

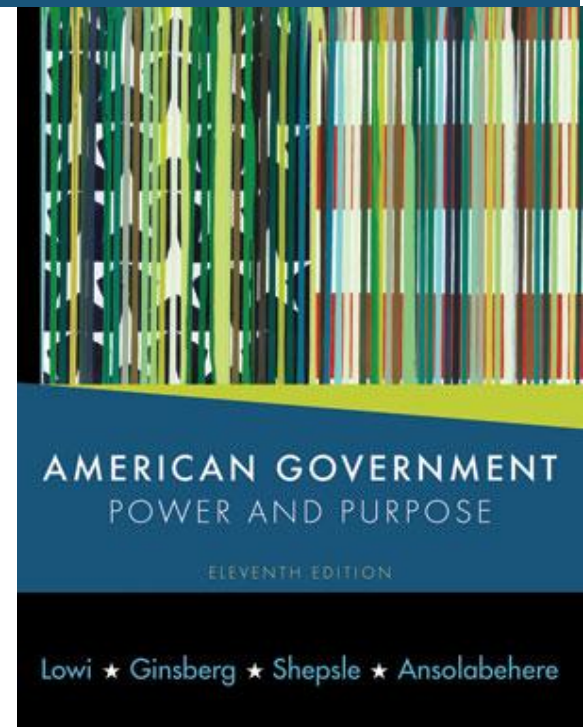
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Elections

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

POWER AND PURPOSE

Lowi ♦ Ginsberg ♦ Shepsle ♦ Ansolabehere



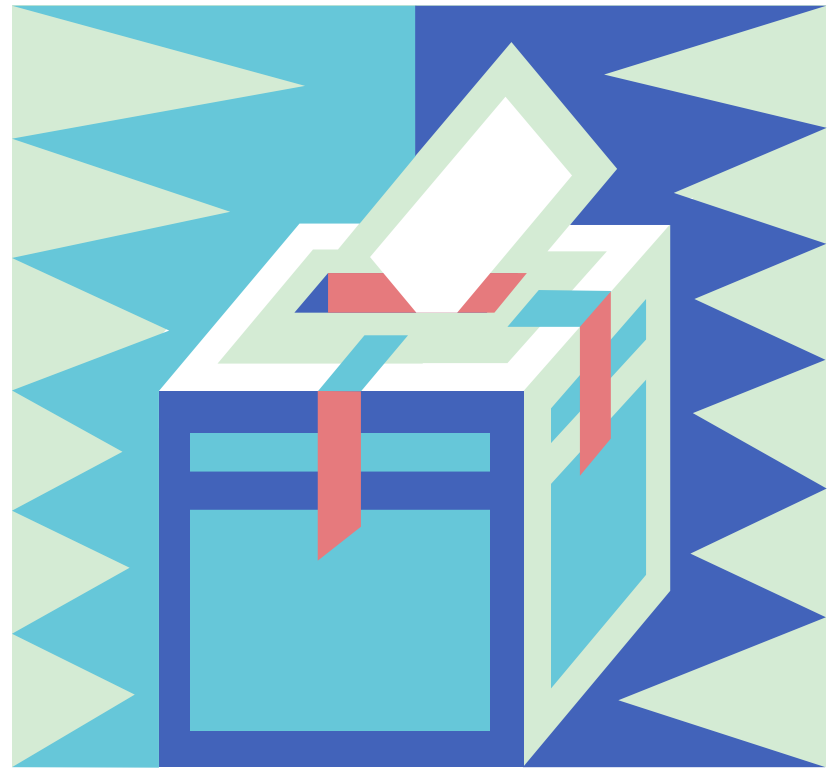
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The Paradox of Voting in America

Americans believe voting is important.

They see it as:

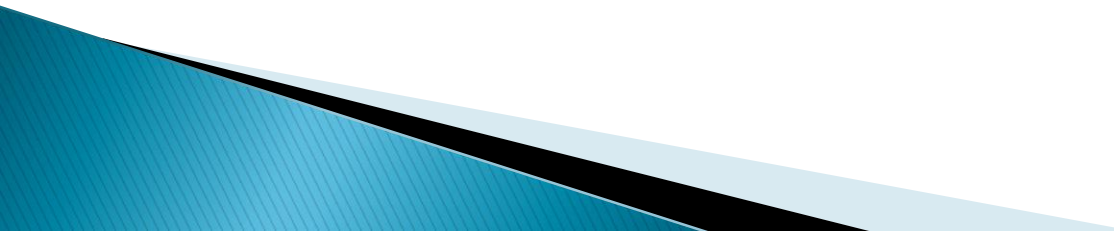
- a **civic duty**;
- key to maintaining popular control of government;
- the very essence of democracy.



