

CHAPTER 10 - Electing the President

OVERVIEW

Since the 1970s, presidential primaries have taken on added significance. The primary phase of the campaign is long. Party activists and the media are advantaged by it. Change is unlikely. General election campaigns are misunderstood. Election outcomes are largely determined by prior events. Prior to the campaign, most voters have made up their minds based on party identification and government performance.

OUTLINE

I. The Nominating of a Presidential Candidate

A. Evolution of the Nomination Process

- The congressional caucus was the major, though not exclusive, means for nominating presidential candidates between 1796 and 1824. Almost from the beginning, however, the congressional caucus came under attack. Some critics felt that involving Congress in the selection of presidential candidates implicitly violated the constitutionally-prescribed separation of powers. Others felt that the procedure was undemocratic, especially as it meant that any district that elected a congressman from the other party was unrepresented in the caucus deliberations. After experimenting with a number of other nominating mechanisms, by the 1840s both the Democrats and Whigs were nominating their presidential and vice presidential candidates by national conventions. The direct primary became popular during the Progressive Era.

B. The Contemporary Nomination Process

- Primaries did not become popular in presidential elections until after Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination in 1968, having never entered a primary. Delegates to contemporary nominating conventions are chosen in three ways:
 1. **Primaries**
 - As of 2008, 41 states hold presidential primaries. Delegates deliver the choice of the voters at the national convention.
 2. **Caucuses**
 - In caucus states, the nomination process begins in precinct meetings. Here, delegates are chosen for the next level and then the next, until a state's final contingent of delegates is chosen to attend the national convention. Turnout for precinct meetings is typically in single digits.
 3. **Super-Delegates**
 - In 1982 the Democratic Party adopted a new set of rules under which certain kinds of party leaders—members of the U.S. House and Senate, governors, members of the national committee—became automatic or ex-officio delegates.

C. Financing Nomination Campaigns

- Prior to the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1974, the financing of presidential campaigns was almost completely unregulated. The

new regime established by FECA had five major features: contribution limits, matching funds, spending limits, self-financing, disclosure requirements.

D. The Presidential Nomination Process in Action

- The period of campaigning before any primary or caucus takes place is called the “invisible primary”. Candidates use this invisible primary to raise funds, gauge the mood of the electorate, and spending a lot of time in states with early primaries and caucuses.

E. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Nomination Process

- Not everyone is happy with the increased democratization of the nomination process, as the inclusion of super-delegates in the nominating process demonstrates.
- Political activists are people who are more interested in, and committed to, political issues than are ordinary citizens. Primaries increased their importance because political activists are more inclined than the average voter to participate. Also, they work in campaigns and donate money to candidates. Critics charge that these activists are not representative of the public in their issue positions. Thus, candidates seeking the nomination take more extreme positions than if all voters were participating. Research shows that this criticism is an exaggeration. Another result of activists’ involvement in the primary process is that the issues that get debated are not always the same ones on the mind of the average voter.
- The media are advantaged by the primary process and they are criticized for focusing on trivial matters such as, who is winning, scandals, gaffes, and campaign feuds, instead of what the election outcome will mean for the country. In response, it could be said that if this is how the media behave it is because this is what the voters want to read or hear. A second criticism of the media is that it makes news by exaggerating campaign events, like the New Hampshire open primary. A third criticism is that the media have become players in the election instead of mere observers. Rather than tell Americans what the political participants think, the media now tells Americans what the media think. In defense of the media, it could be said that it merely gives a different perspective to events from what each candidate’s organization gives.

F. Who Nominates the Vice President?

- Before the reliance on the primary process, vice- presidential candidates were selected by convention delegates. Now, the selection is entirely in the hands of the presidential nominees. They usually try to select someone who will help the ticket get elected.

II. The General Election for President

- The campaign for the presidency is officially under way on Labor Day. The election is held the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November.

A. Financing the General-Election Campaign

- Under the 1974 federal law, presidential candidates (those receiving a major party nomination) could accept public financing to pay for their campaigns.

Since that law first went into effect in 1976, every major candidate has opted for this tax money. In the 1990s, soft money also became important.

B. Spending in the General Election Campaign

- Campaign consultants oversee the expenditure of campaign funds. The most important category of spending is for the media. An increasing trend in recent years is reliance on negative advertising.

