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POLITICAL PARTIES, INTEREST GROUPS, PACs, AND 527 GROUPS

THE CONCEPTS

- What coalitions make up the two main political parties in the United States?
- Why do third parties so often fail in U.S. politics?
- What effect has dealignment had on political parties?
- Are there serious policy differences between Democrats and Republicans?
- Who supports the two parties and why?
- How does the Constitution control special interests?

- How have interest groups helped to democratize the U.S. political system?
- Why are interest groups a threat to democracy?
- What role do interest groups play in setting the political agenda?
- What techniques do PACs use to get their messages across?
- How do interest groups achieve and exert their influence?

THE TERMS

- political parties
- two-party system
- primary elections
- bolter parties
- doctrinal parties
- single-issue parties
- Independent candidates
- platform
- national convention
- soft money
- split-ticket voting
- party dealignment
- party realignment
- divided government
- critical election
- coalition
- *amicus curiae* briefs
- class action suits
- influence peddling
- Federal Election Campaign Act
- political action committees (PACs) and 527 Groups

In the previous chapter we reviewed how individuals develop their political beliefs. Few political acts, however, are the work of a single person. Rather, most politically active people work within groups to achieve common political goals. The AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam expects you to know about four types of political groups. They are **political parties**, **interest groups**, **political action committees (PACs)**, and **527 groups**. This chapter reviews everything you need to know about the organization and activities of these groups.

which favors strict environmental policies, more government social programs, and controls over big business, ran Ralph Nader for president in 2000. Nader's candidacy took votes from Al Gore, thus tipping the scales in favor of George W. Bush.

Third-party candidates should not be confused with **Independent candidates**. Independent candidates run without party affiliation. It is very difficult for Independent candidates to overcome the money and organization of the two major parties. Eugene McCarthy, an anti-Vietnam War candidate in 1968, and John Anderson, a fiscal conservative and social liberal in 1980, are two examples.

WHY THIRD PARTIES FAIL

The failure of third parties to elect presidential and other candidates to office is a direct result of an American political system designed to support only two major parties. National campaigns in countries using equal, single-member, plurality voting-district systems (like the United States) require huge sums of money and vast organizations. Also, in American presidential elections, almost all states have a winner-take-all system for electoral votes; the candidate who receives the most votes, even if it is only by one, wins all of the electors in the state. Because the losers get no electoral votes, the electoral count usually does not accurately reflect the popular vote. During the 2000 presidential election (which featured the Florida voting controversy), Al Gore won the popular vote by about 500,000 votes nationwide, but George W. Bush was found to have won the Florida electorate, giving him all of Florida's twenty-five electoral votes and, ultimately, the presidency.

FUNCTIONS OF MODERN POLITICAL PARTIES

Political scientists identify three major subdivisions of political parties.

- **The party among the electorate.** Voters enroll in and identify with political parties. They generally vote for candidates who represent their party.
- **The party in government.** Government officials belong to political parties. They act together to pursue common goals, although regional and ideological differences sometimes subvert their efforts.
- **The party organization.** A group of people who are neither elected officials nor average voters, the party organization is made up of political professionals who recruit candidates and voters, organize campaign events, and raise money to promote the party.

Political parties perform all of the following functions:

- **Recruit and nominate candidates.** The parties are the major players in electoral politics. They seek out candidates to run in their primary elections. They also create the rules by which candidates seek their nominations. In nearly all elections, nomination by one of the major parties is a prerequisite to victory. For example, in the 2008 Democratic primary, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought it out until Obama had enough delegates to secure the nomination, at which point the Democratic party formally announced him as their candidate.
- **Educate and mobilize voters.** Political parties fund propaganda campaigns to persuade voters to choose their candidates. They send mailings, hold rallies, and run advertisements. They target regions in which their support is strong and campaign to persuade voters in those regions to vote on election day.

