10 Elections and Public Opinion

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

- Describe the purpose and functions of elections in the United States.
- Analyze the relationship among elections, participation, and the democratic process.
- Distinguish between types of elections and analyze the circumstances surrounding realigning elections.
- Analyze the role of public opinion in elections.

In the 1994 midterm election, the Democrats lost control of the U.S. House of Representatives to the Republicans for the first time in 40 years. Republicans picked up 54 seats in the House; they also took control of the U.S. Senate as well as many state governorships. Pundits viewed this as a defeat for President Bill Clinton and were quick to say that the election represented a rejection of his efforts to bring about health care reform. Others claimed it was due to the inability of the Democrat-controlled Congress to accomplish anything substantive, including health care reform. Still others interpreted the change as a sign that the people had changed their party loyalties. Not only were people voting for Republican candidates, but they were increasingly identifying as Republicans. The 1994 election was indeed significant. Republicans would control the House of Representatives until the 2006 midterm election, and they would control the Senate until 2001.

In this chapter, we explore this and other elections in the context of their time and what they tell us about the contemporary American population. We also examine the role that elections generally play in the American political process. Elections are more than a matter of choosing individuals to govern. Elections tell us about what the people think is important, and they say something about the political values of a nation. Through elections, the people participate in the democratic process and hold public officials in constitutional government accountable. But the shifting winds of public opinion can also lead to unpredictable results.

10.1 Purpose of Elections

The United States uses elections to choose its leaders. Voting is the most basic form of political participation and is assumed to be a basic right in a democracy. However, elections are important for other reasons as well. In the United States, elections serve three basic functions:

1. They provide an essential basis for democratic expression.
2. They provide for a peaceful transfer of power.
3. They allow citizens, as a political community, to offer their tacit acceptance of the American constitutional tradition. By voting, citizens reaffirm their commitment to the social contract that the Constitution represents.

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Through elections, American voters offer their tacit acceptance of the constitutional tradition. Elections also provide for the peaceful transfer of power and are the basis of democratic expression.

Democratic Expression

People express themselves in a democracy by casting ballots either in person or by mail. Casting a vote allows them to express their preferences, which is an extension of human agency. When people vote for candidates who currently hold office, they affirm their support for the

current government, and when they vote against those who currently hold office, they register their opposition to that same government.

Citizens achieve the greatest state of democratic expression when they can control the circumstances affecting their lives. In the political world, people control their circumstances by electing the government that will make decisions on their behalf. Elections are the vehicles by which the people achieve their political voice.

Peaceful Transfer of Power

Americans may take a peaceful transfer of power for granted, but this is actually one of the unique features of the American legacy. When the Framers of the Constitution constructed the American political system, they wanted to ensure peaceful transfers of power. A peaceful transfer of power—that is, using the ballot box rather than the barrel of a gun—represented a serious break from past experience. The election of 1800 illustrates this point. John Adams, George Washington's vice president, who also was a Federalist, was elected president in 1796 after Washington opted not to seek a third term. Thomas Jefferson, the lead author of the U.S. Declaration of Independence who strongly opposed the centralized federal structure, lost to Adams in 1796. Jefferson became Adams's vice president because the original Constitution (since changed with the 12th Amendment in 1804) extended the vice presidency to the person who received the second-highest number of electoral votes in the presidential election. Adams ran for reelection in 1800, and Jefferson ran for president a second time. This time, Jefferson won. The peaceful, though not apolitical, transfer of power that resulted from this election, from the nation's first two presidents, both Federalists, to Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, reflected the Framers' aspirations.

Among the precedents that George Washington set as the first president was his personal choice not to seek more than two terms in office. Until the 22nd Amendment was ratified in 1951, the Constitution did not expressly prohibit presidents from serving two terms even though only one president (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) served more than two terms before the 22nd Amendment was ratified. Washington's action paved the way for the election of his replacement and the tradition of peaceful transfer of power in the United States. Because Americans can trust that power will be peacefully transferred, they do not have to resort to violence to change the government.

Tacit Acceptance of American Constitutional Tradition

The U.S. Constitution is in many respects a social contract between the government and the people, but it was entered into by a generation of people from whom current Americans are far removed. Thomas Jefferson thought it would be a good idea if every generation held a constitutional convention so that each could choose the governing arrangements that would best meet its needs. But because Americans choose their government through periodic elections, they do not really need to convene new constitutional conventions. Elections enable them to offer their **tacit consent**, or implied agreement, to the basic social contract of the Constitution. By freely participating in the political process through elections, Americans agree to the political arrangements that govern them. Elections, then, in a very broad sense fulfill a public support function.

