Elections socialize and institutionalize political activity. They provide regular access to political power. America has an entrepreneurial system in which the people play a crucial role at every stage, from nomination to election. The price of this openness is that the process is a long and convoluted one that has little downtime before it revs up all over again. Today’s campaigns clearly promote individualism in American politics.

Whether elections make the government pay attention to what the people think is a matter of debate. The clearest conclusion is that the greater the policy differences between the candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices. Candidates do not always do their best to clarify the issues. They are often ambiguous.

Because states are the key battlegrounds of presidential campaigns, candidates must tailor their appeals to the particular interests of each major state. During the campaign promises mount which may contribute to the growth of government. Elections also help to increase generalized support for government and its powers. Citizens in a democracy often seek to benefit from the state.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. THE NOMINATION GAME
   A. A nomination is a party’s official endorsement of a candidate for office.
   B. Success in the nomination game generally requires money, media attention, and momentum. Candidates attempt to manipulate each of these elements through campaign strategy.
   C. Competing for delegates.
      1. The goal of the nomination game is to win the majority of delegates’ support at the national party convention.
      2. From February through June of election year, the individual state parties choose their delegates to the national convention through caucuses or primaries.
         a. At one time, all states selected their delegates to the national convention in a meeting of state party leaders, called a caucus.
         b. Today, caucuses are open to all voters who are registered with the party. The Democrats also require strict adherence to complex rules of representation.
         c. Only a minority of states hold caucuses today, and the earliest caucus is traditionally held in Iowa.
         d. Caucuses are usually organized like a pyramid.
      4. Presidential primaries.
         a. Today, most of the delegates to the national conventions are selected in presidential primaries, in which voters in a state go to the polls and vote for a candidate or for delegates pledged to a candidate.
b. The primary season begins in the winter in New Hampshire. At this early stage, the campaign is not for delegates but for images.

c. The Democratic Party began to reform its delegate selection procedures after a highly conflicted national convention in 1968; these reforms were proposed by the McGovern-Fraser Commission.

d. This reform created superdelegates, representing state and national party leaders.

e. The importance of early primaries has led to the practice of frontloading, as states try to move their primaries up in the calendar.

5. Political scientists and commentators have a number of criticisms of the primary and caucus system:

a. A disproportionate amount of attention goes to the early caucuses and primaries. Critics think America’s media-dominated campaigns are distorted by early primaries and caucuses.

b. Running for the presidency has become a full-time job, and prominent politicians find it difficult to take time out from their duties to run.

c. Money plays too big a role in the caucuses and primaries.

d. Participation is low and is not representative of the voting population. Although about 60 percent of the population votes in the November presidential election, only about 20 percent casts ballots in presidential primaries. Voters in primaries and caucuses also tend to be better educated and more affluent than voters in general.

e. The system gives too much power to the media.

6. Proposals for national and regional presidential primaries.

a. Proponents of a national primary to select party nominees believe that this would bring directness and simplicity to the process for both the voters and the candidates. The length and cost of the campaign would be reduced, and concentration of media coverage on this one event would increase political interest and public understanding of the issues involved.

b. Critics of a national primary respond that a national primary would almost inevitably require a runoff election between the top two finishers to avoid having a candidate win with only a plurality of the vote. Big money and intense attention from the national media would become more crucial than ever, and obscure candidates would never have a chance.

c. There have also been proposals for regional primaries in which groups of states (such as those in a particular time zone) would vote one week, then another the following week, and so on. The major problem with the regional primary proposal is the advantage gained by whichever region goes first.

7. The convention send-off.

a. The “drama” has now been largely drained from conventions, as the winner is usually a foregone conclusion. The preferences of delegates selected in primaries and open caucuses are known before the conventions begin.
b. The last time there was any doubt as to who would win at the convention was in 1976, when Gerald Ford barely defeated Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination.
c. Today’s conventions are carefully scripted to present the party in its best light.
d. Conventions are a significant rallying point for the parties and are important in developing the party’s policy positions.

II. THE CAMPAIGN GAME
   A. Once nominated, candidates concentrate on campaigning for the general election in November.
   B. Three ingredients are needed to project the right image to the voters: a campaign organization, money, and media attention.
   C. To effectively organize their campaigns, candidates must succeed in numerous key areas:
      1. Get a campaign manager.
      2. Get a research staff and policy advisers.
      3. Hire a pollster.
      5. Establish a Web site.