- **Provide campaign funds and support.** The national parties have committees dedicated to raising funds for House and Senate campaigns. State parties also raise funds for candidates for both state and national office. Although most candidates rely primarily on their own personal campaign support staff, they also need the help of the state or national party organizations.
- **Organize government activity.** Parties act as an organizing force in government. The House and Senate organize their leadership and committee systems strictly along party lines, as do state legislatures.
- **Provide balance through opposition of two parties.** Each party serves as a check on the other by constantly watching for and exposing weakness and hypocrisy. The minority party (provided a single party controls both the White House and the Congress) performs the role of the *loyal opposition*, constantly critiquing the performance of the party in power.
- **Reduce conflict and tension in society.** The two-party system promotes compromise and negotiation in two ways: by encouraging parties to accommodate voters and encouraging voters to accept compromises in policy. The Republican Party, for example, includes both religious social-conservatives and libertarians. To assemble winning coalitions, the party must somehow appease both groups. The groups, in turn, must be willing to compromise if they wish to prevent the Democrats from prevailing.

U.S. political parties are not hierarchical. The national party organization and each of the state and local organizations are largely autonomous and serve different functions; one does not necessarily take orders from the other.

Party committees are organized by geographic subdivisions. Locally, committees at the precinct, town, ward, and electoral district levels coordinate get-out-the-vote drives, door-to-door canvassing, and leaflet distribution. These party committees are staffed mostly by volunteers, and their work is largely concentrated around election time. The next largest geographic grouping is the county. County committees coordinate efforts in local elections and organize the efforts of committees on the precinct level. They also send representatives to each polling place to monitor voting procedures. State committees raise money and provide volunteers to staff campaign events. They provide support to candidates for both state and national offices. National legislative elections, however, are also the responsibility of the powerful congressional district and senatorial committees. These committees, chaired by incumbents and staffed by professionals, are part of the national party organization. They are most likely to become involved in these legislative elections when the possibility exists of gaining or losing a seat. Because incumbents usually run for reelection and are often reelected easily, the congressional and senatorial committees are active in a minority of election efforts during each electoral cycle.

The national party plans the **national conventions** held every four years to nominate a presidential candidate. It sponsors polls to keep party members informed of public opinion and manages issue-oriented advertising and propaganda.

ARE PARTIES IN DECLINE?

Some political scientists believe that the parties are no longer as powerful or as significant as they once were. Prior to 1968, one party typically controlled both the executive and legislative branches of government. Since that year, however, there have been only a few years of one-party control of these branches (1977 to 1980, 1992 to 1994, 2002 to 2005, and from 2008 to 2010). Americans are voting a **split ticket** (see page 89) more frequently than ever before. They are more likely to consider the merits and positions of a particular candidate than to merely consider his or her party affiliation. As a result, no one party dominates government, and officials with different political agendas are elected to work together. Split-ticket voting leads to divided government, when one party controls the Senate or House or both and the other controls the White House. An example of this was during the 110th Congress (2007–2008) when Democrats held the majority of the House and Senate, and there was a Republican in the White House. This can create policy gridlock because these two branches are often at odds with each other. Conversely, it can cause them to work together in the creation of moderate public policy. Lastly, it encourages **party dealignment** because voters do not align with their parties as uniformly as they once did.

Increasingly, modern candidates have taken control of their own election campaigns, relying less on party support than did past candidates. They are now able to appeal directly to the public through television and the Internet. This has left the parties—which once wielded great power over the electoral process—with less power. In their place, media consultants have become the chief movers and shakers in political campaigns.

PARTY COALITIONS

Political parties consist of combinations of groups, which consist of combinations of individuals. The larger the coalition, the more likely the candidate will win. Party candidates and party positions on policy are designed to attract more groups of voters, putting together a winning **coalition**.

