

CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

Elections are the basis of any democracy. **Without free and fair elections, there can be no real democracy.** Elections provide the means by which citizens select leaders who enact policies that determine “who gets what, when, how, and why.”

An **informed and active citizenry** is central to successful democratic elections. As we have seen, however, that is the ideal. Citizens in the U.S. are ill-informed about politics, and general voting interest is extremely low (20% or less vote in local elections). Several reasons for this have been discussed, among them: apathy, alienation, winner-take-all-system, lack of choice, mistrust and cynicism, and media negativism. Some campaigns do capture voters’ interest. People will respond to elections if they feel there is **sufficient reason to vote**—when they perceive the choices to be meaningful (as in the 2004 elections), the election is competitive, and candidates speak to them (as for example, in 1992, to younger voters).

READING ASSIGNMENTS:

- In *Understanding American Government*, read Chapter 8, and in Chapter 9, pages 289-299.

OBJECTIVES:

- To clarify why elections are **vital to democracy**
- To develop an understanding of the **varieties of elections** Americans can participate in if they so choose
- To examine **what it takes** to get elected
- To distinguish in what ways getting **nominated** differs from getting **elected**
- To determine if elections in the U.S. reflect the desire and will of the people.
- To develop an understanding that **election campaigns today** are vastly **different from elections** prior to the advent of **television**
- To understand the difference between “**wholesale politics**” and “**resale politics**”

LECTURE OUTLINE:

1. Elections and Democracy
2. Why Do They Run? Power, Ambition, and Service
3. What Is Required of a Candidate
4. Advantages of Incumbency
5. Campaign Strategies
6. The Primary and the General Campaign
7. The Voter Decides
8. Possible Reforms

Elections and Democracy

As discussed in earlier lectures, **the existence of free and fair elections** are an important way we identify democracy. They are the most common form of participation. In the American system of government, we elect our rulers rather than make the rules ourselves.

Elections provide **protection against official abuse**. Voters have to be reckoned with, and at times they have demonstrated great decisiveness. **Retrospective voting, for example, occurs when an incumbent is removed from office based on the public's perception of her having performed poorly in office.**

Power and Ambition

Politics attracts people who desire power and influence more than money or privacy, although with the growing importance of the “revolving door” between government and business, a couple of terms in Congress can be a stepping stone to a very lucrative lobbying or consulting career.

Why people choose to run for office is important to voters. American political culture does not accept personal reasons for entering politics, or public service simply as a stepping stone to higher office. This is particularly true for women, who for some reason are considered dangerous if they are ambitious. During the 2004 vice-presidential debates, Dick Cheney attempted to portray himself as simply a public servant with no interest in attaining higher office, and implied that his younger opponent, Democrat John Edwards, had his eye on eventually winning the presidency.

There are many **characteristics necessary for success**, aside from the constitutional requirements. A candidate has to be able and willing to sell herself, to have enough confidence to go door to door and convince voters of her qualifications for office. Inherent in this is the **ability to communicate**. One of the strongest political characteristics of President Bush during the primaries for the 2000 election was his ability to communicate to his base.

Now, at the same time, one must also display a temperament conducive to **politics as a profession**. The point is that a candidate must be able to keep their cool when in public, and be respectful of her opponents, challenges from the media, and to have the sense to avoid saying extremist or controversial statements likely to offend a large number of people.

Finally, the candidate requires the ability to **attract money**. As your book notes, modern campaigns are complex endeavors that require financing for advertising, office space, communications, large

staffs, and depending on the campaign, hiring consultants, public relations experts, stylists, etc. According to your book, what is the cost of a modern presidential campaign? A Senate campaign? Obviously, if you are running for something like city council or for a position in county government, costs will vary, depending on the city and the likelihood of a hotly contested race. Interest groups play an important role, here. Not only do interest groups use campaigns to get out the vote and raise money, but they also provide their members or citizens sympathetic to their work with information about a particular candidate. For example, if you're online, click on this link for **Project Vote Smart**, and select your Representative or Senator, and see how different interest groups have rated them on the issues important to you (select the issues from the drop down box, after you've selected the official). It's interesting, take a look: http://www.vote-smart.org/official_congress_state.php?criteria=MI

In a campaign, there are several advantages one candidate might have over another, regardless of their qualities to hold office. Now let's look at the incumbent – the person currently holding the office in question and running for reelection – who usually begins her campaign with the upper hand over her opponents.