III. MONEY AND CAMPAIGNING
   A. Campaigns are expensive, and they are growing more so in America’s high-tech political arena.
      1. Candidates need money to build a campaign organization and to get the message out.
      2. There is a common perception that money buys votes and influence. This chapter examines the role of money in campaigns.
   B. Congress passed the Federal Election Campaign Act in 1974 with the goals of tightening reporting requirements for contributions and limiting overall expenditures. Provisions of the act (with subsequent amendments) included the following:
      1. A bipartisan Federal Election Commission was created to administer campaign finance laws and enforce compliance with their requirements.
      2. It created the Presidential Election Campaign Fund.
      3. It provided partial public financing for presidential primaries through matching funds.
      4. It provided full public financing for major party candidates in the general election.
      5. All candidates must file periodic financial disclosure reports with the FEC, listing who contributed funds and how the money was spent.
      6. It limited contributions, with individual contributions restricted to $1,000; the McCain-Feingold Act raised this limit to $2,000 as of 2004. PACs can give up to $5,000 per federal candidate per election.
C. Limiting the impact of money is a difficult task—loopholes are hard to close.
   1. A 1979 amendment to the original FECA made it easier for political parties to raise money for voter registration drives and the distribution of campaign material at the grass roots level. Money used for these purposes was referred to as soft money, because it was a loophole that had few limitations. The 2002 McCain-Feingold Act finally banned soft money after years of complaints by public-minded observers.
   2. Supposedly independent “527 groups” (named after a federal tax code section) are now the loophole of choice. They do not directly endorse candidates, but make strong and obvious attacks on their opponents.

D. Campaign reforms also encouraged the spread of Political Action Committees (PACs).
   1. The 1974 reforms created a new way for interest groups like business and labor to contribute to campaigns. Any interest group can now form its own PAC to directly channel contributions of up to $5,000 per candidate.
   2. A PAC is formed when a business association—or some other interest group—decides to contribute to candidates it believes will be favorable toward its goals. After the group registers with the FEC as a PAC, the PAC can collect money from interested parties and contribute money to candidates. (All expenditures must be accounted for to the FEC.)
   3. PACs have proliferated in recent years and play a major role in paying for expensive campaigns. PACs contributed $258 million to congressional candidates for the 2002 campaign.
   4. Critics of the PAC system believe that this has led to a system of open graft. They fear that the large amount of money controlled by PACs leads to PAC control over what the winners do once they are in office.
   5. However, the perception that PACs control officeholders may be misleading since most PACs give money to candidates who already agree with them. The impact of PAC money on presidents is even more doubtful since presidential campaigns are partly subsidized by the public and presidents have well-articulated positions on most important issues.

E. Does money buy victory?
   1. Money is crucial to electoral victory. In this era of high-tech politics, pollsters, public relations people, direct-mail consultants, and many other specialists are crucial to a campaign.
   2. Perhaps the most basic complaint about money and politics is that there may be a direct link between dollars spent and votes received.

F. The media and the campaign
   1. Media coverage is determined by how candidates use their advertising budget and the “free” attention they get as news makers.
   2. Political consultants can turn a disorganized campaign into a well-run, high-tech operation.
   3. Viewers can learn more from watching candidate ads than from watching TV news shows.
   4. News coverage tends to focus on the horse race aspects of the campaign.
IV. THE IMPACT OF CAMPAIGNS

A. Politicians tend to overestimate the impact of campaigns. Political scientists have found that campaigns have three major effects on voters: reinforcement, activation, and conversion. Campaigns can reinforce voters’ preferences for candidates; they can activate voters, getting them to contribute money or become active in campaigns; and they can convert by changing voters’ minds.

B. Campaigns primarily reinforce and activate. Only rarely do campaigns convert because several factors tend to weaken campaigns’ impact on voters:

1. People have a remarkable capacity for selective perception—paying most attention to positions they already agree with and interpreting events according to their own predispositions.
2. Although party identification is not as important as it once was, such factors still influence voting behavior.
3. Incumbents start with a substantial advantage in terms of name recognition and an established record.

V. WHETHER TO VOTE: A CITIZEN’S FIRST CHOICE

A. Who votes and who stays home?

1. Nearly two centuries of American electoral history include greatly expanded suffrage (the right to vote).
   a. As the right to vote has been extended, proportionately fewer of those eligible have chosen to exercise that right.
   b. The highest turnout of the past 100 years was the 80 percent turnout in 1896; in 2008, 61 percent of the adult population voted for president.
2. One reason why many people vote is that they have a high sense of political efficacy—the belief that ordinary people can influence the government.
3. Those who vote out of a sense of civic duty are people who vote simply to support democratic government (even if they are indifferent about the outcome).