In the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, the Republican coalition included the following:

- veterans' groups and military supporters
- religious conservatives
- Libertarians
- opponents of gay marriage
- opponents of affirmative action
- supporters of the development of natural resources on public lands
- rural dwellers

In the same elections, the Democratic coalition included the following:

- disaffected moderate Republicans
- pro-choicers
- African and Hispanic Americans
- members and supporters of labor unions
- gay rights supporters
- intellectuals

- people with lower incomes
- city dwellers
- feminists
- environmentalists

While there are always exceptions to the rule, the two parties tend to rely on these groups as a base of support. Regionally, it appears that the east and west coasts and the upper Midwest are more Democratic, while the South and lower Midwest are more Republican.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARTIES

While there are general ideological differences between the two parties, there are also a number of similarities. Neither party, for example, questions the validity of the nation's capitalist economic system.

Although both parties tend to be centrist, there are nevertheless differences in the ways the two parties view the role of government. The greatest ideological differences are between the liberals in the Democratic Party and the conservatives in the Republican Party, the so-called **party bases**. While appealing to the independent centrist voter during election campaigns, each party counts on its base to get out and vote. Party leaders must use great care in choosing policy positions so they do not lose their party base. They must also avoid alienating the moderates of the party by taking extreme left or right positions.

Democrats tend to be

- less disposed to spend on defense
- less disposed to use vouchers, or other public funds, to let students attend private schools
- more disposed to spend money to advance social-welfare programs
- more disposed to use government money for public education
- more disposed to spend money on government-run health insurance programs
- more disposed to grant tax relief to targeted groups such as the lower and middle classes
- against private ownership of assault weapons and for broader regulations on the ownership of firearms

Republicans tend to be

- more disposed to spend on defense
- more disposed to use vouchers for private schools and to give government aid to parochial schools
- more disposed to grant tax relief to everyone, especially the wealthy and corporations
- less disposed to spend money on social-welfare programs
- less disposed to spend money on government-run health insurance programs
- less disposed to regulate firearms

PARTY REALIGNMENT

Party realignment occurs when the coalitions making up the two parties fall apart, such as when many of the groups that make up the majority party defect to the minority party. Realignment is very rare and usually occurs as a result of some major traumatic event, such as an economic depression or a war. They are signaled by what is called a **critical election**, when a new party comes to dominate politics. The last realignment took place in 1932, as a result of the Great Depression, when the Republican Party became the minority party and the Democratic party became the majority party, with overwhelming numbers of Democrats being elected to every branch of government at every level. Realignments occur over a period of time and show permanence. The New Deal coalition of the 1930s lasted for decades. There have been no realignments since the 1930s.

The trend today seems to be toward dealignment. **Dealignment** is usually a result of party members becoming disaffected as a result of some policy position taken by the party. These disaffected party members join no political party and vote for the candidate rather than the party he or she belongs to. Since the 1960s, membership in the Democratic party has declined while the number of voters self-identifying as independents has increased. During the same time period, the number of Republicans has remained constant. The two major parties are now nearly equal in party membership. This is a classic example of dealignment. (That said, the number of registered Democrats has increased in the last 6 years.)

INTEREST GROUPS AND LOBBYISTS

Interest groups are organizations dedicated to a particular political goal or to a set of unified goals. Group members often share a common bond, either religious (**Christian Coalition**), racial (**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**), or professional (**American Medical Association**). In other cases, they simply share a common interest, such as the environment (**Sierra Club**) or political reform (**Common Cause**). In either case, they are similar to political parties in that they try to influence the outcome of elections and legislation. Unlike political parties, however, they do not nominate candidates, nor do they normally try to address a wide range of issues.

When interest groups try to influence legislators, we say they are **lobbying** for a bill or issue. The term originated with the historical practice of early lobbyists; they waited in the lobby of the capitol so they could catch legislators coming in and out of session. Today, most lobbyists are highly paid professionals. A number are former legislators, whose experience and friendships in the Capitol make them particularly effective.

There are literally thousands of interest groups in the United States. Most groups fall under one of the following categories:

- **Economic groups.** Economic groups are formed to promote and protect members' economic interests. They include peak business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which represents the interests of all businesspeople. Other groups represent specific trades and industries; among these are the American Farm Bureau Federation and the American Nuclear Energy Council. Labor groups such as the AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers represent union members. Professional groups include the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association. Most economic groups have existed a long time and have developed strong ties with legislators and bureaucrats. They are also very large, highly influential, and extremely well funded, and either represent or employ large constituencies. As a result, they are usually the most powerful interest groups in Washington, D.C.