Of course, the public support function rests on the same assumptions of trust that the peaceful transfer of power does. Only because the people trust that the government in power will respect their wishes can elections represent this tacit acceptance. After all, if citizens participate in the political process by voting, rather than seeking to overthrow it through rioting and rebellion, it must follow that they are basically happy and accept the legitimacy of the system. But if it can no longer govern effectively, the government loses its legitimacy.

10.2 Public Participation

Although a majority of the country may be eligible to vote, not everyone does. On one level, because elections are critical to democracy, many regard voting as a civic obligation, similar to jury duty. But on another level, freedom to participate in the democratic process also means the freedom not to participate.

The United States does not mandate participation in elections. It also has one of the lowest rates of voter participation compared with other representative democracies. If a group of people chooses not to vote and the government then pursues policies that this group does not like, do these people have a reasonable basis to complain?

Are politicians obligated to represent all the people, or only those who vote? In theory, all citizens have a legitimate claim to be represented by elected officials. In reality, however, politicians tend to represent only those who vote. Of course, the larger question is what it means to talk about the importance of voting if people fail to exercise this basic right. Another issue is that—given the long-fought battle for civil rights, of which voting was most prominent—if large segments of the population opt not to vote, what was the point of fighting for the right in the first place?

Who Votes?

American citizens age 18 or older are eligible to vote, but the "typical voter" usually falls into a particular set of demographic categories. For example, various studies have shown that a person's position in society based on economic class or education, or **socioeconomic status**, is a key determinant of who votes. Those with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to vote than those with a lower socioeconomic status are.

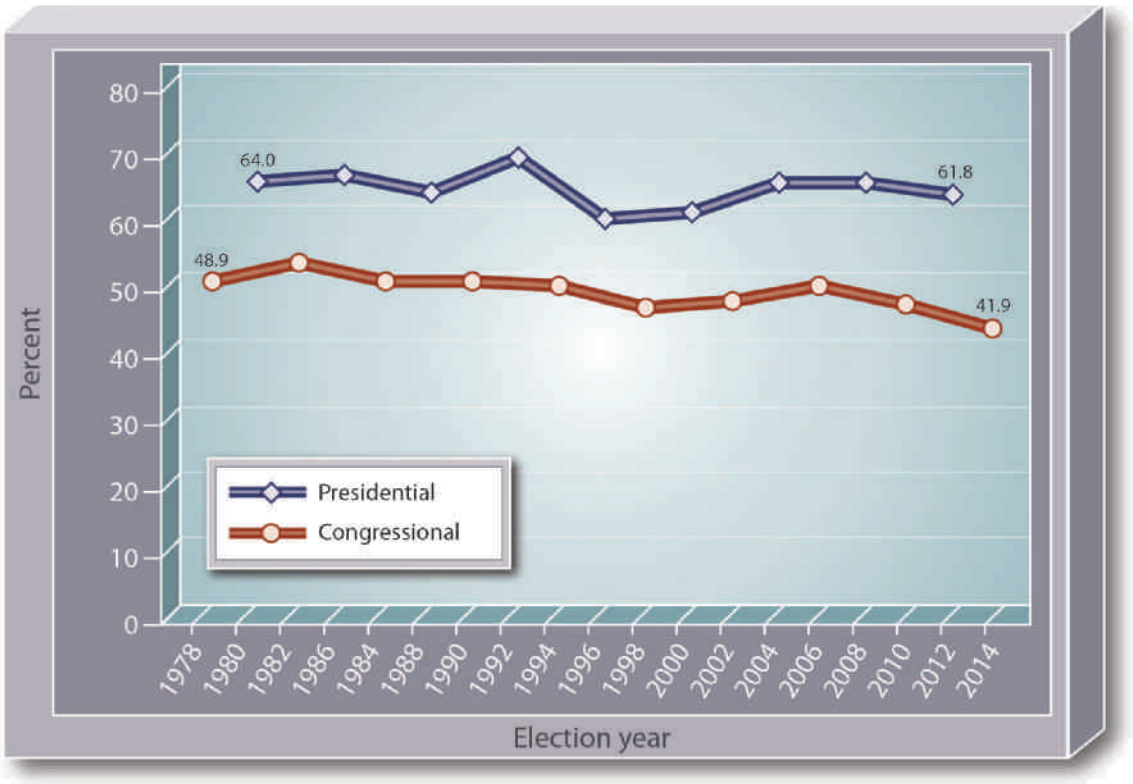
Older people are more likely to vote than younger people are, women are slightly more likely to vote than men are, and Whites are more likely to vote than members of racial or ethnic minority groups are. Further, those with a strong political ideology, often assumed from their families, religious groups, or other social influences, are more likely to vote than those without a strong ideology, religious commitment, or social connection are.