B. Registering to vote.

1. States adopted voter registration around the turn of the century, largely to prevent corruption associated with stuffing the ballot boxes.
2. Registration procedures differ greatly from one state to another.
   a. States in the upper Great Plains and the Northwest make it easiest to register: there is no registration at all in North Dakota, and four states permit registration on election day.
   b. States in the South still face the most difficult forms of registration (and they also record lower voter turnout rates).
   c. This changed somewhat when the 1993 Motor Voter Act went into effect in 1996. The act requires states to permit people to register to vote at the same time citizens apply for driver’s licenses. The Motor Voter Act makes voter registration much easier by allowing eligible voters to simply check a box on their driver’s license application or renewal form.
C. Social science research points to several characteristics of voters and nonvoters:
1. Voting is a class-biased activity. People with higher than average education and income levels have a higher rate of voting. This is the most important factor affecting turnout.
2. Young people have the lowest turnout rate.
3. Whites vote with greater frequency than members of minority groups (but Blacks and other minority groups with high levels of income and education have a higher turnout rate than Whites with comparable socioeconomic status).
4. Women are slightly more likely than men to vote.
5. Married people are more likely to vote than unmarried people.
6. Government employees have higher than average turnout levels.

VI. HOW AMERICANS VOTE: EXPLAINING CITIZENS’ DECISIONS

A. Mandate theory of elections.
1. Many journalists and politicians believe the winner of an election has a mandate from the people to carry out the policies he or she promised during the campaign.
2. Conversely, political scientists know that people rarely vote a certain way for the same reasons. Political scientists focus instead on three major elements of voters’ decisions: voters’ party identification, voters’ evaluations of the candidates, and the match between voters’ policy positions and those of the candidates and parties (known as policy voting).

B. Party identification.
1. Because of the importance of party identification in deciding how to vote, the parties tended to rely on groups that lean heavily in their favor to form their basic coalition.
2. With the emergence of television and candidate-centered politics, the hold of the party on the voter eroded substantially during the 1960s and 1970s, and then stabilized at a new and lower level during the 1980s.
3. Scholars singled out party affiliation as the single best predictor of a voter’s decision in the 1950s. Voting along party lines is less common today, particularly in elections for the House of Representatives, where incumbency is now of paramount importance.

C. Candidate evaluations.
1. Political psychologists Shawn Rosenberg and Patrick McCafferty show that it is possible to manipulate a candidate’s appearance in a way that affects voters’ choices (even by substituting a good picture for a bad one).
2. Research by Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk shows that the three most important components of candidate image are integrity, reliability, and competence.
   a. In 2000, George W. Bush scored higher than Al Gore in the dimension of integrity.
   b. Integrity is not enough; a candidate must also be seen as being reliable, i.e., dependable and decisive. George H. W. Bush’s image of reliability suffered when he broke the “no new taxes” pledge made during his 1992 campaign.
c. The personal traits most often mentioned by voters involve *competence*, i.e., experience, which is one of the reasons it is hard to beat an incumbent president.

D. Policy voting.

1. **Policy voting** occurs when people base their choices in an election on *their own issue preferences*.

2. True policy voting can take place only when several conditions are met.
   a. Voters must have a clear view of their own policy positions.
   b. Voters must know where the candidates stand on policy issues.
   c. Voters must see a difference between candidates on these issues.
   d. Voters must actually cast a vote for the candidate whose policy positions coincide with their own.

3. One recurrent problem is that *candidates* often decide that the best way to handle a controversial issue is to cloud their positions in rhetoric; *both* candidates may be deliberately ambiguous.

4. The *media* also may not be helpful, as they typically focus more on the “horse race” aspects of the campaign than on the policy stands of the candidates.

5. Although it is questionable whether voters are really much more sophisticated now about issues, policy voting has become somewhat easier than in the past. Today’s candidates are compelled to take clear stands to appeal to their own party’s *primary* voters. The presidency of George W. Bush was marked by clear, strong positions, which have increased voter polarization. Thus, it is the *electoral process* that has changed rather than the voters.

E. 2008: An Election about Change

1. In 2004, Barack Obama catapulted to national prominence as the result of a debut speech that electrified the Democratic Convention.
   a. Obama’s message emphasized unity and multi-culturalism.
   b. Obama was viewed as a rising star and potential presidential candidate.

   a. Obama became the primary alternative to the front-runner Hillary Clinton.
   b. Obama’s call for change resonated more effectively than Clinton’s emphasis on experience.