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ELECTIONS

THE CONCEPTS

- Does the media place too much emphasis on irrelevant issues in presidential campaigns?
- Why do incumbents win at such high rates?
- Why is voter turnout so low in the United States?
- What is the impact of primary elections, and who votes in them?
- Why do political parties have such a difficult time holding their coalitions together?
- Why are soft money contributions considered a threat to the election process?
- Why did the Supreme Court have a problem with the imposition of spending limits on PACs?
- Has the Federal Election Campaign Reform Act succeeded in fulfilling the intent of the legislation?
- What accounts for the so-called gender gap?

THE TERMS

- nominations
- general elections
- closed primary
- open primary
- blanket primary
- plurality
- runoff primary
- delegates
- super-delegates
- federal matching funds
- Super Tuesday
- front-loading
- Federal Election Commission
- brokered conventions
- electoral college
- winner-take-all system
- mandate

The federal government holds elections every two years. Each election gives voters the chance to select a new representative in the House of Representatives. Every other election allows them to vote for president. Each of a state's two seats in the Senate is contested every six years; as a result, state voters select a senator in two out of every three federal elections.

To cut expenses and to encourage voter turnout, states often hold their elections at the same time as federal elections. Thus, voters choose not only federal officials at election time, but also state legislators, judges, the governor, and local officials. They may also be asked to vote on referenda and state bond issues.

Thus, many officeholders are chosen and many issues are decided during each election. When the AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam asks about elections, however, it nearly always focuses on the presidential election. This chapter will do the same.

There is one exception to this rule. The AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam always asks at least one question about the **incumbent advantage**. Be sure you know the following two facts, as they will almost certainly be tested on the AP exam: 1) representatives who run for reelection win approximately 90 percent of the time; and 2) while incumbent senators have a tremendous electoral advantage, House incumbents have an even greater advantage. Senators must run statewide, and they almost always face a serious challenger. On the other hand, House members run in their home districts, where constituents are often overwhelmingly of one party due to **gerrymandering** (partisan redrawing of congressional district borders). In such races, victory in the primary election virtually guarantees victory in the general election. In fact, each year a number of House incumbents run for reelection unopposed.

THE ELECTION CYCLE

Elections consist of two phases: **nominations**, during which the parties choose their candidates for the general elections, and **general elections**, during which voters decide who will hold elective office.

The majority of states (39) use primary elections to select presidential nominees. All states use some form of primary election to select legislative and state nominees. These elections are usually held between early February and late spring of an election year, with the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary enjoying the coveted "first-in-the-nation" position. Each state sets its own rules for these elections, and there is considerable variation in primary procedures from state to state. There are several types of primaries.

- **Closed primary.** This is the most common type. In a closed primary, voting is restricted to registered members of a political party. Voters may vote only for candidates running for the nomination of their declared party. Democrats choose among the candidates for the Democratic nomination, while Republicans choose among Republican hopefuls.
- **Open primary.** In open primaries, voters may vote only in one party's primary, but they may vote in whichever party primary they choose. Voters select the party primary in which they wish to participate in the privacy of the voting booth. Critics argue that open primaries allow voters to sabotage their opponents' primaries by crossing party lines to vote for the candidate *least* likely to win the general election. This is likely to happen only when there are no close contests in one party, however.
- **Blanket primary.** Blanket primaries use the same procedure as the general elections. In blanket primaries, voters may vote for one candidate per office of either party. Only Alaska and Washington state use this primary system.

In primary voting for legislators and state officials, the candidate who receives a **plurality** (greatest number of votes, but not more than half the total votes cast) or majority (more than half) in each primary is declared the winner. Some states require the winner to receive a minimum percentage of the vote, however. If no candidate receives the required share of votes, a **runoff primary** is held between the top two. Runoffs occur most often when many challengers vie for an open office, especially when none of them are well known.