Reasons for Nonvoting

The electorate consists of those who are eligible to vote, whether they vote or not. Voter turnout during presidential elections usually falls between 50% and 60% and is even lower during midterm congressional elections (see Figure 10.1). This means that at least 40% of the electorate chooses not to participate. Why is this the case?

Figure 10.1: Voting rates in congressional and presidential elections: 1978–2014

In the years since 1980, American voter turnout has generally decreased.



*From "Who Votes? Congressional Elections and the American Electorate: 1978–2014," by T. File, 2015 (**http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p20-577.pdf**). Copyright 2015 by U.S. Census Bureau. Reprinted with permission.*

The Requirement to Register

All but one state requires that eligible voters be registered in order to vote. Voter registration has proven to be a barrier to voting. Supporters of mandatory registration argue that registration is a safeguard against fraud. Yet registration can be burdensome because it requires that forms be completed and submitted to the local supervisor of elections in advance of an election. Of the 49 states requiring that voters register, half require registration between 15 and 30 days in advance, while the other half require registration between 0 (Election Day registration) and 14 days before Election Day. Federal law prohibits states from requiring registration beyond 30 days before Election Day. While voter registration may be inconvenient, it helps emphasize the importance of voting and assumes that responsible citizens will complete the process.

Many argue that one response to low voter turnout is to take additional steps to ease access to registration. After passage of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) in 1993, various states implemented a **motor-voter** process, which allows people to register to vote when

they register their cars with the state Department of Motor Vehicles or apply for or renew a driver's license. (Of course, for those who do not drive, this may not be helpful.) The NVRA also allowed people to register by mail or when applying for various social services.

The Disillusionment of Poor Voters

Low-income people are less likely to vote for various reasons. These reasons may include the inconvenience and potentially lost wages to take time off to go to the polls, believing that voting will not affect the political process, or believing that elected officials do not understand their situation. Low-income people may believe that electing candidates who promise to enact economic and social programs that benefit lower-income groups will have little bearing on their lives. This belief may stem from the broker party nature of the system. Additionally, powerful interest groups enjoy advantages over individuals who are not organized.

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One purpose of voter registration is to prevent fraud. However, registration is often considered a barrier to voting because it requires individuals to fill out and submit a form by a state-mandated deadline.

When people opt out of the system because they believe it does not represent their interests well, their concerns become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many politicians believe that there is no point in campaigning in areas or neighborhoods with high percentages of nonvoters. As noted in the last chapter, running for office is very expensive. Candidates must make strategic decisions about where to allocate their resources. They are more likely to spend their time and money in neighborhoods that are known to have relatively high turnout and are less likely to pay much attention to low-turnout populations.

Constitutional Bases for Expanding Suffrage

Voting eligibility is addressed in just a few places in the Constitution. The first is the 15th Amendment (see Figure 10.2), ratified in 1870, which states that a citizen cannot be denied the right to vote by the national government or any of the states on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. This amendment provided the constitutional basis for newly freed slaves to be eligible to vote after the Civil War. Next is the 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, which says that citizens cannot be denied the right to vote on account of sex. This amendment granted women the right to vote.

The 23rd Amendment, ratified in 1961, extended the right to vote for president to residents of the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.). Before the amendment was ratified, Electoral College votes were given only to states, and because Washington, D.C. is a district and not a state, D.C. residents could not vote for the president. The 23rd Amendment gave to Washington, D.C. the same number of Electoral College votes as the smallest state. As each state is guaranteed