Advantages of Incumbency

Incumbents **have strong advantages over their challengers** (in your textbook, review pages 276-279) Name recognition is important, especially if the incumbent has held office for more than one term, as voters who are ill informed will often vote for a recognizable name. Incumbents, especially Senators and House members, enjoy the advantages that come with being in office - free use of the U.S. mails, travel allowances, and large, professional staffs to handle casework and press. Incumbents that have been in office for some time usually have a record of providing benefits to people or interests in their districts. This is crucial for fundraising, and makes the incumbent with a proven record more attractive to Political Action Committees (PACs). Democratic Representative John Dingell, for example, has a reputation of delivering the goods for his constituents, especially the Ford Motor Company and its employees, headquartered in his district. An incumbent, however, is always raising funds and always trying to keep herself visible to her constituents – what your textbook calls the “permanent campaign.”

When a president runs for reelection, for example, he usually enjoys about three times the press coverage of his challenger. This is largely due to the nature of the office. As the president has great resources at his disposal, he can turn every appearance as president into an unofficial campaign event. George W. Bush used this to full advantage in the 2004 election; we'll look at some of these more in-depth when we meet in class.

Campaign Strategies

An important point about modern campaigns is the shift in strategy from **retail politics**, where the candidate goes door to door and meets the voters personally, to **wholesale politics** based on the media and mass communication. In certain local elections, retail politics is still important and necessary, while for national campaigns, retail politics are in fact part of a larger media strategy.

The great benefit of advertisements is that they enable the campaign message to be well crafted, concise, and minimal potential for mistakes. Of course, the impact of the big rise in advertising and political consultants has caused the cost of campaigning to skyrocket and thus put a premium on candidates who can raise the most money. Politicians also shy away from more risky face-to-face conversations and towards staged events where it is clearer what the media's coverage will be and how it will play.

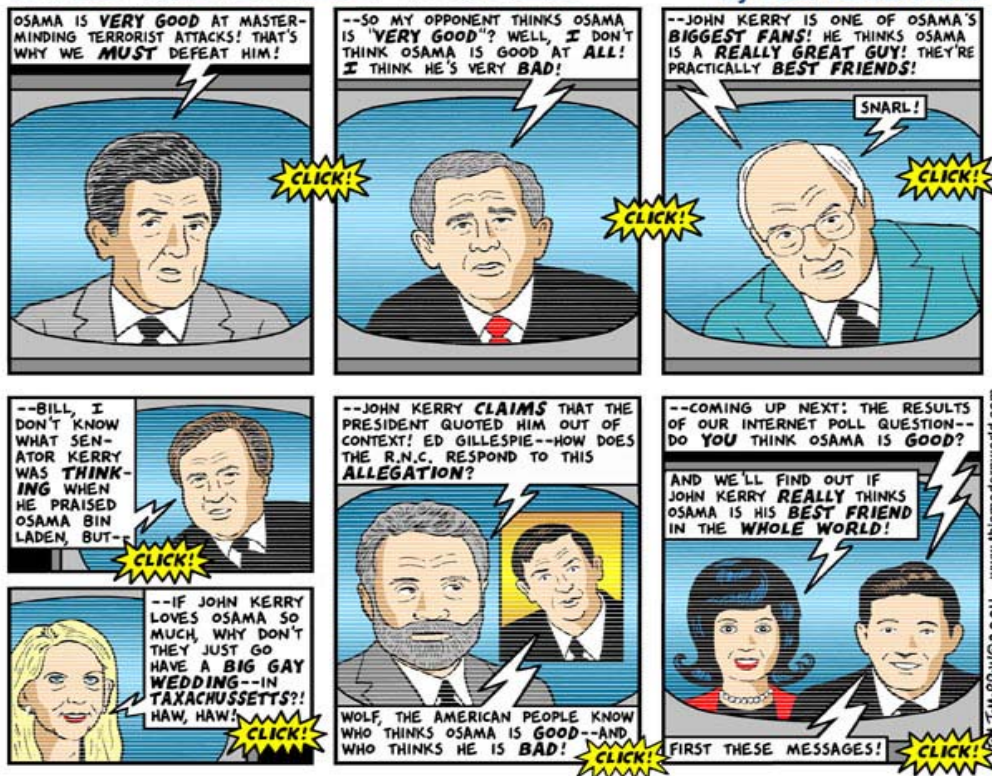
As your book notes, national and state political campaigns have become **highly professional** and **commercialized**. The use of media is crucial to understanding modern campaigns. As most people get their information from television, campaigns have increasingly been adapted to exploit television more effectively.