In primary elections for the presidency, voters also choose delegates pledged to a particular presidential candidate. Winning delegates attend their party's national convention. Some states select presidential convention delegates at **state caucuses** and **conventions**. This process begins with local meetings of party members, who select representatives to send to statewide party meetings. Compared with primaries, the state caucus and convention process usually attracts fewer participants. Those who participate tend to be more politically active and better informed than typical voters.

The Democratic Party uses a third method to choose some delegates to its national convention. It grants automatic delegate status to many elected party leaders, including congresspersons and important state leaders. These **super-delegates** generally support the front-runner. Critics complain that the super-delegates dilute the importance of the primary elections by making it easier for the party elite to control the nominating process. The Republican Party does not have super-delegates. To promote diversity within the delegate pool, the **McGovern-Fraser Commission** was created in 1968. It recommended that delegates be represented by the proportion of their population in each state.

General elections for federal office are held on the first Tuesday of November. Elections in which the president is being chosen are called **presidential elections**. Those that occur between presidential elections are called **midterm elections**.

FIRST STEPS TOWARD NOMINATION

Nearly all elected officials first receive the endorsement, or nomination, of one of the two major parties. Nominees usually have extensive backgrounds in government. Some presidential candidates are current or former members of the Senate. Many have served as governors. Gubernatorial experience allows candidates to claim executive abilities, because governors serve many of the same government functions in their states as the president does in the federal government. Governors also have the advantage of being able to run as Washington outsiders, as opposed to senators, who usually have extensive federal experience (and whose voting records are often used against them). At a time when public distrust of Washington is high, outsider status can be a significant benefit. **Bill Clinton** and **George W. Bush** successfully exploited this factor in their presidential campaigns. And, although he was a senator, Barack Obama found success by campaigning as an outsider in 2008, as well.

On occasion, the major parties will pursue a candidate with little or no government experience. Such candidates are invariably popular and well-respected figures, often from the military. **Dwight Eisenhower** was such a candidate.

A presidential run is an all-consuming endeavor that must begin up to two years before the first primary. As a result, most candidates devote themselves to the effort full time. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both left their governorships before running for the presidency; Bob Dole retired from the Senate in 1996 to commit himself more fully to his campaign. Others have remained in office and ran successful campaigns. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are two candidates who remained governors while successfully seeking their party's nomination. Presidents running for reelection and vice presidents seeking the presidency benefit from the prestige of their offices.

Those considering a run for the presidency must first seek support among the party organizations. They must especially seek the aid of influential donors to the party because elections are extremely expensive. Candidates spend much of the early stages of the nomination process meeting with potential donors, establishing PACs to raise funds (more about fundraising below), and campaigning for the endorsements of important political groups and leaders. This entire process is often referred to as testing the waters. Many campaigns fail at this stage, long before the public is ever aware of them, due to lack of interest among the political elite.

In the year before the first primaries, potential candidates attempt to increase their public profile. They schedule public appearances and attempt to attract media coverage by taking stands on current issues and discussing the goals of their projected presidencies. Candidates are particularly vulnerable to the media during this period. Since the public knows little about most potential candidates, negative reports or media spin can quickly scuttle a campaign (see Newt Gingrich in 2012). As primary season begins, candidates try to raise as much money as possible and to garner as many votes in the primaries as possible, in an effort to win the nomination. Candidates who can't raise their own money and don't get enough votes are quickly forced out of the race. The candidates also begin to assemble campaign personnel—advisors, political consultants, public relations experts, speechwriters, fundraisers, lawyers, and office administrators—who will help manage the campaign.

Recently, very wealthy candidates have attempted to run for the presidency without needing, or using, federal matching funds. Ross Perot in 1992 and Steve Forbes in 1996 used their own money to campaign, but both campaigns failed. Ross Perot's 1992 campaign spent more money than the Democrat and Republican candidates combined.

FINANCING CAMPAIGNS

A successful presidential campaign requires much more than an appealing candidate. It needs a huge supporting staff, jets and buses, and the resources to hire consultants, pollsters, and advertising agencies. It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the most important skills a candidate can possess is the ability to raise money.