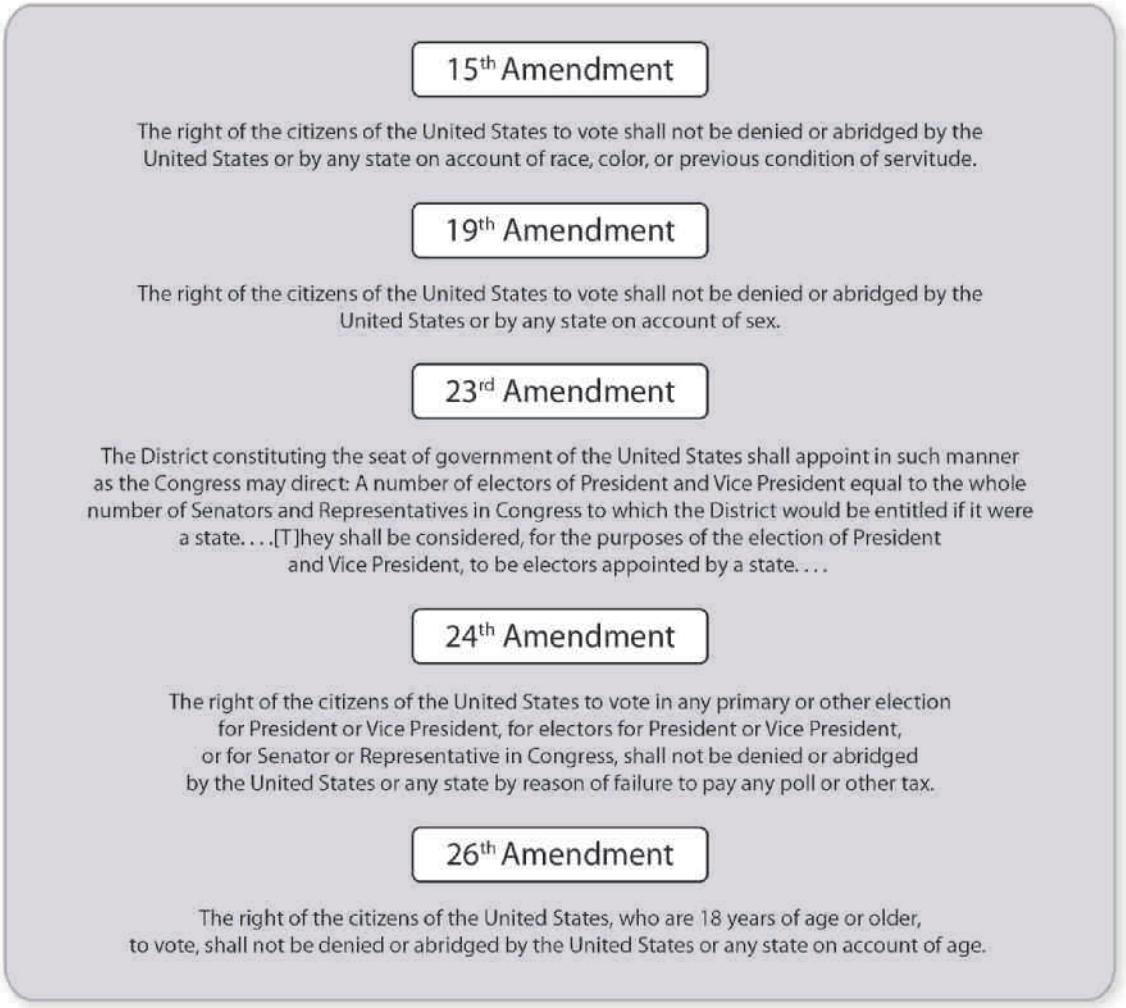
a minimum of three Electoral College votes, the District of Columbia was guaranteed three Electoral College votes as well.

The 24th Amendment, ratified in 1964, states that the right to vote in national elections cannot be denied for failing to pay a poll tax. The 24th Amendment was proposed and ratified in response to Southern states that were using such taxes to disqualify poor Blacks from voting. Finally, the 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the legal voting age to 18. While some states allowed those over 18 to vote, other states required a minimum age of 21.

Voter eligibility is otherwise assumed to be a matter of states' rights. States have enjoyed the power to determine who is eligible to vote while also handling their voter registration. States began eliminating property qualifications in the 1820s, and it was the Southern states that targeted voting barriers toward African Americans. The women's suffrage movement originally began as a grassroots movement on a state-by-state basis, with Wyoming being the first state to allow women to vote in state and local elections, in 1893.

Figure 10.2: Voting eligibility according to the Constitution

Voting eligibility is addressed in only four places in the Constitution, and all of them are amendments.



Suffragettes stand in front of the Woman Suffrage headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1912. The 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920.

The constitutional amendments that expanded suffrage, federal legislation such as the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and key U.S. Supreme Court cases each removed voting barriers that were erected by the states. In fact, the Voting Rights Act prohibited states from imposing any "voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure . . . to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color." It was Congress's specific intention to outlaw the practice of requiring otherwise qualified voters to pass literacy tests to register to vote, which had been another method, in addition to poll taxes, by which Southern states denied African Americans the right to vote.