C. The Electoral College

- Electors actually elect the president and vice president. To win a candidate must get a majority of the electors. Currently, 270 is a majority of the 538 electors. There have been instances in which a candidate winning more nation-wide popular votes did not end up as president for a variety of reasons.
- Since all but two states give all their electoral votes to the winner of the popular vote in the state, there is a large-state bias in how the Electoral College works.
- In the past few decades, it appeared as if the Republicans had a lock on a good number of states (shaped like an "L") guaranteeing it a large share of electoral votes.

III. Voting Behavior in Presidential Elections

- Voters do not often switch how they vote. This electoral inertia is why the media have such a limited effect on the general election. Here are the factors that affect when and how Americans make up their minds for whom to vote.

A. When Americans Decide

- About one-third of voters have decided for whom to vote before the primaries. By the end of the convention about one-half to two-thirds have made up their minds.

B. How Americans Decide

1. Party Loyalties

- About two-thirds of Americans identify with the Democratic or Republican parties.
- African Americans, Jews, union members, urban residents, Southerners, and Catholics tend to identify with the Democratic Party.
- Businesspersons, small-town residents, Midwesterners, and Evangelical Protestants tend to identify with the Republican Party.

2. Public Policies

- Policy concerns are not a dominant factor in most elections. Most people just do not know enough about policies or don't know where the candidates stand on issues. One exception would be social issues that help form a party's image such as abortion, faith-based initiatives, gay marriage, and the war in Iraq. Certain issues also can become important during a campaign.

3. Government Performance

- Voters are capable of basing their vote on how well they think the government is performing. Performance voting demands less of voters than policy voting.
- Voting by looking backwards at performance (retrospective voting) may be more common than basing a vote on what is desired in the future (prospective voting).

4. The Qualities of the Candidates

- An individual candidate's personality can be a reason why voters might change their vote from election to election. The traits that particularly concern voters are intelligence, integrity, decisiveness, experience, and character.
- There is, however, a tendency to overestimate the independent effect of the candidates.

IV. What Difference Do Presidential Campaigns Make?

- Presidential campaigns may generate a lot of excitement and publicity, but they don't change many votes. Of course, in a very close election, changing even a small number of votes may spell the difference between victory and defeat.

V. The Contemporary Presidential Election Scene

- Since the New Deal split in the 1960s, the Democrats were not able to win the presidency twice in a row until the 1990s.

A. The 1970s and 1980s: Republican Lock

- The so-called Republican lock on the presidency reflected developments that gave
- Republicans a clear advantage on two of the four major factors determining how Americans vote: performance and issues.
- During the 1980s and even into the 2000s, the Republican performance on policies beat Democrats on each of these major fronts: the economy, national defense and international relations, racial politics, and social issues.

B. The 1990s: Democratic Resurgence

- Turnarounds in each of the four areas discussed above contributed to Clinton's victories in 1992 and 1996. The economy grew steadily during Clinton's first term and most Americans were optimistic concerning the economy. Inflation and unemployment were very low and the stock market was at an all-time high. The Republican Congress was viewed as anti-environment (important to independents), lacking in compassion (important to women), and made a serious mistake in shutting down the government in 1995-1996. The gender gap is widely misunderstood. It is not a result of men and women taking different positions on women's issues; rather, they differ in their views regarding violence, military force, and helping the disadvantaged. The actions of the Republican Congress helped widen the gender gap.

C. The 2000 Election

- The presidential election of 2000 highlighted the importance of the Electoral College.
- It also underscored the different roles played by the primary and general elections.
- One question: why didn't Gore, the expected winner, win? One theory is that Gore was not able to take credit for the good of the Clinton years. Another is that Gore suffered from the scandals that plagued Clinton. Finally, some think Gore lost because of Gore.

D. The 2004 Elections

- Polls that showed a captivatingly close race in the final days of the 2004 campaign led many media commentators to speculate that the race would again be decided in the courts or in state-level recounts. Nevertheless, the result, while not an overwhelming victory for George W. Bush, was at least a decisive one: for the first time since 1988, the winner of the presidency amassed a clear majority (51 percent) of the popular vote.

E. The 2008 Elections

- Although the 2008 elections were long-fought, Obama won a clear victory, winning 52 percent of the popular vote. Although polls put McCain and Obama in a very close race through September, the sharp economic downturn seemed to turn support Obama's way. McCain was unable to separate himself from the Republican Party, which many Americans held responsible for the economic crisis.