Presidential candidates who meet certain prerequisites may receive federal funding. Primary candidates who receive more than 10 percent of the vote in an election may apply for **federal matching funds**. These funds essentially double all campaign contributions of \$250 and less by matching them. To receive matching funds, candidates must agree to obey federal spending limits: In 2008, the limit was \$42.05 million for the primary elections and \$84.1 million for the general election. Any candidate who receives less than 10 percent of the vote in two consecutive primaries loses his or her eligibility for matching funds until he or she wins more than 10 percent of the vote in another primary.

The federal government funds the general election campaigns of the two major presidential candidates, provided those candidates agree not to accept and spend other donations (an exception is made for up to \$50,000 of the candidate's own money). 2004 was the first election in which both major party nominees declined public matching funds during the primaries. Independents do not receive federal funding for their campaigns. (In 2008, John McCain accepted matching funds. Barack Obama did not.)

Despite attempts at campaign finance reform, the trend toward high levels of election spending has continued through the 1990s and into the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the 2004 election, George W. Bush raised a whopping \$272.5 million and John Kerry raised \$250.3 million, making it the most expensive presidential race in history. Both candidates refused matching funds to avoid all spending limits. Future candidates may raise even more now that corporations and unions can donate directly and without limit.

There is currently no public financing of congressional campaigns, and there are no spending limits for congressional candidates. There are, however, limits on the amounts that individuals and political committees may donate to candidates, but these limits have been revised in the twenty-first century, first by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) in 2002, then by *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in 2010. These limits are as follows:

	To a Candidate	To a National Party	To a Political Committee	Total per 2 Calendar Years
Individual may give	\$2,500	\$30,800	\$5,000	\$117,000
PAC may give	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$5,000	no limit
Non-PAC committee may give ¹	\$2,500	\$30,800	\$5,000	no limit

Many Americans believe that the current campaign finance system has a corrupting effect on government. Efforts to change the system, however, run into several obstacles. The Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) that mandatory spending limits on campaigns violate candidates' First Amendment rights to free expression. Furthermore, the system currently benefits incumbents, in that the incumbent's job description is basically the stuff of reelections: meetings, events, talking to voters, photo ops, and so on. Accordingly, legislators are reluctant to make changes because changes would make their reelection more difficult. The permissible donations listed in the above table will change if campaign finance reform is enacted.

¹ Political committees that do not meet legal requirements of a PAC (e.g., donations from at least 50 contributors).

PRIMARY SEASON

By January 1 of election year, candidates are campaigning widely among the public. From this point on, candidates participate in debates, campaign from state to state delivering their “stump speeches” (so called because campaigning is often referred to as “stumping”), and choreograph media events—in an effort to draw positive media coverage of their campaigns.

The earliest primaries (New Hampshire’s is a prime example) provide a great boost to the campaigns of whoever wins, increasing the candidate’s media exposure and making all-important fund-raising chores easier. Major financial contributors usually desert the campaigns of the losers in early primaries. Furthermore, candidates who receive less than 10 percent of the vote in two successive primaries lose their eligibility for crucial federal matching funds. As a result, those who fare poorly in early primaries usually have to drop out of the race long before the majority of delegates have been selected.

Because early primaries are perceived to have grown increasingly important in recent years, many states have pushed forward the date of their primary elections. Many states even hold their primaries all on the same day in early March (called **Super Tuesday**). Large states such as New York and California have moved forward their primaries in hopes of having a greater influence on which candidates win the nominations. Political analysts refer to this strategy as **front-loading**, and the result has been to place increased pressure on candidates to succeed early. Critics argue that it unnecessarily forces voters to choose early in the election process, before they have gotten a chance to know the candidates well.

Primary elections and state caucuses continue into late spring. In many recent elections, however, the party nominee has been decided long before the last elections. Mitt Romney’s nomination in 2012 is an example of that very phenomenon.