Negative advertising is a major part of a modern political campaign. Negative ads identify opponents with **negative images or attack some perceived character flaw**. There is a difference between being critical and being negative: an ad heavily critical of an incumbent's policies, for example, is not negative, while one that suggests the incumbent is lazy, immoral, hints at some scandalous behavior, or attempts to paint one's opponent as the equivalent of Osama Bin Laden would be considered negative. These advertisements make for good television, though! In this way, campaigns are increasingly influenced **by** the media. Messages are crafted for sound bites and good theater, even if actual policy solutions are much more complicated. Politicians cater to the media's desire to present **politics as a battle** by demonizing other politicians for their views rather than searching for common ground, or by blocking promising proposals from other parties lest it will make their opponents look good.

Tom Tomorrow had a great cartoon about this during the 2004 presidential election:

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



Obviously this is satirical, but the cartoon stresses the importance of sound bites, and the now-common strategy of moving the debate away from issues and onto questions about character. The important thing to remember is that a **successful political campaign will work to not only manage news about their candidate, but also try to establish how their opponent is talked about.**

National campaigns hire media professionals and public relations firms to manage and control, as much as possible, the candidate's image in the press. To develop these images, consultants conduct **focus groups** and **polling**. For example, an important strategy for the Republican Party has been their campaign to eliminate the **estate tax**, which affects the wealthiest, and only less than one percent of the population. Basically, this tiny minority of the very rich are taxed on the amount they leave to families when they die, an indication of our national opposition to aristocracy. A Republican public relations expert, Frank Luntz, conducted focus group interviews where he discovered that voters were more supportive of the estate tax when it was referred to as "the inheritance tax" or the "estate tax." He did find that voters were more opposed if it was instead called the "death tax." The Republicans seized on this, and immediately began using the phrase. Soon the political debate in the media on this issue was filled with references to the "death tax," and those who supported it were portrayed as cruel and heartless – "Can you imagine? They want to tax me just for dying!" Demonstrating the effectiveness of

this effort, even Democrats began adopting the phrase, and a large percentage of the public (well over half) believed they would be affected by changes in the tax, even though less than 1% actually would.









Media strategies rely extensively on **paid advertising spots**. They are the most expensive part of a political campaign; the costs of slick, well produced ads and the prime television time in which to air them can run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. **Free airtime is highly sought, but access is limited**, and tends to favor the incumbent. **Televised debates** help candidates with a smaller campaign treasury get valuable media time. Also, challengers in recent years have been more willing to appear on non-traditional television programs. Bill Clinton appeared on the Arsenio Hall show and played saxophone with the band, John Edwards announced his candidacy on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, George W. Bush appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show where he kissed Ms. Winfrey, and John Kerry appeared on Jay Leno's program, making his entrance on a motorcycle and donning a leather jacket.

Money in Elections

As noted, fundraising is the most important aspect of campaigning. Campaigns are very expensive, and financial contributions are essential to success. But what do contributors buy with this money?

- Contributors expect a return on their investments
- **Access** to be able to present their views to elected office holders
- "He/she who spends the most money wins" – what does the textbook say about this?