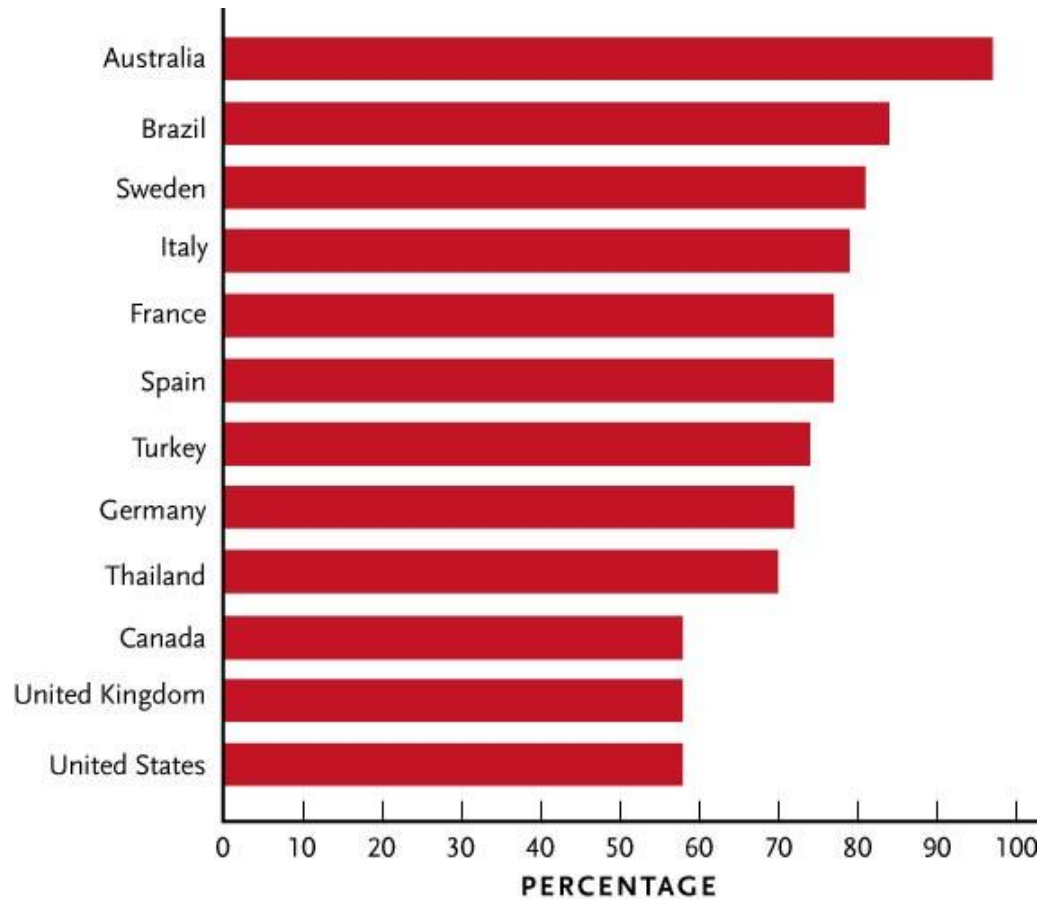
American turnout is also low compared to many of the world's other democracies.

Voter turnout levels in other democracies, such as South Africa, Denmark, Israel, Germany, Mexico, Britain, Russia, France and Canada, range from 15 to 35 percent higher than turnout in American *presidential* elections.

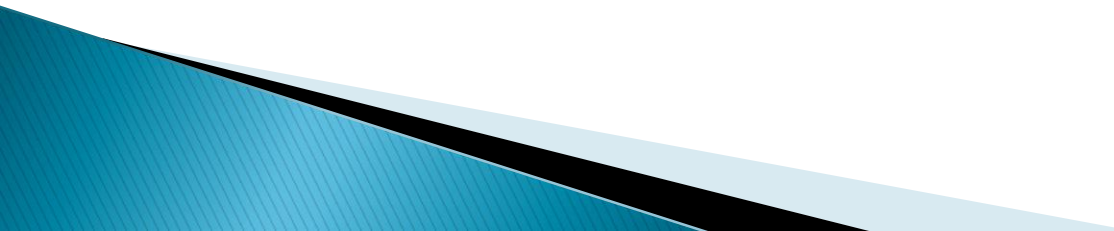
What is it about American culture, society, and politics that explains Americans' comparative unwillingness to vote?