NATIONAL CONVENTIONS

After the primary season has ended, both parties hold national conventions to confirm their nominee. When no candidate has received the pledge of a majority of convention delegates, conventions decide who the nominee will be; such conventions are called **brokered conventions**. The parties have designed their primary systems to prevent brokered conventions, which can divide the party and cost it the election.

One of the main purposes of a national convention, in fact, is to **unify the party**. Primary elections can damage each party, as candidates attack each other and thereby expose rifts within the party membership. Another main purpose of conventions is to make a show of party unity for political gain. Both parties’ conventions are nationally televised and are widely covered by the news media. Not surprisingly, most of what occurs on the convention stage is choreographed to appeal to the party faithful and undecided voters watching at home.

That does not mean that conventions are placid affairs, however. Conventions are the site of many political negotiations, as different factions of the party attempt to win concessions in return for their full support during the general election. There are often intense battles over the party platform, a statement of purpose and party goals, which, ironically, has little concrete significance. The conventions also offer some political drama, as nominees sometimes wait until the convention to announce their choice of running mates.

The greatest impact conventions can have on general election results is negative. In 1968, for example, rioting outside the Democratic convention in Chicago created a bad impression among voters, especially when contrasted with the unified display at the Republican convention in Miami weeks later. In 1992, ultraconservatives were able to control key elements of the Republican convention. The

image the convention created was one of an angry and activist party, which frightened voters and hurt President Bush's reelection campaign. Under normal circumstances, however, conventions usually help their candidates considerably. Polls taken immediately after conventions show the candidates' approval ratings up significantly. This rise in public approval is called a **post-convention bump**.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that national conventions have been altered dramatically in the last century. Until about mid-century, conventions and convention delegates actually selected and nominated the candidate. With the adoption of primary elections, conventions have been transformed into mere coronations with the nominees generally being determined before the convention begins (as with Obama and Romney in 2012).

THE GENERAL ELECTION AND THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

The remaining candidates continue to campaign for the general election in much the same way as they campaigned during the primaries: holding rallies, participating in debates, running campaign advertisements, and pursuing positive media coverage. There are several key differences between the primaries and the general election. First, during the primaries, candidates run against members of their own party. Because primary candidates are often in general agreement about big-picture issues, their campaigns focus instead on the subtler differences between them. During the general elections, candidates often emphasize the general policy and philosophical differences between the two parties. Put simply, a candidate courts his or her political base during the primary season and then usually attempts to move toward the center in the general election to win undecided votes in hopes of securing the majority.

Second, candidates planning their campaign strategies must consider the nature of the **electoral college**. This institution was created by the framers of the Constitution as a means of insulating the government from the whims of a less-educated public. Critics feel the electoral college system is antiquated, but no one has yet successfully proposed an amendment to change it. Presidential elections therefore continue to be determined not by the final popular vote but rather by this institution. Each state is given a number of electors equal to the sum of its federal legislators (senators plus representatives). The winner of the presidential election in each state wins all of that state's electors² (which is why it is often referred to as a **winner-take-all system**).

The electoral college system places greater emphasis on election results in large states. Victory by a single vote in California wins a candidate all of that state's 54 electoral votes; a similar margin of victory in Vermont yields only three electoral votes. Despite the number of votes at stake in the large states, candidates will often devote the bulk of their time to "swing" states—areas in which polling indicates a close race. This is the reason that during the 2012 presidential election, states like Ohio, Colorado, and New Hampshire were inundated with political ads while large states whose voters generally go with one party, such as New York, California, and Texas, were relatively quiet. Finally, candidates consider each other's electoral strategies in planning their campaigns. In 1968, the Democratic Party relied on the support of its Southern base. Republican Richard Nixon realized that this support was weakening and campaigned aggressively in the region. Nixon's "Southern strategy" worked in enough Southern states to swing the election to the Republicans.

² The two exceptions are Maine and Nebraska, which give two electoral votes to the candidate who wins a plurality of the statewide vote, and one vote to the winner of each of the state's congressional districts. In 1996, Maine had four electoral votes, Nebraska had five.