Increasing the Voter Rolls

Both parties seek to increase their election chances by increasing their registration numbers. In recent years, both parties have sought to find new voters among the Latino population. For example, when Republican President George W. Bush campaigned for office, he prided himself on being able to speak fluent Spanish in an attempt to increase Latino support for Republican candidates.

10.3 Types of Elections

Political scientist V. O. Key, Jr. (1955, 1959) famously observed that there are four types of elections: maintaining, deviating, reinstating, and realigning.

Maintaining Elections

A maintaining election is one in which the majority party, which holds power, such as the majority party in Congress, continues to hold power following an election. This type of election requires a continuation of party loyalty among the party-in-the-electorate, which assumes that voters will remain loyal to their party by voting for candidates sharing their party label.

This type of election is a maintaining election because the allegiance of the voters has not changed, probably because the nation is not facing a major crisis or, if facing a crisis, voters believe that the government in place and the party in power are handling it well. A

maintaining election, then, is about preserving the status quo. A pattern of maintaining elections may result in representatives becoming complacent. If the majority party in government can rely on long-standing party loyalty among the electorate, it may not feel the need to be as close to the people as it would if the races were more competitive.

Deviating Elections

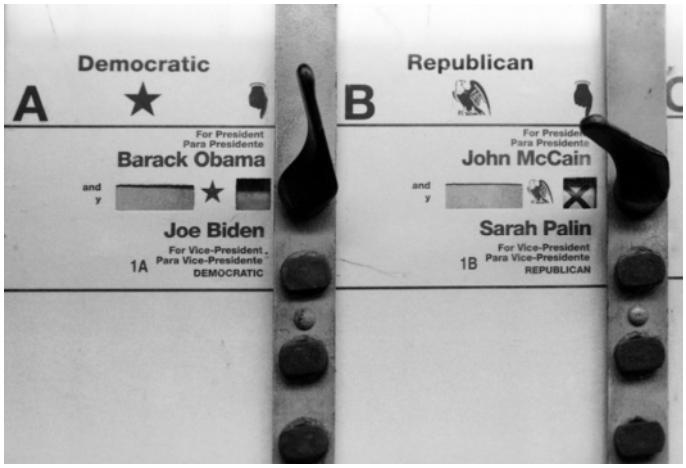
A deviating election occurs when short-term forces overtake long-term party loyalties. Voters cast their ballots for the party out of power, the minority party, displacing the majority party from power. While voters may support the party to which they do not belong in this election and maybe the next, these voters remain loyal to their party. They maintain their allegiance to their party even though they feel compelled to vote for the other party due to short-term forces, such as candidates and issues, that change with each election (either because different candidates and issues get shifted or because the magnitude of certain issues changes). The result is seen as a temporary deviation from the norm because the expectation is that, once the crisis is over, the former majority party will be returned to power.

Associated Press

Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential election victory is an example of a deviating election because large numbers of Democratic voters crossed party lines to vote for him.

Reinstating Elections

The return to power of a former majority party following a deviating election is called a reinstating election. A reinstating election brings a return to the status quo. It also verifies that whatever forces resulted in the deviation were short lived. Because the political landscape remains unchanged, reinstating elections have much in common with maintaining and deviating elections. Each represents relative stability in the composition of both the party-in-the-electorate and the party-in-the-government, with the electorate generally voting on the basis of traditional party loyalties.



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Political scientist V. O. Key, Jr. observed that there are four types of elections. Which of these do you think best describes the 2008 presidential election?

Some may argue that the election of 2008, in which Democrat Barack Obama was elected, was a reinstating election after Republican President George W. Bush's two terms. Bush's election in 2000, in which he won the Electoral College vote but lost the popular vote to Democratic Vice President Al Gore, deviated from the two previous Democratic presidential victories in 1992 and 1996.

Realigning Elections

A realigning election produces a major change in the composition of the party-in-the-government following a massive shift in the party-in-the-electorate. Voters abandon longtime party loyalties and shift their allegiance from the majority party to the minority party, which results in the minority party becoming the new majority party. As V. O. Key, Jr. (1955, 1959) saw it, a realigning election is a **critical election** because it represents a massive and durable shift in party loyalty that results in a long-term change in characteristics of the electorate and the composition of government. For an election to be considered critical, the voter realignment must be both *sharp* and *durable*. To be sharp, voter participation is relatively high, making it clear that whatever divisions within the electorate existed prior to the election have been fundamentally altered. The realignment must also occur at all levels of government.