Voter Turnout Around The World



At the same time, Americans tend **not to vote**, and voter turnout is low by historical standards.

- ▶ Between 70 and 75 percent of the voting-age population is registered to vote;
 - ▶ About 50 percent vote in presidential elections.
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Voter Turnout in U.S. Presidential Elections



Voting: A Cost–Benefit Analysis

The Rationality Principle:

All political activity is goal-oriented and purposive.

Some political scientists argue that it is not “rational” for Americans to vote because:

- The “costs” of voting in America are comparatively high; and
- The “benefits” of voting in America are comparatively low.

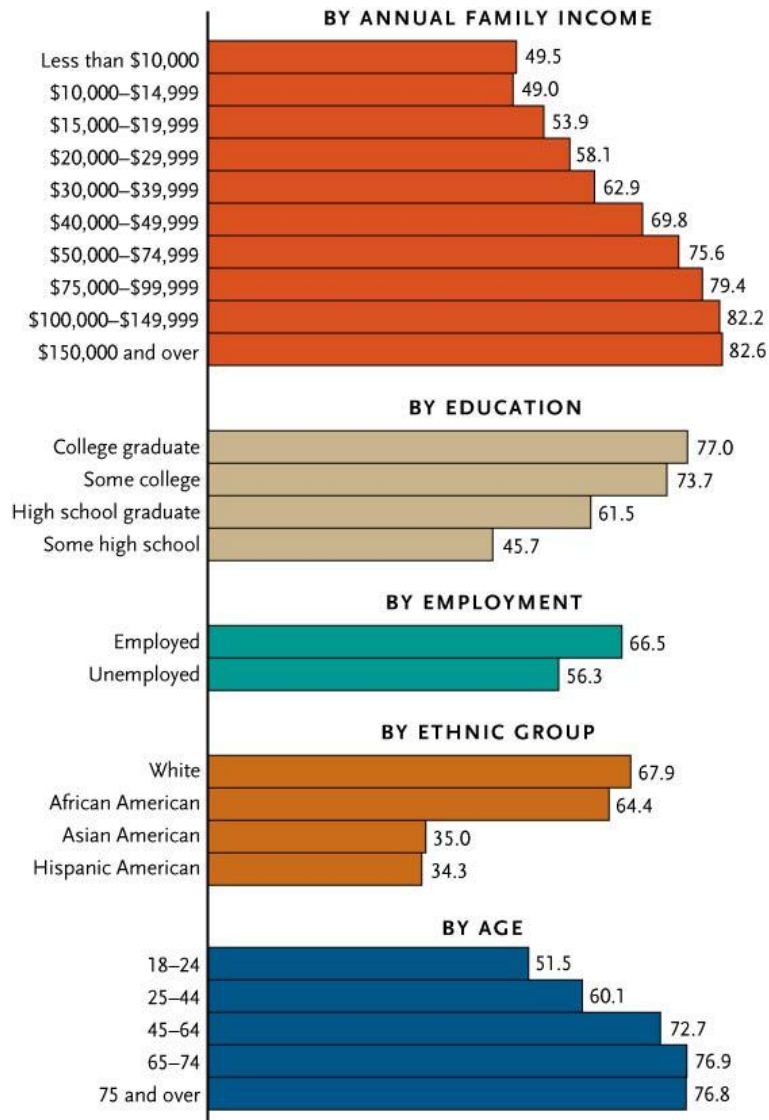


There is a certain bureaucracy to American elections that increases the **costs of voting**.

- Voter registration rules often require voters to register well in advance of elections;
- Many states have laws that “purge” nonvoters from the registration rolls.

And voter registration differs greatly among different social groups.

