

POLITICAL BELIEFS AND POLITICAL BEHAVIORS

AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Although the United States is a diverse society, it is united under a common political culture, or common set of beliefs and attitudes about government and politics. This political culture translates into a consensus of basic concepts that support democracy. Democracy is not guaranteed; therefore the American people must continue to practice these concepts.

- ♦ majority rule/minority rights: Although democracy is based upon majority rule, minority rights must be guaranteed.
- ♦ equality: Equality of every individual before the law and in the political process.
- ♦ private property: Ownership of property is protected by law and supported by the capitalist system.
- ♦ individual freedoms: Guarantees of civil liberties and protections of infringements upon them.
- ♦ compromise: Allows for the combining of different interests and opinions to form public policy to best benefit society.
- ♦ limited government: Powers of government are restricted in a democracy by the will of the people and the law.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Political socialization is the process by which citizens acquire a sense of political identity. Socialization is a complex process that begins early in childhood and continues throughout a person's life. It allows citizens to become aware of politics, learn political facts, and form political values and opinions. Although the paths to political awareness, knowledge, and values differ, people are exposed to a combination of influences that shape their political identities and opinions:

- ♦ Family and home influences often help shape political party identification. It is strongest when both parents identify with the same political party.
- ♦ Schools teach patriotism, basic governmental functions and structure, and encourage political participation.
- ♦ Group affiliations (interest groups, labor unions, professional organizations) provide common bonds between people which may be expressed through the group or its activities.
- ♦ Demographic factors (occupation, race, gender, age, religion, region of country, income, education, ethnicity).
- ♦ Mass media inform the public about issues and help set the political and public agendas.
- ♦ Opinion leaders, those individuals held in great respect because of their position, expertise, or personality, may informally and unintentionally exercise influence.
- ♦ Events may instill positive or negative attitudes. For example, the Watergate scandal created a mistrust of government.

PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is a collection of shared attitudes of many different people in matters relating to politics, public issues, or the making of public policy. It is shaped by people's political culture and political socialization. Public opinion can be analyzed according to distribution (physical shape of responses when graphed), intensity (how strongly the opinions are held), and stability (how much the opinion changes over time). A consensus occurs when there is general agreement on an issue. Public opinion that is strongly divided between two very different views is a divisive opinion.

Measuring Public Opinion

The measurement of public opinion is a complex process often conveying unreliable results. Elections, interest groups, the media, and personal contacts may signal public opinion on certain issues; however, the most reliable measure of public opinion is the public opinion poll. Businesses, governments, political candidates, and interest groups use polls.

Early polling in the United States involved the use of straw polls, asking the same question of a large number of people. They were unreliable because they did not necessarily include a cross-section of the general population of the United States. The most famous mishap occurred in 1936 when the *Literary Digest* mailed postcards to more than 10 million people concerning the outcome of the 1936 presidential election. With over 2 million responses, the magazine incorrectly predicted the defeat of Franklin Roosevelt and victory of challenger Alf Landon. The magazine had used automobile registrations and telephone directories to develop its sample, not realizing that during the Depression many people did not have cars or telephones. Many voters who supported Roosevelt had not been polled. The mailings had also been done early, and some voters changed their minds between answering the poll and actually voting.

Modern polling began in the 1930s when George Gallup helped develop the use of a scientific polling process that includes:

- ♦ **Sampling** - Those chosen to participate in the poll must be representative of the general population and chosen at random.
- ♦ **Preparing valid questions** - Directions should be clear and questions should be phrased and ordered in a way that does not lead the respondent to a particular answer (dear, fair, and unbiased).

- ♦ **Controlling how the poll is taken** - Make sure the respondent has some knowledge of the issues addressed in the poll and that the pollster's appearance and tone do not influence the responses. Survey methods may include telephone, mail, and in-person interviews.
- ♦ **Analyzing and reporting results** - Reporting the results of polls without providing information about how the poll was conducted, sampling errors, or when the poll that was taken can lead to misinformation and error.

Today, the use of statistical analysis through computers has made polling an even more accurate research tool.

Ideology

An ideology is a consistent set of beliefs. A political ideology is a set of beliefs about politics and public policy that creates the structure for looking at government and public policy. Political ideologies can change over time. Differences in ideology generally occur in the arena of political, economic, and social issues.