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON ELECTIONS

With nearly 300 million voters participating in the general election, it is clear that candidates cannot come into direct contact with even a small portion of the electorate. Instead, they must rely on the media to get their political message across.

- **News media** provide many voters with daily campaign information. While most news programs occasionally report on the candidates' positions on the issues, they concentrate on the candidates' standing in the polls, or the horse race aspect of the election. This is because news directors prefer information that can be communicated quickly and that changes regularly, such as public opinion poll results. In contrast, candidates' positions on issues are often complex. Furthermore, they rarely change. Therefore, news programs may report such information once during an election, but they do not report it repeatedly as they do with poll results. As a result, the attention of the network news audience is focused on the campaign game rather than on the candidates' political agendas.
- **Campaign advertisements** provide another, more controlled look at the candidates. Through advertising, candidates attempt to build a positive image with the public. In many cases, they also try to belittle their opponents through negative advertising. Negative advertising works best when the public knows little about a candidate. In 1988, for example, Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis was the subject of several effective negative advertisements. Although he led in the polls prior to the ads, Dukakis's support was weak, as most voters knew little about him. The negative advertisements were effective in destroying Dukakis's lead by portraying him as weak, incompetent, and soft on crime.

ELECTION DAY

There are nearly 240 million Americans of voting age. Of them, nearly 200 million are registered to vote. On a presidential election day, however, fewer than 127 million participate. **Voter turnout** is even lower for midterm elections: Typically less than 40 percent of all eligible voters participate in them. American voter turnout rates are among the lowest of all Western democracies.

Certain patterns are detectable in American voters' behavior. The likelihood that an individual will vote corresponds closely to his or her level of education: The more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to vote. Age is also a factor: Turnout rates are highest among Americans over the age of 40, and lowest among those under the age of 20.

Voter turnout is also influenced in part by how close a race is. Voters are less likely to vote when they believe they know who will win the election. Such was the case in 1996, when many Americans were certain that Bill Clinton would be reelected. Remember, however, that many federal and state offices are up for grabs on election day. A closely contested race in any of those elections can be enough to motivate voters to participate.

On election day, the media report not only election results but also the results of exit polls that break down the vote by age, gender, race, income level, region, and nearly every other demographic imaginable. They do so in an effort to determine the meaning of the results. Why did voters choose one candidate over another? How satisfied were voters with the choices presented them? Were the voters sending a clear message—a **mandate**—or not? Winners search the results for evidence of a mandate. In 1992, Bill Clinton interpreted his victory as a mandate for a more active and

progressive federal government. Several historic failures—on efforts to integrate homosexuals in the military and to establish nationalized health care—demonstrated that voter mandates are not always so clear. The voters' message has become more difficult to discern as **split-ticket voting**—voting for a presidential candidate of one party and legislators of the other—has grown more common.

SUMMARY

- Elections consist of two phases: nominations and the general election. Most nominations are made through party primaries. These can be open, closed, or “blanket.”
- Candidates need the backing of the major parties along with a compelling back story before they can hope to make a strong campaign for national office.
- Campaign finance was restricted by a complicated web of regulations defined by the election laws of the 1970s along with the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, but new laws were passed in 2010.
- Before the general elections, the candidates need to win their party primaries, which often involves energizing the base. Later, candidates may have to repudiate some of the more radical statements they made to court primary voters in order to win more moderate voters in the general election.
- Nominating Conventions used to be where the party nominees were selected, but now they are symbolic coronations of the candidate who has already been selected through the primary process. Still, delegates assemble, cheer, and argue over the drafting of the party platform.
- Presidential candidates must win each state's electors, which is done by getting a plurality of all the voters in that state. This method causes candidates to spend most all their time in “swing” or “battleground” states and can also result in the winner of the popular vote losing the election (as was the case with Al Gore in the election of 2000).
- After all the voting is done, pollsters, the parties, and the media try their best to determine why the people voted the way they did. Exit polls and surveys are the tools used to decipher these factors.