Differences in Voter Registration Rates, 2004



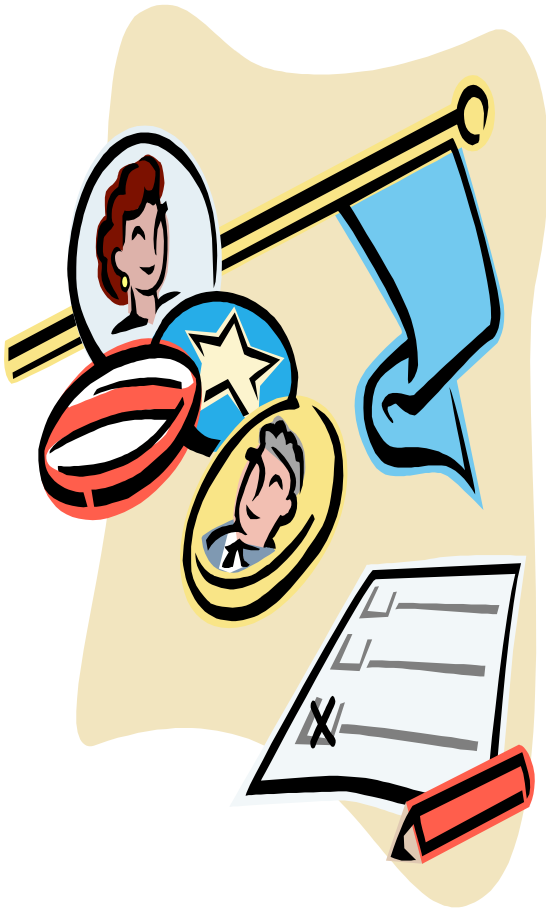
The **costs of voting** in America are also high because of the frequency of American elections.

- ▶ Two-year election cycles are nearly half the length of election cycles of similar democracies.
- ▶ Americans' rare use of primary elections doubles the frequency with which Americans are asked to vote.



Finally, in other countries, **political parties play important roles in mobilizing voters** and thus decrease the costs of voter turnout.

Whereas in the nineteenth century, American parties performed the mobilization role, the decline of American party organizations in the twentieth century made American parties ill-equipped to perform this role.



Although the costs of voting are high in America, many would-be voters perceive the **benefits** of voting to be low.

- ▶ Americans often believe that one vote cannot make a difference.
- ▶ Many Americans believe that there it does not matter which party controls the government.

The higher the stakes in an election, the more likely voters will be to see the benefits of participation. As a result, voter turnout levels vary based on the importance of the offices—including the presidency—up for selection.

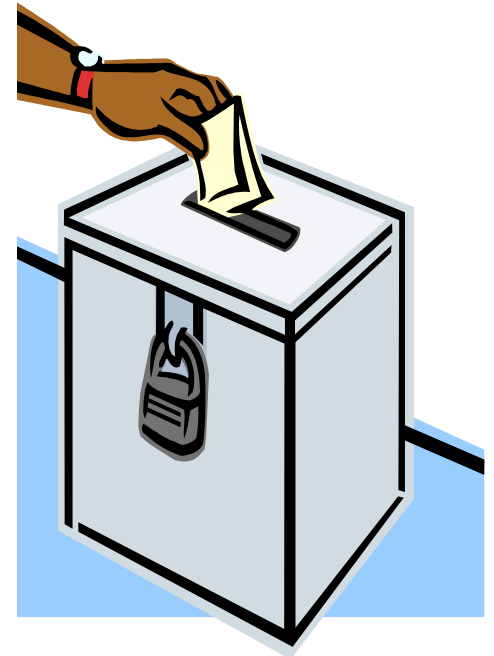


Turnout is the highest in **presidential election years**, when about 50 percent of the voting age population votes. These are held every four years.



Midterm elections for congressional and gubernatorial elections are held in the even-numbered years that do not coincide with presidential elections.

Without the presidency at stake, voter participation tends to be lower. About 33 percent of the voting-age population votes in midterm elections.



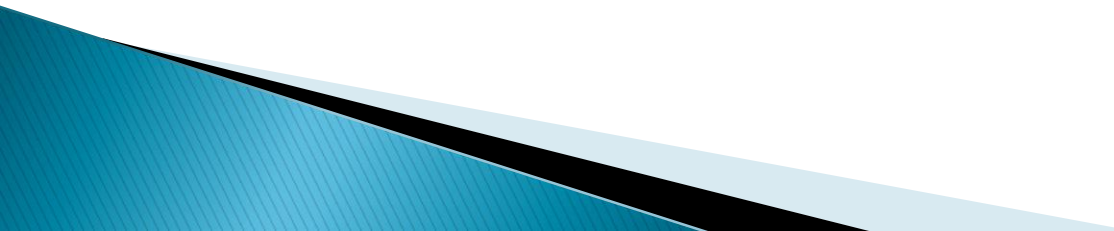
Even fewer vote in off-year, special, and primary elections.

