

Unit 13

Elections:

The Maintenance of Democracy

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

- Define nomination and discuss the ways candidates are nominated for office.
- Describe the organizational styles and strategies of campaigning.
- Describe the demographic characteristics of those who vote and examine efforts to increase voter turnout.
- Illustrate the ways in which people can become involved in electoral politics, beyond voting.

Topic Overview

Unit 13 illustrates the workings of electoral politics in America. The unit describes, for instance, the nomination process—the first step to winning office. As the unit shows, there are several ways to win a party nomination and each demands a different style of campaigning and different strategies. This unit also demonstrates how ordinary citizens become involved in election activities and thereby contribute to a functioning electoral system. Despite the options, as the unit discusses, many Americans do not bother to even vote—the easiest political act. This is especially true of young people, who for a variety of reasons do not exercise their right to vote.

Elections are one mechanism by which citizens can participate in representative democracy. As voters, citizens make choices about whom they want to represent them. Citizens can also run for office and, if elected, are authorized to represent their district's citizens. Individuals seek public office for a variety of reasons. Some are motivated to enter politics out of a sense of duty to their country or communities. Others are motivated by a desire to achieve certain policy goals. Still others are driven by personal ambition and a desire for power and prestige. Undoubtedly, most people enter and stay in politics because of a mixture of these and other reasons.

For most political candidates, the first step in winning office is to gain their party's nomination by winning the **primary election**. Party primaries are organized differently among the states; some are **closed**, where only registered party members may vote, and some are **open**, where non-declared party voters may still choose to vote in a party's primary election. Generally, fewer voters participate in primary elections compared to general elections. Those who vote in the Republican primaries tend to be more conservative than general election voters, and those who vote in Democratic primaries tend to be more liberal.

The party candidates who win their party's nomination face each other in the **general election**. Republicans and Democrats almost always field candidates for partisan offices, while minor party candidates often qualify to get on the ballot as well. In most elections only a **plurality** of votes (the most votes over all other candidates) is required to win office, as opposed to a **majority** of votes (50 percent of voters plus one).

Topic Overview, cont'd.

Although Americans are proud of free elections, they don't often turn out to vote in large numbers. Indeed, **voter turnout** in American elections typically falls well below that of other Western democracies. Many Americans fail to vote because of legal restrictions and structural reasons, such as registration requirements, complicated ballots and issues, and too frequent elections compared to many other industrialized democracies. Some people don't vote because they feel their vote makes no difference.

Those who do vote tend to be better educated, wealthier, and older than those who tend not to vote. People differ over whether low voter turnout is a serious problem. Some observers argue that low voter turnout is a sign of a satisfied electorate. Others see low voter turnout as a threat to representative government.

Citizens also participate in electoral politics by actively working for candidates or issues they support. Their **electoral activities** might include stuffing envelopes for mass mailings, making phone calls, and walking door-to-door to reach prospective voters. People also participate by donating money to a candidate or issue campaign, and asking others to make a contribution.

Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- Do elections really matter?
- Why do so many Americans fail to vote?
- Should we be concerned about low levels of voter participation?
- Can anything be done to encourage people, particularly young people, to participate in elections?

Watch the Video (30 minutes) and Discuss (30 minutes)

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and then pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. John Kennedy in West Virginia

Like most candidates who run under their party's label, presidential candidates must run a two-strategy race. The first strategy is to gain the party's nomination by winning enough party delegates in the primary and caucus elections. The second is to win enough votes among all voters in the general election. In order to accrue delegate support, candidates must determine the states where they will focus their efforts, and those they will ignore or only nominally contest. Because the electorates are different in each state, a candidate's particular campaign strategy for each state will also differ. This story covers the campaign of Senator John F. Kennedy for president in 1960, as Kennedy stumps in West Virginia before the state's primary election.

Discussion Questions

- Why did JFK campaign in West Virginia?
- What issue did JFK directly confront in the West Virginia primary?

Watch the Video and Discuss, cont'd.

2. Getting Behind the Candidates Who Will Truly Represent Us

As citizens, we have the opportunity to participate directly in electoral politics. There are many ways for citizens to participate, including organizing groups of people to work on behalf of their chosen candidates. This story is about one grassroots group, Neighbors for a Better Montgomery (NBM), which organized in 2002 to promote Smart Growth in Montgomery County, Maryland. NBM members were deeply concerned about the pressing challenges to their quality of life, including rampant housing development, clogged roads, and overcrowded schools. As the election neared, NBM hit the ground running by holding issues briefings for candidates and their staffs in an effort to tilt the election debate toward their issues and positions. Having decided on a set of candidates, NBM began working on their behalf, initially going door-to-door to campaign for their candidates. Despite all their hard work, none of NBM's candidates for at-large seats on the County Council survived the primary election, but the group made itself heard in local politics.

