections

A. 1800: The First Electoral Transition of Power

In 1800, state and local organizations promoted the cause of the two candidates (John Adams and Thomas Jefferson). Newspapers were highly partisan and the campaign focused on state legislatures, which had the responsibility for choosing members of the electoral college.

1800 was significant because in order to avoid the situation where the vice president came from the opposing party, Jefferson had his electors also vote for his vice-presidential choice, Aaron Burr. This meant that Jefferson and Burr were tied for first and several ballots were cast in the House. A constitutional crisis was avoided and this election became the first peaceful transfer of power between parties via election in history.

B. 1896: A Bitter Fight over Economic Interests

The major issue in the 1896 election was economics. The Republicans, led by William McKinley, supported the gold standard and high tariffs. The Democrats, led by William Jennings Bryan, favored unlimited coinage of silver. Bryan broke with tradition and took to the stump in person while McKinley ran a front-porch campaign. McKinley won with the support of eastern manufacturers in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, firmly entrenching the Republican Party as the majority for several decades.

C. 2000: What a Mess!

The 2000 presidential election represents one of the most memorable finishes in the history of democracy. The election came down to the state of Florida, which was too

close to call and required a recount. A controversy developed over whether or not undervotes would be examined by hand or not in counties that used punch-card systems. The courts were forced to play a pivotal role in a presidential election for the first time ever. Litigation involved whether there would be hand recounts of ballots, the standards to be used in evaluating ballots, the time allowed for recounts, the acceptability of the design of the butterfly ballot, and a host of related questions. The Florida Supreme Court ruled in favor of Vice President Gore's request for a hand recount. However the U.S. Supreme Court overturned this decision ultimately assuring that George W. Bush would emerge the winner. Although most experts predicted early that Al Gore would win the election, the 2000 election showed that how candidates present themselves to the American people really matters. Gore made the mistake of not focusing on past performance while Bush successfully took advantage of character concerns and big government issues. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader raised issues neglected by the major parties, arguing that the major parties were dominated by corporate interests and called for policies that place the protection of jobs above the interests of big corporations. The 2000 election represents the first time since 1888 that the winner of the popular vote lost the Electoral College count.

D. 2004

Primary and Convention

Bush won White House and Rep. Congress this equaled a new era of dominance?

Why a realignment election?

Gave a mandate to Republicans after 2000.

III. Whether to Vote: A Citizen's First Choice

A. Introduction

American electoral history has experienced an expansion of suffrage, the right to vote. Interestingly, as the right to vote has been extended, proportionately fewer of those eligible have chose to exercise that right.

80% in 1896 to 55% 2004

B. Deciding Whether to Vote

Usually your vote probably will make no difference to the outcome. Furthermore, voting is somewhat costly. Anthony Downs argues that rational people vote if they believe that the policies of one party will bring more benefits than the policies of the other party. People who see policy differences between the parties are more likely to vote, but if you see no difference, the rational choice is not to vote. You may decide to vote out of a sense of civic duty.

Questions????????????????????

Does 1 vote make a difference?

Cost of voting?

So Why Vote?

C. Registering to Vote

States adopted voter registration, requiring citizens to register in advance of Election Day, around the turn of the century. Registration procedures differ from state to state.

The Motor Voter Act (1993) made voter registration easier by allowing eligible voters to check a box on their driver's license application or renewal form. The impact of this law has been limited. In fact, turnout has steadily declined though registration procedures have become easier. Research suggests that the drop in turnout may be related to a decline in Americans' social and political connectedness.

D. Who Votes?

Studies of nonvoting have come to several conclusions:

- 1) education makes participation more likely,
- 2) young people have the lowest turnout rate,
- 3) whites vote with greater frequency than members of minority groups,
- 4) women have slightly higher voting rates than men,
- 5) married people are more likely to vote than unmarried people,
- 6) people who have lived at the same address for a long time are more likely to vote
- 7) union members and families are more likely to vote.

E. The Political Consequences of Turnout Bias

Does turnout influence election outcomes?

The consensus seems to be that election outcomes are not likely to be affected unless they are very close. In the close congressional election of 1994 studies have shown that if turnout rates had been equal among all education categories, the Democrats would have controlled the House of Representatives.

IV. How Americans Vote: Explaining Citizens' Decisions

A. Introduction

Journalists and politicians like to believe that Americans vote because they agree more with the policy views of Candidate A than with those of Candidate B. This is often called the mandate theory of elections. Political scientists tend to focus on three other explanations: party identification, candidate evaluation, and policy voting.

B. Party Identification

Parties tend to rely on groups that lean heavily in their favor to form their basic coalition. With the emergence of television and candidate-centered politics, the hold of the party on the voter eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s, stabilizing at a new and lower level. Voting along party lines is still quite common, but considerably less so than it was several decades ago. Voters feel they no longer need the parties to guide their choices. They have become increasingly individualistic.

C. Candidate Evaluations: How Americans See the Candidates

All candidates try to present a favorable image. Studies have shown that the three most important dimensions of candidate image are integrity, reliability, and competence, and voters most often mention competence as the most important. Evaluations of candidates' personalities are sometimes seen as superficial and irrational judgments; but if a candidate is too incompetent to carry out policy promises, or too dishonest to be trusted, it makes perfect sense for a voter to pay more attention to personality than policies.

D. Policy Voting

Policy voting occurs when people base their choices in an election on their own issue preferences. Policy voting requires voters to have a clear view of their own policy positions, understand the candidates' policy positions, and vote for the candidate whose policies match their own. Policy voting is not always easy since candidates' positions are not always clear and the media do not focus on the issues. Policy voting has become somewhat easier today as candidates are more forced to take clear stands to appeal to their own party's primary voters.

V. The Last Battle: The Electoral College * Table 10.3

The electoral college, not the popular vote, determines the president of the United States. The founders wanted the president to be selected by the nation's elite, not by the people. The electoral college is a body of electors who vote for the president and vice president. Each state has as many electoral votes as it has U.S. senators and representatives. All but two states have a winner-take-all system. Electors meet in their states in December, following the November election, and mail their votes to the vice president. If no candidate receives an electoral college majority, then the election is thrown into the House of Representatives, which chooses from among the top three electoral vote winners. The electoral college introduces bias into the campaign and electoral process by giving extra clout to big states and cities.

VI. Understanding Elections and Voting Behavior

A. Democracy and Elections

The greater the policy differences between candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices. However, the candidates do not always do their best to clarify the issues, often sidestepping controversial questions. When individual candidates do offer a plain choice to the voters, voters are more able to guide the government's policy direction. Those who feel better off as a result of certain policies are likely to support candidates who pledge to continue those policies. This is called retrospective voting. In presidential elections, people unhappy with the state of the economy tend to blame the incumbents.

B. Elections and the Scope of Government

Elections increase generalized support for government and its powers. Voters like to feel that they are sending a message to the government to accomplish something. Thus, as democracy has spread, government has come to do more and more, and its scope has grown.