Primary elections are elections used by political parties to select their candidates for general elections; these can be either **open or closed**.

Open primaries are those in which the voter can wait until the day of the primary to choose which party to enroll in to select candidates for the general election.

Closed primaries are those in which voters can participate in the selection of candidates for a party to which they belong prior to Election Day.

There are structural features of the American electoral system that undermine the impact of individual votes:

- America's **single-member plurality (SMP)** electoral system tends to dilute the impact of individual votes in specific geographic areas, particularly when compared to **proportional representation (PR)** electoral systems;
 - The **electoral college** system of selecting the president also decreases the potential impact of individual votes on electoral outcomes.
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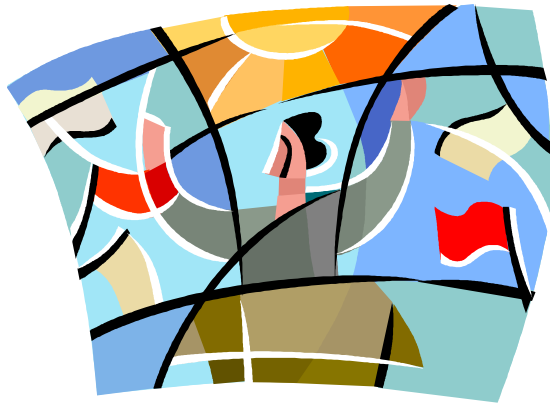
The means by which elections are conducted, votes are counted, and winners are determined play key roles in elections.

In **majority systems**, candidates must receive a majority (50 percent plus one) of the votes in a district in order to win a seat.

In **plurality systems**, like most elections in the United States, candidates need only receive the most votes in an election, regardless of whether it constitutes a majority.



Some electoral systems are **proportional representation (PR)** systems, in which multiple seats are awarded for a particular geographic area and each party receives a percentage of those seats proportional to the percentage of votes it received.



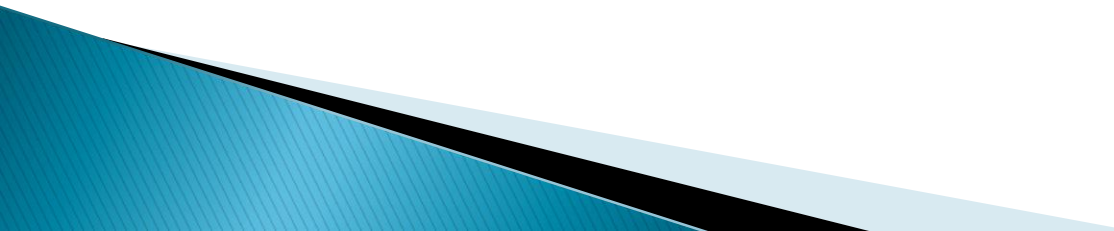
Majority and plurality electoral systems tend to reduce the number of political parties in a political system.

Proportional representation electoral systems tend to increase the number of competitive political parties.