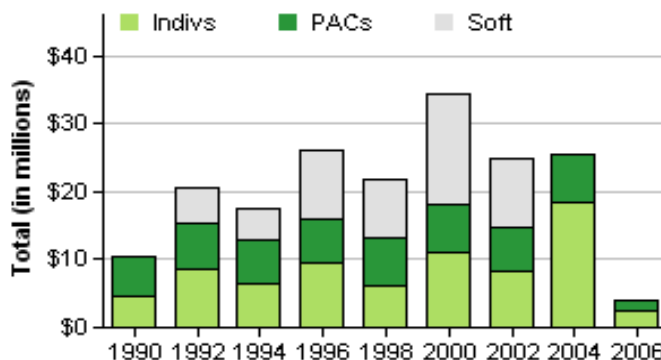
On the next page, let's examine some charts to get a better idea of how money has increased in recent years:

Total Contributions to Presidential Campaigns		
Year		Total (in millions)
2004		\$880.5
2000		\$528.9
1996		\$425.7
1992		\$331.1
1988		\$324.4
1984		\$202.0
1980		\$161.9
1976		\$171.0

Includes Primary Receipts, General Election Public Funding, and Convention Public Funding

While not adjusted for inflation (the increase, while still drastic, would be slightly reduced), the chart clearly shows that campaign contributions have skyrocketed, especially since 1992. It gets more interesting when we examine the specifics of campaign finance. For example, let's look at the campaign contributions of the oil and gas industries. **Table 1** shows the amount per year, and the breakdown between individual donations, donations from Political Action Committees (PACS) and soft money:

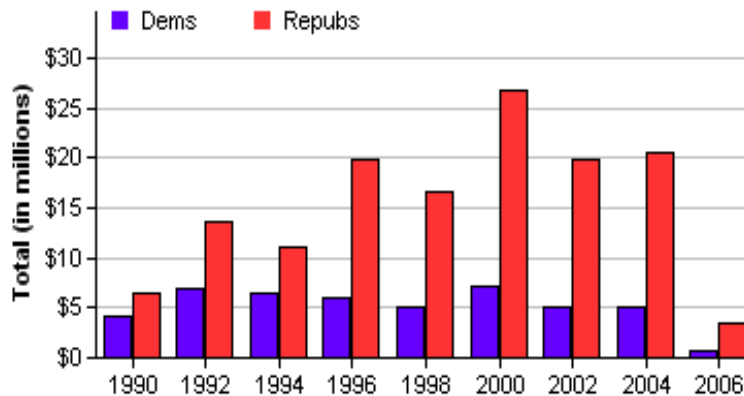
Table 1:



Why did soft money donations (the gray portion) seem to vanish in 2004 (hint: check your textbook's discussion of soft money and campaign finance reform)? What explains the variance in the level of

donations each election year? **Table 2** also focuses on the oil and gas industry, but breaks down the contributions by year, and shows how much was given to Republicans and how much was given to Democrats:

Table 2:



The Presidential Campaigns: The Primary

These are the most difficult and grueling of all political races. Media attention is crucial in primary races, as there are far more candidates with whom one is competing. Primaries focus on **party activists and ideologically motivated voters** in key states, and campaign **themes tend to be more ideological**. Candidates with early success find it easier to acquire financial support, and those who do poorly in early primaries will have more difficulty. Many candidates “front load” their campaigns for this reason. Also, the results of big-state primaries (in size as well as importance, such as New Hampshire) may influence large blocks of voters. There is a growing debate, addressed in last year’s election commission headed by James Baker and former President Carter, about the role of primaries and their fairness. Certain states, and thus certain populations and certain interests, are favored, while others are denied a role in determining which candidate will run. The commission discussed several possible solutions, including revolving primaries from state to state, and expanding early primaries beyond just one state at a time.

The Presidential Campaign: The General Election Battle

Strategies in general elections differ from primaries. Campaign themes are less ideological than during primaries, as candidates turn their attention to wooing independents and moderates from the opposing party. The necessary focus on the Electoral College results in campaigns only targeting specific states that might swing one way or the other, hence the term “swing states.” A candidate, then, might only campaign heavily in less than a quarter of the states in the entire nation and win the election. Big-state victories, such as California, Texas, and New York add up Electoral College votes quickly. **Your**

textbook has a brief but good section on party conventions (pages 262-263), so I'll leave that issue aside here, and we'll discuss more about conventions in class.