3. The Republican nomination was wrapped up faster and more decisively by John McCain.
   a. McCain’s reputation as a maverick had special appeal.

4. The campaign seemed to be shaping up as a close battle between Obama’s perceived advantages on economic issues and personal intelligence versus McCain’s perceived advantages on foreign policy issues and political experience.

5. The campaign took a turn in late September when the credit crisis rocked the financial markets.

6. The intense focus on the economy for the rest of the campaign provided Obama with opportunities to emphasize his popular plans for middle-class tax cut, extension of health care coverage, and programs to support education.

7. McCain’s choice of vice president, Sarah Palin did not resonate with the electorate even though she was an effective campaigner.
8. Obama was able to successfully link McCain to the unpopular President George W. Bush.
9. The final result of the election gave Obama 53 percent of the vote to McCain’s 46 percent.
10. The people’s verdict in 2008, just as in 1800 and 1896, was that it was time for a change in Washington.

VII. THE LAST BATTLE: THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE
A. It is the electoral vote rather than the popular vote that actually determines the outcome of the presidential election.
   1. Because the founders wanted the president to be selected by the nation’s elite—and not directly by the people—they created the electoral college.
   2. Political practice since 1828 has been for electors to vote for the candidate who won their state’s popular vote.
B. Mechanics of the electoral college system.
   1. Each state has as many electoral votes as it has U.S. senators and representatives. Today, state parties nominate slates of electors.
   2. All states except Maine and Nebraska have a winner-take-all system in which electors vote as a bloc for the candidate who received the most popular votes in the states.
   3. Electors meet in their respective states in December and mail their votes to the president of the Senate (vice president of the U.S.). The vote is counted when the new congressional session opens in January, and the result is reported by the president of the Senate.
   4. If no candidate receives an electoral college majority, the election is thrown into the House of Representatives, which must choose from among the top three electoral vote winners. The unit rule is used, which means that each state delegation has one vote (not each member).
   5. The electoral college system disproportionately favors less populated states because of the formula, heavily populated states because of the winner-take-all rules, and especially the swing states where it is not clear which party has the edge—that is where the bulk of the attention will go during the general election.

VIII. UNDERSTANDING NOMINATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS
A. Are nominations and campaigns too democratic?
   1. The American political system allows citizens a voice at almost every point of the election process, unlike many countries where a political elite controls nominations and elections. As a result, party outsiders can get elected in a way that is virtually unknown outside the United States.
   2. The process has also led to what some call “the permanent campaign.” Some analysts believe the process of openness places numerous demands on citizens; many are overwhelmed by the process and do not participate.
   3. The burdens of the modern campaign can also discourage good candidates from entering the fray.
4. The current system of running for office has been labeled by Wattenberg as the “candidate-centered age.” It allows for politicians to decide on their own to run, to raise their own campaign funds, to build their own personal organizations, and to make promises as to how they specifically will act in office.

B. Do elections affect public policy?
1. Elections, to some degree, affect public policy, and public policy decisions affect electoral outcomes.
2. The greater the policy differences between the candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices.
3. When individual candidates do offer a plan choice to the voters, voters are more able to guide the government’s policy direction.

C. Do big campaigns lead to an increase in the scope of government?
1. Because states are the key battlegrounds of presidential campaigns, candidates must tailor their appeals to the particular interests of each major state.
2. Candidates end up supporting a variety of local interests in order to secure votes from each region of the country.
3. The way modern campaigns are conducted is thus one of the many reasons why politicians always find it easier to expand the scope of American government than to limit it.

**KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

527 groups: independent groups that seek to influence the political process but are not subject to contribution restrictions because they do not directly advocate the election of a particular candidate.

Campaign strategy: the way candidates use scarce resources to achieve the nomination or win office.

Caucus: a meeting to determine which candidate delegates from a state party will support.

Civic duty: a belief in the obligation to vote.

Electoral college: the institution designated in the Constitution whereby a body of electors selects the president and vice president.

Federal Election Campaign Act: 1974 legislation designed to regulate campaign contributions and limit campaign expenditures.


Frontloading: states’ decisions to move their presidential primaries and caucuses to earlier in the nomination season in order to capitalize on media attention.

Mandate theory of elections: the belief that the election winner has a mandate to implement policy promises.

Matching funds: money provided to qualifying presidential candidates from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund, the amount of which is determined by the amount of contributions raised by the candidate.