

Summary

9.1 Voter Registration

Voter registration varies from state to state, depending on local culture and concerns. In an attempt to stop the disenfranchisement of Black voters, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act (1965), which prohibited states from denying voting rights based on race, and the Supreme Court determined grandfather clauses and other restrictions were unconstitutional. Some states only require that a citizen be over eighteen and reside in the state. Others include additional requirements. Some states require registration to occur thirty days prior to an election, and some allow voters to register the same day as the election.

Following the passage of the Help America Vote Act (2002), states are required to maintain accurate voter registration rolls and are working harder to register citizens and update records. Registering has become easier over the years; the National Voter Registration Act (1993) requires states to add voter registration to government applications, while an increasing number of states are implementing novel approaches such as online voter registration and automatic registration.

9.2 Voter Turnout

Some believe a healthy democracy needs many participating citizens, while others argue that only informed citizens should vote. When turnout is calculated as a percentage of the voting-age population (VAP), it often appears that just over half of U.S. citizens vote. Using the voting-eligible population (VEP) yields a slightly higher number, and the highest turnout, 87 percent, is calculated as a percentage of registered voters. Citizens older than sixty-five and those with a high income and advanced education are very likely to vote. Those younger than thirty years old, especially if still in school and earning low income, are less likely to vote.

Hurdles in a state's registration system and a high number of yearly elections may also decrease turnout. Some states have turned to early voting and mail-only ballots as ways to combat the limitations of one-day and weekday voting. The Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby v. Holder* led to states' removal from the Voting Rights Act's preclearance list. Many of these states implemented changes to their election laws, including the requirement to show photo identification before voting. Globally, the United States experiences lower turnout than other nations; some counties automatically register citizens or require citizens to vote.

9.3 Elections

The Federal Election Commission was created in an effort to control federal campaign donations and create transparency in campaign finance. Individuals and organizations have

contribution limits, and candidates must disclose the source of their funds. However, decisions by the Supreme Court, such as *Citizens United*, have voided sections of the campaign finance law, and businesses and organizations may now run campaign ads and support candidates for offices. The cases also resulted in the creation of super PACs, which can raise unlimited funds, provided they do not coordinate with candidates' campaigns.

The first stage in the election cycle is nomination, where parties determine who the party nominee will be. State political parties choose to hold either primaries or caucuses, depending on whether they want a fast and private ballot election or an informal, public caucus. Delegates from the local primaries and caucuses will go to state or national conventions to vote on behalf of local and state voters.

During the general election, candidates debate one another and run campaigns. Election Day is in early November, but the Electoral College formally elects the president mid-December. Congressional incumbents often win or lose seats based on the popularity of their party's president or presidential candidate.

9.4 Campaigns and Voting

Campaigns must try to convince undecided voters to vote for a candidate and get the party voters to the polls. Early money allows candidates to start a strong campaign and attract other donations. The election year starts with primary campaigns, in which multiple candidates compete for each party's nomination, and the focus is on name recognition and issue positions. General election campaigns focus on getting party members to the polls. Shadow campaigns and super PACs may run negative ads to influence voters. Modern campaigns use television to create emotions and the Internet to interact with supporters and fundraise.

Most voters will cast a ballot for the candidate from their party. Others will consider the issues a candidate supports. Some voters care about what candidates have done in the past, or what they may do in the future, while others are concerned only about their personal finances. Lastly, some citizens will be concerned with the candidate's physical characteristics. Incumbents have many advantages, including war chests, franking privileges, and gerrymandering.

9.5 Direct Democracy

Direct democracy allows the voters in a state to write laws, amend constitutions, remove politicians from office, and approve decisions made by government. Initiatives are laws or constitutional amendments on the ballot. Referendums ask voters to approve a decision by the government. The process for ballot measures requires the collection of signatures from voters, approval of the measure by state government, and a ballot election. Recalls allow citizens to remove politicians from office. While direct democracy does give citizens a say in the policies and laws of their state, it can also be used by businesses and the wealthy to

pass policy goals. Initiatives can also lead to bad policy if voters do not research the measure or misunderstand the law.

Key Terms

ballot fatigue

the result when a voter stops voting for offices and initiatives at the bottom of a long ballot

caucus

a form of candidate nomination that occurs in a town-hall style format rather than a day-long election; usually reserved for presidential elections

chronic minority

voters who belong to political parties that tend not to be competitive in national elections because they are too small to become a majority or because of the Electoral College system distribution in their state

closed primary

an election in which only voters registered with a party may vote for that party's candidates

coattail effect

the result when a popular presidential candidate helps candidates from the same party win their own elections

delegates

party members who are chosen to represent a particular candidate at the party's state- or national-level nominating convention

district system

the means by which electoral votes are divided between candidates based on who wins districts and/or the state

early voting

an accommodation that allows voting up to two weeks before Election Day

Electoral College

the constitutionally created group of individuals, chosen by the states, with the responsibility of formally selecting the next U.S. president

incumbency advantage

the advantage held by officeholders that allows them to often win reelection

incumbent

the current holder of a political office

initiative

law or constitutional amendment proposed and passed by the voters and subject to review by the state courts; also called a proposition

midterm elections

the congressional elections that occur in the even-numbered years between presidential election years, in the middle of the president's term

open primary

an election in which any registered voter may vote in any party's primary or caucus

platform

the set of issues important to the political party and the party delegates

political action committees (PACs)

organizations created to raise money for political campaigns and spend money to influence policy and politics

recall

the removal of a politician or government official by the voters

referendum

a yes or no vote by citizens on a law or candidate proposed by the state government

residency requirement

the stipulation that citizen must live in a state for a determined period of time before a citizen can register to vote as a resident of that state

shadow campaign

a campaign run by political action committees and other organizations without the coordination of the candidate

straight-ticket voting

the practice of voting only for candidates from the same party

super PACs

officially known as Independent Expenditure-Only Committees; organizations that can fundraise and spend as they please to support or attack a candidate but not contribute directly to a candidate or strategize with a candidate's campaign

top-two primary

a primary election in which the two candidates with the most votes, regardless of party, become the nominees for the general election

voter fatigue

the result when voters grow tired of voting and stay home from the polls

voting-age population

the number of citizens over eighteen

voting-eligible population

the number of citizens eligible to vote

winner-take-all system

all electoral votes for a state are given to the candidate who wins the most votes in that state