Nationally televised presidential “debates”

“Debates” offer voters a chance to directly compare the candidates side by side. Right, but why, you're asking, is debate in quotes? Because, as your book notes, these events tend to be restricted to judgments about clarity, appearance, and stage presence.

Given the limitations on the traditional rules of debate in presidential debates, the events tend to emphasize image over substance. They are conducted in the interest of the two main parties, representatives of which negotiate the terms of the debate, such as what topics will be discussed, how long each response and follow up will be, if the camera will show the response of the other candidate, whether or not the two candidates can ask each other direct questions (no on this one), and usually exclude third parties. Given the heavily managed rules, it allows candidates to present scripted answers. Candidates are never surprised during a debate, although some exchanges might get heated. Still, this is the most important opportunity during a campaign for the candidates to present themselves to the American public as “presidential” (see the cartoon on the next page).

While the structure of the debates might make it seem that there is little point in us watching, the candidates' performance and the resulting public opinion shifts can in fact be surprising. In the three 2004 presidential debates, for example, Kerry surprised pundits by winning each debate, despite the assumed advantage Bush held in appearance and presence.



The Voter Decides

In a close election, voter turnout is *usually* the major decisive factor as to who will win (the 2000 presidential election has set an unusual precedent in that the Supreme Court was the decisive factor). Thus, voting behavior has been examined in almost every aspect. Party affiliation is more important in congressional than presidential races. However, given the general weakness of political parties in the U.S., the number of independent voters is growing. Ideology rather than party membership is most important to politically active citizens.

A candidate's image and ability to relate to potential voters are major influences on election results, while economic conditions at the time of the election will directly impact chances for the incumbent, who is generally held responsible for the strength or weakness of the economy at the time of the election, **even though the president is rarely directly responsible for economic conditions.** Ronald Reagan's question during the 1980 debates, however - "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" - is classic campaign rhetoric, because it was effective; it asks the voter to consider if their life and the lives of their loved ones have improved, and if not, suggests that they should blame the president (rather than their boss, speculators on Wall Street, substandard schools, or other culprits).

However, most voters are unaware of candidates' specific policy positions. Rather, voters are more influenced by party identification, group membership (interest groups such as NRA or NOW), group identity (Black, Latino, etc.), economic conditions, and a small percentage are influenced somewhat by ideology and issue preferences.

Campaign Finance Reform

There are several problems with America's electoral system, despite our shared core values of free and fair elections and letting every vote count. Perhaps the most pressing issue is the dominance of money in political campaigns. Billions are spent during presidential election years by presidential and congressional candidates, not to mention the collective amounts spent in state races across the country. In a system where money is so crucial, and few effective restrictions exist on campaign donations, it is not surprising that the wealthy hold the upper hand in exerting influence. The Democratic primary campaign of Howard Dean in 2003-2004 was an exception, in that most of Deans contributions were through the internet and in small individual amounts. Still, this is nowhere near the norm, and some states have passed laws mandating the **public funding** of campaigns (Arizona and Maine, among others) - where qualifying candidates received public money (from taxes) for campaigns. In addition, the laws often require free airtime for qualifying parties and candidates (media spots are very expensive, especially in national races) or replace ads with public service-style

messages on public television. The laws also include limits on how much can be spent on an election, public disclosure if a candidate opts out of the public system, and limits on length of election campaigns. **Review pages 298-299 in your textbook for further discussion of election reforms.**

Conclusion

Successful democratic elections require informed and active citizens. That is the ideal, as we've discussed, and campaigns are not always the best way to learn about the political issues at stake nor the candidates themselves. American campaigns are not perfect, and many aspects appear to run contrary to what we expect in a democratic society. Still, **information is available for voters willing to look for it**, and while campaigns can definitely become tiresome and repetitive, important information about the candidates can be found in order for us to better make informed decisions, while also understanding the need to make our elections and the candidates' campaigns more open and responsive to voters.