Ideology: A Political Spectrum

- ♦ **radical**: favors rapid, fundamental change in existing social, economic, or political order; may be willing to resort to extreme means, even violence or revolution to accomplish such change (extreme change to create an entirely new social system)
- ♦ **liberal**: supports active government in promoting individual welfare and supporting civil rights, and accepts peaceful political and social change within the existing political system
- ♦ **moderate**: political ideology that falls between liberal and conservative and which may include some of both; usually thought of as tolerant of others' political opinions and not likely to hold extreme views on issues
- ♦ **conservative**: promotes a limited governmental role in helping individuals economically, supports traditional values and lifestyles, favors a more active role for government in promoting national security, and approaches change cautiously
- ♦ **reactionary**: advocates a return to a previous state of affairs, often a social order or government that existed earlier in history (may be willing to go to extremes to achieve their goals)

PARTICIPATION AND VOTING

Forms of Political Participation

- ♦ voting in elections
- ♦ discussing politics and attending political meetings
- ♦ forming interest groups and PACS
- ♦ contacting public officials
- ♦ campaigning for a candidate or political party
- ♦ contributing money to a candidate or political party
- ♦ running for office
- ♦ protesting government decisions

Most of these behaviors would be considered conventional or routine, within the acceptable channels of representative government. Less conventional behaviors have been used when groups have felt powerless and ineffective. Although Americans are less approving of unconventional behaviors, those tactics are sometimes effective in influencing government decisions. The often-violent protests against the Vietnam Conflict discouraged Lyndon Johnson from running for reelection in 1968.

The most common form of political participation in the United States is voting. However, Americans are less likely to vote than citizens of other countries.

Participation Through Voting

Democratic government is "government by the people." In the United States, participation through elections is the basis of the democratic process. According to democratic theory, everyone should be allowed to vote. In practice, however, no nation grants universal suffrage; all nations have requirements for voting.

Expansion of Suffrage

Suffrage is the right to vote. It is a political right that belongs to all those who meet certain requirements set by law. The United States was the first nation to provide for general elections of representatives through mass suffrage. The issue of suffrage is left to the states the only stipulation found in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution is that individuals who could vote for "the most numerous branch of the state legislature" could also vote for their Congressional representatives.

The composition of the American electorate has changed throughout history. Two major trends have marked the development of suffrage: the elimination of a number of restrictive requirements and the transfer of more and more authority from the states to the federal government.

Changes in voting requirements have included:

- ♦ elimination of religious qualifications, property ownership, and tax payments after 1800
- ♦ elimination of race disqualifications with the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870
- ♦ elimination of gender disqualifications with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920
- ♦ elimination of grandfather clauses, white primaries, and literacy requirements with the, passage of federal civil rights legislation and court decisions (Civil Rights Acts, Voting Rights Act of 1965)
- ♦ allowing residents of Washington, D.C., to vote in presidential elections with the passage of the 23rd Amendment in 1961
- ♦ elimination of poll taxes in federal elections with the passage of the 24th Amendment in 1964 (all poll taxes were ruled unconstitutional in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections, 1966*)
- ♦ lowering the minimum age for voting in federal elections to 18 with the passage of the 26th Amendment in 1971

Issue or Policy Voting

The Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century was a philosophy of political reform that fostered the development of mechanisms for increased direct participation.

- ♦ A direct primary allows citizens to nominate candidates.
- ♦ A recall is a special election initiated by petition to allow citizens to remove an official from office before a term expires.
- ♦ A referendum allows citizens to vote directly on issues called propositions (proposed laws or state constitutional amendments).
- ♦ An initiative allows voters to petition to propose issues to be decided by qualified voters.

Although the recall, referendum, and initiative do not exist at the national level, several states allow issue voting.

Candidate Voting

Voting for candidates is the most common form of political participation. It allows citizens to choose candidates they think will best serve their interests and makes public officials accountable for their actions. In the United States voters only elect two national officeholders-the president and vice president. All remaining candidates represent state or local constituencies.