Discussion Questions

- What motivated the members of NBM to become involved in electoral politics?
- What did the group do to find acceptable candidates?
- What strategy did the members of NBM initially pursue?
- Why did they change their strategy?

3. Rock Around the Voting Booth

In 1972, at the height of the Vietnam War when young men over the age of 18 were being drafted and sent overseas, Congress passed a constitutional amendment that lowered the voting age to 18. The idea was that if you were old enough to fight, you were old enough to vote. Since then, however, more young people have chosen not to vote than those who have. To address the problem of low voter turnout among young people, members of the recording industry began a campaign in 1990 to empower young people and to encourage them to exercise their right to vote. The group's chosen name, Rock the Vote, soon became a familiar catch phrase among the MTV generation. To Jamu Green, Executive Director of Rock the Vote, the first crucial step in helping young people find their political voice was to promote voting in elections, and so Rock the Vote immediately began a voter registration effort. From the start, Rock the Vote built momentum by enlisting the help of celebrities and partnering with youth-oriented media such as MTV. That strategy reaped results as young voter turnout increased by 7 percent in 1992.

Rock the Vote next turned its attention to the newly enacted Motor Voter Law, which is officially entitled the National Voter Registration Act. The Act allows voters to register to vote when they get their driver's license or perform other government functions. The new law allowed Rock the Vote to use one simple form to push new voter registration in rallies across the country. Through the use of Community Street Teams, Rock the Vote recruited committed volunteers in about 40 U.S. cities. These volunteers helped set up band shows that served as the initial draw for rallies, and they went to public places such as parks to push the message that participation in elections can affect change. But as Andy Gabor, Community Street Team member explains, the challenge of mobilizing youth for participation remains: "[Young people] have a short attention span when it comes to history.... When you look at the things that Black people and women had to go through to gain the right to vote ... the generations today don't realize that their ancestors had to go through that." Indeed, while the group made great strides in the 1992 election, youth voter turnout dropped significantly in 1996.

The trick to regaining interest, according to Jamu Green, is to connect the group's goals to the issues young people are currently concerned with: "We are in a moment right now where a lot of decisions are going to be made on issues following September 11th. So we have a new campaign called Wake Up and Rock the Vote that talks to young people about the freedoms this country was built on, and the need for young people to protect those freedoms." It remains to be seen whether the current challenges and issues in a post September 11th world will spur a new generation of young people to greater participation in elections and politics.

Watch the Video and Discuss, cont'd.

Discussion Questions

- Why was the Rock the Vote program created?
- How was the program aided by a change in the voter registration laws?
- Can campaigns like this encourage young people to vote?

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Low Voter Turnout: Causes and Possible Remedies (20 minutes)

Voter Turnout in the U.S.: How Bad Is It? Voter turnout is the rate by which people vote in elections. The simplest way to calculate a given election's turnout rate is to compare the actual number of voters with the voting-age population. Compared to other industrialized representative democracies, the United States ranks low in terms of voter turnout. For example, voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections remains around 50 percent of the total population of eligible voters. In off-year gubernatorial elections (i.e., election years without a presidential election), turnout can drop down into the 40 percent range and in off-year congressional elections, down to the middle 30 percent range. In primary elections, voter turnout can drop below 30 percent, while in local elections, turnout often drops below 25 percent of eligible voters. These voting rates place the United States near the bottom of industrialized nations, many of which experience much higher voting rates. For example, over 80 percent of eligible citizens typically vote in Australia, Belgium, Sweden, Netherlands, Austria, and Germany. Why is turnout so low in American elections? Do any of the explanations offered seem satisfactory? Using the explanations offered below, develop a plan to counter low voter turnout.

Who Votes in the U.S.? Voters in the U.S. come from all demographic groups, including the young and old, and the rich and poor. However, those who vote most often are older, have higher incomes, and are more educated. Wealthier citizens are more likely to believe they have a personal stake in the election and in the political process in general than less-wealthy voters. In addition, wealthier voters also tend to be more educated. Typically, the more educated you are, the more likely you are to understand how the election system works. Also, people with more education have a stronger sense of obligation to vote. Like voters with higher rates of education, older citizens are more likely to feel they have a stake in the election and a duty to vote. Many older citizens also feel they have more time to vote than younger citizens.