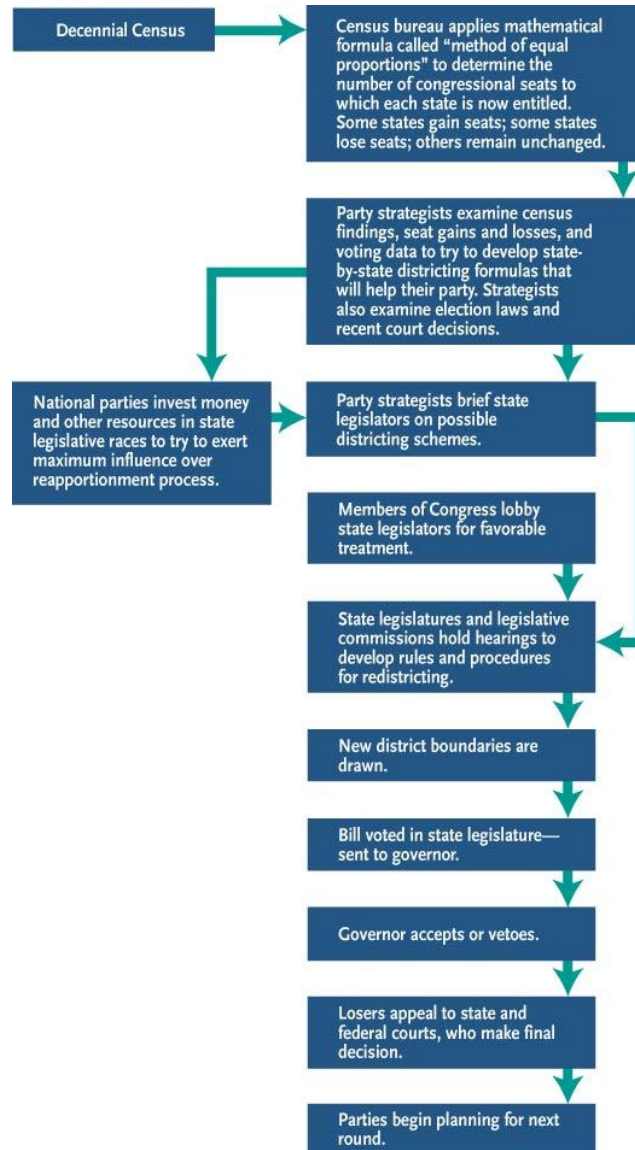
Majority and plurality electoral systems tend to accentuate the importance of geographic district boundaries.

Redistricting refers to the process of drawing election districts.

When redistricting is viewed as a political process designed to give unfair advantage to a particular group, candidate, or party, this is often called **gerrymandering**.

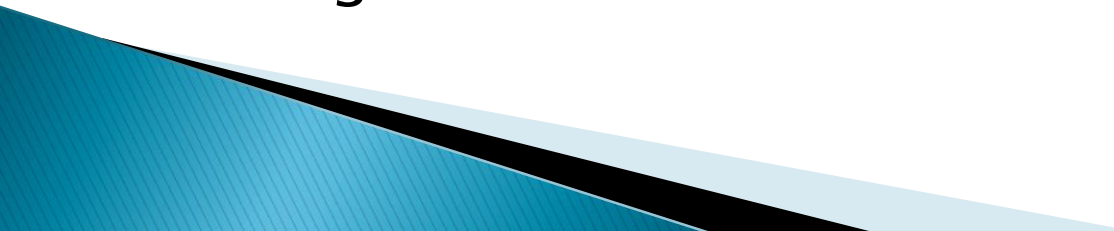


Congressional Redistricting

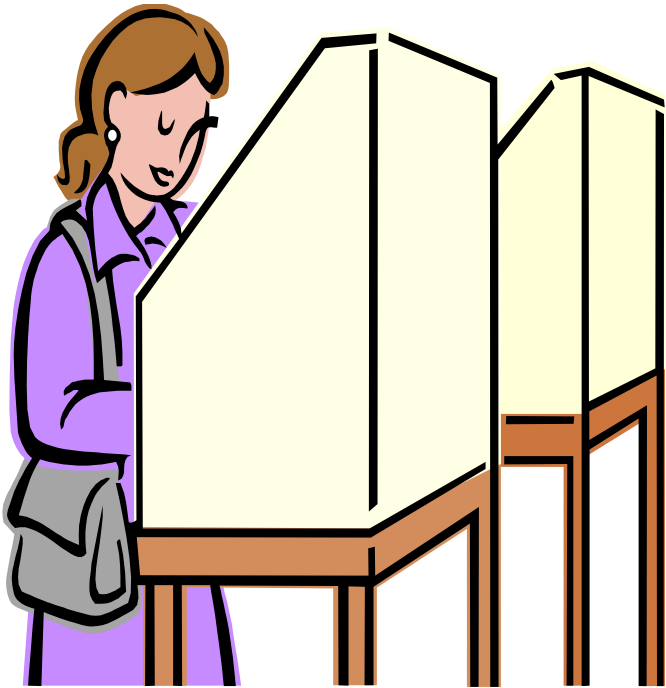


With the **costs of voting** being comparatively high in the United States, it is little wonder that America's voting-age population votes less than citizens of countries that, through strong parties and eased voting bureaucracies, subsidize voting behavior.

And with the **benefits of voting** being comparatively low in the United States, it is also not a surprise that countries that have more parties, and thus greater choice for voters, see higher turnout.