Low Voter Turnout

Voting has been studied more closely than any other form of political participation in the United States. Studies have shown that voter turnout in the United States has decreased when compared with other nations and when compared with the United States over time. Voter turnout is higher if the election is seen as important; voter turnout is higher in presidential elections than in off-year elections. Several reasons might account for the low voter turnout:

- ♦ expansion of the electorate-increase in the number of potential voters (26th Amendment)
- ♦ failure of political parties to mobilize voters - negative campaigning, numerous elections, frequent elections, lack of party identification
- ♦ no perceived differences between the candidates or parties - both parties and their candidates are seen as virtually the same
- ♦ mistrust of government - a belief that all candidates are untrustworthy or unresponsive, due in part to the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals
- ♦ apathy - a lack of interest in politics; a belief that voting is not important
- ♦ satisfaction with the way things are - a belief that not voting will keep the status quo
- ♦ lack of political efficacy - people do not believe their vote out of millions of votes will make a difference
- ♦ mobility of electorate - moving around leads to a lack of social belonging
- ♦ registration process - differences in registration procedures from state to state may create barriers; the National Voter Registration Act of 1995 (Motor Voter Law) was designed to make voter registration easier by allowing people to register at drivers' license bureaus and some public offices

Who Votes?

Several factors affect the likelihood of voting:

- ♦ **Education** - The higher the level of education, the more likely a person is to vote. This is the most important indicator of voting behavior.
- ♦ **Occupation and income** - These often depend on education level. Those with white-collar jobs and higher levels of income are more likely to vote than those with blue-collar jobs or lower levels of income.
- ♦ **Age** - Older people are more likely to vote than younger people.
- ♦ **Race** - Minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to vote than whites, unless they have similar socioeconomic status.
- ♦ **Gender** - At one time, gender was not a major predictor, but today women are more likely to vote than men.
- ♦ **Religion** - Those who are more active within their religion are more likely to vote than those who do not attend religious services, or rarely attend.

- ◆ **Marital status** - Married people are more likely to vote than those who are not married.
- ◆ **Union membership** - Unions encourage participation, and union members tend to vote regularly.
- ◆ **Community membership** - People who are well integrated into community life are more likely to vote than those who have moved recently.
- ◆ **Party identification** - Those who have a strong sense of party identification are more likely to vote.
- ◆ **Geography** - Residents of states with interparty competition and close elections may be more likely to vote than those who live in states with one-party domination.

TYPES OF ELECTIONS

- ◆ Primary elections are nominating elections in which voters choose the candidates from each party who will run for office in the general election. There are several major types of primaries:
 - closed primary - Only voters who are registered in the party may vote to choose the candidate. Separate primaries are held by each political party, and voters must select a primary in advance.
 - open primary - Voters may vote to choose the candidates of either party, whether they belong to that party or not. Voters make the decision of which party to support in the voting booth.
 - blanket primary - Voters may vote for candidates of either party, choosing a Republican for one office and a Democrat for another; used only in Alaska and Washington.
 - runoff primary - When no candidate from a party receives a majority of the votes, the top two candidates face each other in a runoff.
- ◆ General elections are elections in which the voters choose from among all the candidates nominated by political parties or running as independents.
- ◆ Special elections are held whenever an issue must be decided by voters before a primary or general election is held, for example, to fill a vacancy in the Senate.

When Elections Are Held

Local, state, and federal laws determine when elections are held. Congress has established that congressional and presidential elections will be held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Congressional elections are held every even-numbered year, and presidential elections are held every fourth year.

Congressional Elections

Since congressional elections are held every even-numbered year, off-year elections (mid-term elections) occur during the year when no presidential election is held. Voter turnout in off-year elections is generally lower than during presidential election years. During presidential election years, the popularity of a presidential candidate may create a **coattail** effect, allowing lesser-known or weaker candidates from the presidential candidate's party to win by riding the "coattails" of the nominee.

Presidential Elections

The road to the White House and the presidency begins months and even years prior to the election. Some candidates begin the process as soon as the previous election is over. Phases of a candidacy include:

- ◆ **Exploration** - In deciding whether to run for president, individuals must determine whether they have enough political and financial support to win against other possible candidates. Often a possible nominee will form an exploratory committee to begin lining up support and finances, as well as to attract media coverage and gain widespread recognition.
- ◆ **Announcement** - Once a candidate has decided to run, an announcement is generally made in a press conference. This announcement is a formal declaration that the candidate is seeking the party's nomination.
- ◆ **Presidential primaries and caucuses** - In the past, state party officials would meet in a caucus to endorse the party candidate prior to presidential primaries. Abuses of the caucus system led to many states abandoning its use. Iowa still uses caucuses to nominate presidential candidates; however, today they are open to all members of the party. Most states today use the presidential preference primary to determine whom the state delegates to the national party convention will support. Voters vote in a primary election, and party delegates to the conventions support the winner of the primary election.
- ◆ **Nominating convention** - Each political party holds a national nominating convention in the summer prior to the general election. The convention is composed of delegates from each state, with each party determining its method of selecting delegates. The purpose of the nominating convention is to choose the party's presidential and vice-presidential nominees, write the party platform, and bring unity to the party in support of their chosen nominees.
- ◆ **Campaigning and the general election** - After the conventions are over, each candidate begins campaigning for the general election. Generally, candidates travel to swing states (these in which neither major party has overwhelming support) and often appear more moderate in an effort to win the largest possible number of votes. In recent years the candidates have faced each other in televised debates. The general election is then held to determine which candidate wins the electoral college vote for that state.