Why Is Turnout So Low? While scholars continue to debate the most important reasons for lagging turnout in U.S. elections, most agree on the following as contributing reasons:

- **Voter Registration Laws:** In most states, voters must register to vote well before the actual election. Registering to vote takes planning and initiative. Citizens who are less knowledgeable about the political process are less likely to register to vote. In the U.S., citizens tend to relocate more than many other countries. When you move to a new state or local area, you must re-register in that jurisdiction. Many new residents fail to register for several election cycles, or at all.
- **Frequency of Elections:** Probably no electorate in the world is called to vote more frequently than citizens in the U.S. For example, while British voters may go to the polls twice in a four-year election cycle (once for Parliamentary elections and once for local elections), Americans are called upon to vote in as many as 10 or more primary and general elections in the same period. Some scholars believe "election fatigue" may help explain why many voters fail to vote in every election opportunity.
- **Voter Attitudes:** Voting is not compulsory in the U.S. But it is in some other countries, including Australia. Some American voters may choose to not vote because they feel their vote does not count, because they don't see much difference between the choices offered, or because they are alienated from the political system due to voter apathy (just don't care) or alienation (e.g., lack of trust in politicians, sense of personal powerlessness).

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

- **Relatively Weak Political Parties:** Unlike parties in many other countries, political parties in the U.S. are relatively weak in terms of their ability to mobilize voters to register and ultimately vote on election day.

How Should We Increase Turnout? For those who feel we should try to increase voter turnout, there are several potential changes to consider. One change would be to adopt same-day registration procedures at voting places. This would allow those who decide to vote late in the campaign the option of voting. Such a move would build upon the 1993 Motor Voter Law that allows citizens to register to vote at their Department of Motor Vehicles and other public agencies. Another option would be to make it easier for voters to cast an absentee ballot. While the practice of absentee voting has risen significantly in the last decade, many states still require that voters apply in person and far in advance of the election. Streamlined absentee ballot procedures could bring more voters into the process. Still another change to increase turnout would be to keep the polls open longer, perhaps for 48 hours instead of the average 12 to 15 hours that are usually available for voting. This change could help particularly busy people get to the polls. A final change might be to make election day a holiday. People would have the day off from work, which would eliminate one common excuse for not voting. And following the tradition in some European countries where election day is a time of festivals, speeches, and feasts, an election holiday might help foster a sense of celebration about exercising our voting rights.

2. What Are the Effects of Low Voter Turnout? (10 minutes)

People disagree over the effects of voter turnout rates in the U.S. Some people argue that because nonvoters tend to be poorer, less educated, and minorities, elected politicians can more easily disregard their interests when formulating public policy. Also, since the Democratic Party tends to attract more people who fit these profiles, higher voting rates might result in additional support for Democrats, or for candidates from other parties that appeal to voters with lower socioeconomic status characteristics. Other people dispute these assumptions. They argue that higher voting rates would not change the overall makeup of the electorate enough to cause significant change in election outcomes and public policy. A study of this question by Raymond Wolfinger and Benjamin Highton, for example, found that the overall group of nonvoters largely mirrors the diverse and ideologically divided population that already votes. What is your view of this? Should we be concerned about low voter turnout or simply assume that those who are not voting are generally satisfied or at least willing to accept the way things are?

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 14 to prepare for next week's session.

- Introduction—Interest Groups: Organizing To Influence
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: "That the Americans Combat the Effects of Individualism by Free Institutions" and "Of the Use Which the Americans Make of Public Associations in Civil Life"
- "The Whole World's Temperance Convention Held at Metropolitan Hall in the City of New York"
- "An Appeal to the Women of the United States by National Woman Suffrage and Educational Committee"
- I.W.W. Song: "Long-Haired Preachers"

Read next week's Topic Overview.

Critical Thinking Activity: Go to the course Web site and try the Critical Thinking Activity for Unit 13. This is a good activity to use with your students, too.

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Classroom Applications

You may want to have your students do the post-viewing activities: Low Voter Turnout: Causes and Possible Remedies and What Are the Effects of Low Voter Turnout? They are provided for you as blackline masters in the Appendix.

Web-Based Resources

www.vote-smart.org—**Project Vote Smart** is a citizen's organization dedicated to serving all Americans with accurate and unbiased information for electoral decision-making. The Web site includes search engines to access information on thousands of candidates and issues including campaign positions, campaign finance sources, and voting records for incumbents.

www.politicalindex.com—**The National Political Index** provides an index of substantive political information for voters, political activists, political consultants, lobbyists, politicians, academicians, and media editors with a wide range of products, information, services, simulations, games, and polling in an interactive communications environment.

www.fec.gov—**The Federal Election Commission** Web site offers detailed information about candidates' campaign finances, a citizens' guide to elections, and an overview about election rules in different states and local areas.

www.rockthevote.org—The official Web site of **Rock the Vote** offers election issue forums, voter registration forms, and links to other avenues of citizen participation.

www.opensecrets.org—Sponsored by the **Center for Responsive Politics**, the Open Secrets Web site provides easy access to updated campaign finance data for candidates nationwide.