For a realignment to be durable, the new electoral composition must persist over time. To measure the sharpness of the shift, an issue or a set of issues that would cause voters to make a monumental change would be essential. It would be extremely difficult to examine a single election isolated from its larger political context to determine durability. A momentous event, such as a war or a deep recession, that reorders the political landscape in ways not seen before is required.

Key argued that for there to be such a massive shift in one election, there would have to be a significant **cleavage**, or division, among the electorate. The people might argue, for example, over whether the government should provide universal health care; cleavage may be said to exist between conservatives who espouse individual liberty and limited government and liberals who support greater equality and more active government. If times are good and most people are confident about their economic future, perhaps the majority party that supports health care reform will remain in power. But a deep recession resulting in high unemployment and increased anxiety can cause the existing division to become more pronounced.

Key also recognized that there have been few instances in American history when voters switched allegiance in a single election. Key expanded his concept of critical elections to include gradual shifts over a long period. A given election might represent a phase in a long-term process of declining group solidarity. The critical election, then, might represent the culmination of this process. In the critical election, voters abandon their party and switch allegiance to the other major party. Students of critical elections suggest that they occur every 30 years or so.

Consequences of Realignment

The most profound consequence of realignment is a change in the party-in-the-government, which in turn often means a significant change in policy direction. Had the electorate been pleased with the direction of the country and the policies that it was pursuing prior to the election, there would not have been a realignment.

Examples of Realignment

The election of 1932, which occurred after the Great Depression hit, was an example of a realigning election because the Republicans lost the majority control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, which occurred for nearly all elections until 1994. Democrat Franklin Roosevelt unseated incumbent Republican President Herbert Hoover, while many state houses changed to Democratic rule. All of the presidents elected from 1860 until 1932, with two exceptions, were Republican. Because of the depths of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt came to office backed by an electoral coalition that included ethnic and religious minorities, blue-collar workers, and union members, as well as the traditional Southern states. This new coalition would remain the base of the Democratic Party until the late 1960s.

Yet suggesting that a particular election was a critical election because realignment occurred is to be retrospective. It does not necessarily mean that one can predict future elections based on what happened in the past. As an example, consider that political commentator Kevin Phillips wrote *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969 in an attempt to analyze the 1968 election. According to Phillips (1969), Richard Nixon's election was the beginning of an electoral realignment because more people were moving to the suburbs and these suburban communities were voting Republican. Beginning with Nixon, the Republicans held the presidency from 1980 to 1988 and 2000 to 2008. Not only did suburban communities shift Republican, so too did many Southern states, because they were upset that Democratic President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which took power away from the Democratic-dominated Southern states in managing elections. Because the base of the Democratic Party had been concentrated in the cities, Phillips reasoned, the party would not be able to hold its majority if the demographics changed to favor suburbia. If Phillips was correct in saying that 1968 was the beginning of a realignment, that would mean that the 1976 election of Democrat Jimmy Carter was a deviation while the 1980 election of Republican Ronald Reagan was the reinstatement. Carter may have won because of deep divisions over Watergate. Carter's opponent, incumbent President Gerald Ford, had been Nixon's vice president. After Ford ascended to the presidency following Nixon's resignation, he had pardoned Nixon for Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal.

Associated Press

The 1968 presidential election, won by Richard Nixon, has been called a realigning election.

If 1968 was not a realigning election, then it was a deviating election, with 1976 serving as a reinstating election, while the realignment would have happened in 1980. Nixon won in 1968 in a close election amid deep divisions over the Vietnam War and the sense that there was too much lawlessness in the Democratic Party, as evidenced by the violence at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago. Ultimately, the answer to whether an election was a critical election is a matter of interpretation.

Primaries and Caucuses

Presidential elections begin at the state level through a series of primaries and caucuses. Since the 1960s, states have increasingly adopted primary elections far more than caucuses as a means to select candidates. Most primaries are either *open primaries* or *closed primaries*. Most states hold **closed primaries**, where only registered party members may vote in that party's primary. In **open primaries**, by contrast, registered voters, no matter their party registration, or no party registration, may vote in one, but not both, party primaries.