- ◆ **Electoral college** - When voters go to the polls on election day they are casting the popular vote. This vote is actually for electors. Each state has a number of electors equal to its senators and representatives in Congress. Also, Washington, D.C. has three electoral votes. The entire group of 538 electors is known as the electoral college. After the general election, the electors meet in their respective state capitals on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December. The candidate who wins a majority of popular votes in a state in the general election wins all the state's electoral votes in the electoral college (winner-take-all). Although the electors are not required to vote for their party's candidate, only rarely do they cast a vote for someone else. The votes cast in the electoral college are then sent to Congress, where they are opened and counted before a joint session. The candidate who receives a majority (270) of electoral votes is declared the winner. If no candidate for president receives a majority of electoral votes, the House of Representatives chooses the president from the top three candidates. If no candidate for vice president receives a majority of electoral votes, the Senate chooses the vice president from the top two candidates.

Partisanship in Elections

- ◆ **Maintaining elections** occur when the traditional majority power maintains power based on the party loyalty of voters.
- ◆ **Deviating elections** occur when the minority party is able to win with the support of majority-party members, independents, and new voters; however, the long-term party preferences of voters do not change.
- ◆ **Critical elections** indicate sharp changes in existing patterns of party loyalty due to changing social and economic conditions, for example, elections of 1860, 1896, and 1932.
- ◆ **Realigning elections** occur when the minority party wins by building a new coalition of voters that continues over successive elections. This is usually associated with a national crisis such as the Great Depression, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to create a new coalition of southerners, African Americans, the poor, Catholics and Jews, labor union members, and urban dwellers.
- ◆ **Dealigning elections** occur when party loyalty becomes less important to voters, as may be seen with the increase in independents and split-ticket voting.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Campaigning for political office is expensive. For the 2000 elections the Republican and Democratic parties raised more than 1.1 billion dollars.

Campaign Finance Regulations and Reforms

Prior to the 1970s candidates for public office received donations from businesses, labor organizations, and individuals to finance campaigns.

Congress passed the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) in 1971, restricting the amount of campaign funds that can be spent on advertising, requiring disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures, and limiting the amounts candidates and their families can donate to their own campaigns. It also allowed taxpayers to designate a donation on their tax return to the major political party candidates, beginning in the 1976 presidential election.

In 1974, after the Watergate scandal, Congress amended the Federal Election Campaign Act to establish a Federal Election Commission (FEC) to enforce the act, and established public financing for presidential candidates in primaries and the general election. The measure also restricted contributions by prohibiting foreign contributions, limiting individual contributions, and restricting the formation of PACs and their contributions. It was further amended in 1976 and 1979.

In 1976 the Supreme Court ruled in *Buckley v. Valeo*, that spending limits established by the FECA Amendments of 1974 were unconstitutional, ruling that those restrictions were in violation of the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of expression. *Buckley v. Valeo* also declared that the FECA ban on self-financed campaigns was unconstitutional.

In 1996 new questions arose over the use of "soft money," donations to political parties that could be used for general purposes. Originally, the money was supposed to be used for voter registration drives, national party conventions, and issue ads. Political parties were allowed to raise unlimited amounts of money because it was not to be used for campaigning. However, soft money has generally been spent in ways that ultimately help individual candidates. By the 2000 election, soft money donations had exceeded \$400 million between the two major parties.

Campaign finance reform has been a major issue in Congress. In 2002 Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (BCRA), banning the use of soft money in federal campaigns and increasing the 1974 limits on individual and group contributions to candidates. A result of the BCRA in the campaign of 2004 was the formation of "527" political organizations. A 527 political organization is a largely unregulated interest group that focuses on a single policy and attempts to influence voters. After the 2004 election, new rules governing 527 organizations regulated their use of soft money and allowed the FEC to examine their expenditures.