Another way of selecting candidates is through the caucus system. Caucuses tend to be found in smaller states (such as Iowa) and require a greater time investment from the voters than casting a ballot. In a caucus, voters report to their polling station, in which each candidate has an area. Voters then go to the area of their preferred candidate, but voters in other areas, that is, supporters of other candidates, can challenge the preferences of others. This often leads to a general discussion of why one candidate is preferable to another. At the end of the night, support in each area in each precinct is tallied up and delegates are apportioned on the basis of the percentage of support that each candidate received.

One key benefit to the caucus system is that participants must be familiar with candidates' issue positions so that they can intelligently defend their choices. Yet state-level caucuses tend to demonstrate low turnout because they require more commitment from voters. As a consequence, the outcomes may not be entirely representative of the state electorate because only party activists tend to participate. Three fourths of the states use primaries for presidential nominations.

10.4 The Role of Public Opinion in Elections

The outcome of an election often reflects the tide of public opinion. As U.S. Senator Barack Obama defeated U.S. Senator John McCain in 2008, the electoral outcome can be said to reflect various factors linked to public opinion toward Obama, McCain, the incumbent president and his party, various issues, partisanship, a combination of these, or something else. Public opinion also plays a key role in elections because candidates utilize pollsters to gauge public opinion throughout the election season. Still, as much as we talk about the importance of public opinion in democracy, it is not always easy to gauge.

Defining Public Opinion: Values, Ideology, and Attitudes

Public opinion generally encompasses values, political ideology, and attitudes. *Values* represent deep-rooted goals, aspirations, and ideals that shape an individual's perceptions of political issues. As an example, most Americans believe in freedom as a fundamental American value. Though we may all define it differently, most people aspire to live freely.

Differences over the meaning of freedom involve political *ideology*. As a matter of ideology, one might think that personal freedom is maximized when government is limited in its function. A limited government would mean little regulation, low taxes, and very few social programs.

Such an ideology is often referred to as conservative. The political ideology that values government support for disadvantaged populations or during periods of hardship is considered liberal or progressive. An *attitude* is a specific view about a particular issue, personality, or event that is shaped by ideology.

Values, political ideology, and attitudes may be affected by various factors, including socioeconomic status, family background, and one's political environment.

Measuring Public Opinion Through Polling

The easiest way to measure public opinion is through surveys. Analysts, candidates, and officeholders routinely conduct polls to get a sense of public attitudes toward particular issues.

Polls conducted using scientific techniques are more accurate than those that are not. Scientific polls take a random sample of the population such that each person in the sample has an equal chance of being selected. A poll of registered Democratic activists is not a valid sample of the public because the respondents may be more ideological than the public and, thus, not represent the public's views on government and issues.

Today, most people have phones, which was not true in the 1940s. Sampling from the telephone book would not produce a sample representing the public. In the early days of polling, there were some significant inaccuracies. The most famous case was the 1948 election, where pollsters predicted Thomas Dewey's defeat of President Harry Truman. Dewey went to bed thinking that he had won, only to find out that he had lost.

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The most famous case of polling inaccuracy was the 1948 election, where pollsters prematurely predicted Thomas Dewey's defeat of President Harry Truman. Truman is shown here holding up an erroneous headline from a newspaper that went to press early on election night.

Forces That Shape Values and Ideology

Individuals develop their values and ideology through **agents of socialization**, which are the institutions and influences that help shape one's basic political worldview. Four important agencies of socialization are the family, social groups, education, and prevailing political conditions.

The most important agent of socialization is the family. For example, children take on the ideology and other public perspectives of their parents, while family socioeconomic status might also affect one's political ideology and values.

The second most important agent of socialization is education. Educated persons might think critically and be more open to competing ideas, while someone whose education focuses on reinforcing core values without questioning them will likely take on those same ideological approaches.

People are also socialized by the types of social groups, such as interest groups or churches, to which they belong. A social group is an important reinforcement because people are interacting with others who share their values. Finally, political values and ideology are often affected by prevailing political and economic conditions.

Cleavages in Public Opinion

It is tempting to talk about American public opinion as though there is one unified public. But public opinion is characterized by deep divisions across worldviews and the political ideologies on which those worldviews are based. Factors affecting these cleavages include occupation, race, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Individuals in higher-paying occupations may view tax policy differently from how individuals in lower-paying occupations do. Similarly, as average incomes tend to be higher among Republicans, there is often more opposition to new or increased taxes among Republicans compared with Democrats. Democrats, whose average income is lower than that of Republicans, may be more likely to favor increased or new taxes as a means of promoting welfare and other forms of support for lower-income groups.

Associated Press/Paul Sancya

Affirmative action deeply divides public opinion along racial lines.

While occupation may account for varying policy attitudes, it may not be as important in explaining other political attitudes. Race is an important variable that affects policy views. Affirmative action, for instance, divides public opinion along racial lines. Blacks tend to support affirmative action programs, while Whites tend to oppose affirmative action due to concerns about reverse discrimination. Still, such cleavages are not absolute. More affluent Whites tend to support affirmative action, while many successful Blacks oppose it because they believe that it stigmatizes them. At the same time, partisanship affects support for affirmative action, as Democrats more strongly support affirmative action on the grounds that it promotes equal opportunity, while Republicans tend to oppose affirmative action because they believe that it limits individual opportunities for success.

Religion is also an important source of cleavage. Catholics and evangelical Christians tend to oppose abortion and same-sex marriage, which may affect vote choice. Evangelical Christians favor school prayer more than other religious groups do. Meanwhile, Jews tend to oppose school prayer and often see it as a threat to First Amendment religious protections.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Elections are a staple of the American political system, and through elections the public achieves democratic expression. Elections enable the peaceful transfer of power, which is fundamental to democracy. Through elections, the public offers its tacit consent for the American constitutional tradition. Although elections serve an important function, election outcomes may not represent public preferences, in part because much of the eligible electorate does not vote. Voting is a matter of individual preference, and the freedom to vote includes the freedom not to vote. But non-participation is particularly problematic in the United States because most of those who do not vote tend to be poor, and the poor often choose not to vote because they do not believe that the political system is responsive to their needs. When people choose not to vote, elected officials might not feel as obligated to represent them. The effects of non-participation, then, may be to distort the representative function of elections.

As critical as elections are to the democratic process, they may also reveal much about citizens' beliefs and core values. Analysts often evaluate elections within the context of critical elections, whether there has been a sharp and durable shift in party affiliation following deep political cleavages, resulting in a new majority party in power. A critical election may result in a new policy direction for the country. A critical election may reveal that the public is not of one mind with regard to what constitutes its core beliefs and values. This means that there are multiple publics, which often break down along class, educational, occupational, and racial lines.

Measuring public opinion is important to the electoral process. But it is not always clear. When members of Congress take a position on an issue, they might be responding to public opinion as reported either in polls or in what is being reported in the press. As we will see in Chapter 12, this means that the press also plays an important role in American politics.

Key Ideas to Remember

- Through elections, citizens express themselves as a political community, give their tacit acceptance of the constitutional arrangements that govern them, and achieve a peaceful transfer of power.
- Voting is the most basic form of public participation, but those with a higher socioeconomic status tend to participate more. The effect of nonvoting might be to distort the democratic process.
- Nonvoting tends to be more concentrated among lower-income groups, largely because they do not think that voting will significantly improve their lives. Registering to vote has proven to be a significant barrier for some groups. Attempts to register more voters could significantly increase the number of people voting.

- V. O. Key, Jr. identified four types of elections, with a realigning election identified as a critical election. For an election to be critical, there would have to be a sharp and durable realignment among the electorate in terms of party affiliation, as measured by significant and lasting change in the party-in-the-government. The realignment would be brought on by deep divisions in the country that might be precipitated by a severe crisis.
- Elections often reflect changes in public opinion, which encompasses values, political ideology, and attitudes.

Questions to Consider

1. Why does the United States have elections?
2. Why are elections critical to the peaceful transfer of power?
3. What demographic factors are most likely to predict whether an individual votes?
4. Why do some people choose not to participate in the political process?
5. What does V. O. Key, Jr.'s typology of elections tell us about the nature of American politics?
6. How does public opinion relate to values and political ideology?
7. What are some of the sources of the opinions that people have, and what are the bases for cleavages in public opinion?
8. What are the most important reasons contributing to lower voter turnout in mid-term versus presidential elections?
9. Given Key's definition of a critical election, can we say that the 1994 election was an example of one? Why or why not?

Key Terms

agents of socialization Institutions that help shape an individual's political values.

cleavage The division of voters into voting blocs.

closed primaries Elections for a statewide presidential candidate in which one can vote only in the party primary that one is registered for.

critical election An election in which a major party realignment occurs.

motor-voter A system of voter registration whereby people register to vote when they register their cars or apply for or renew a driver's license.

open primaries Elections for a statewide presidential candidate in which one can vote in either party primary, regardless of party affiliation.

socioeconomic status One's standing or position in society based on economic class or educational attainment.

tacit consent Giving effective agreement through a behavior, such as voting.

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