How Voters Decide



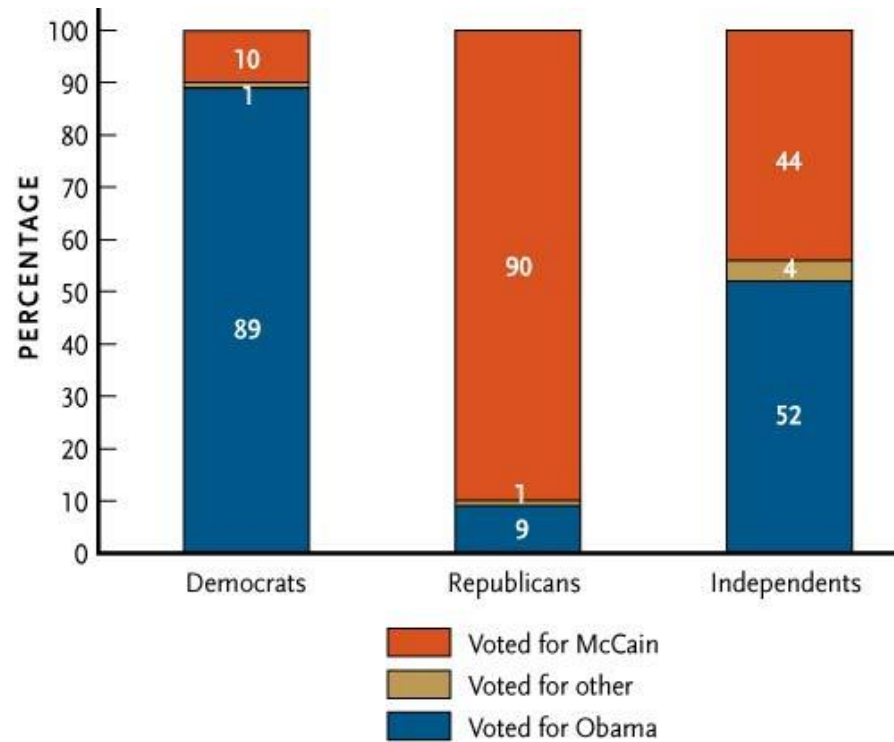
In making their decisions, voters balance a mix of cues and information, including:

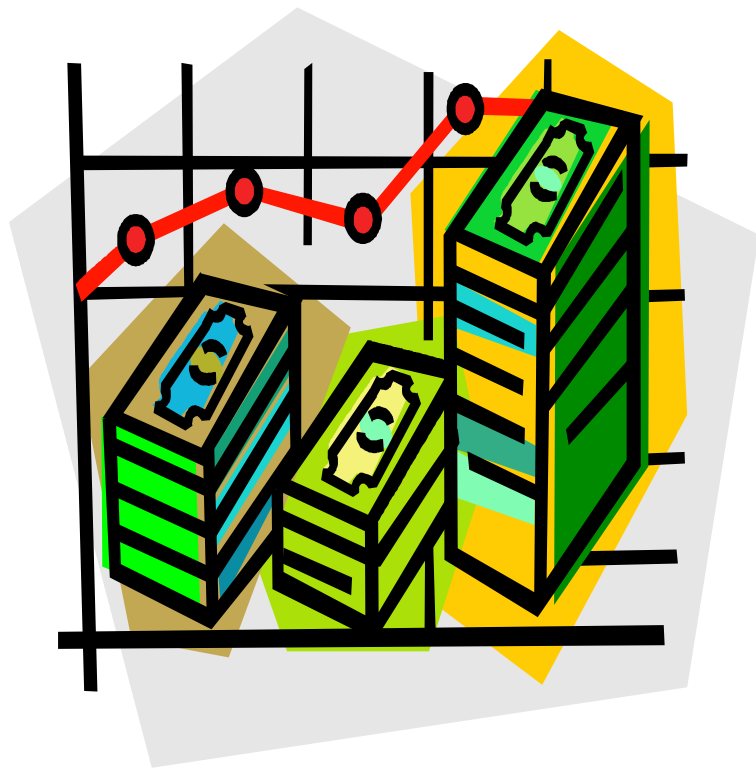
- Partisan loyalty;
- Issues;
- Candidate characteristics.

Although television and other media have made candidate characteristics and issue appeals more salient in voter decision making, for many voters partisanship remains preeminent.



The Effect of Party Identification on The Vote for President, 2008

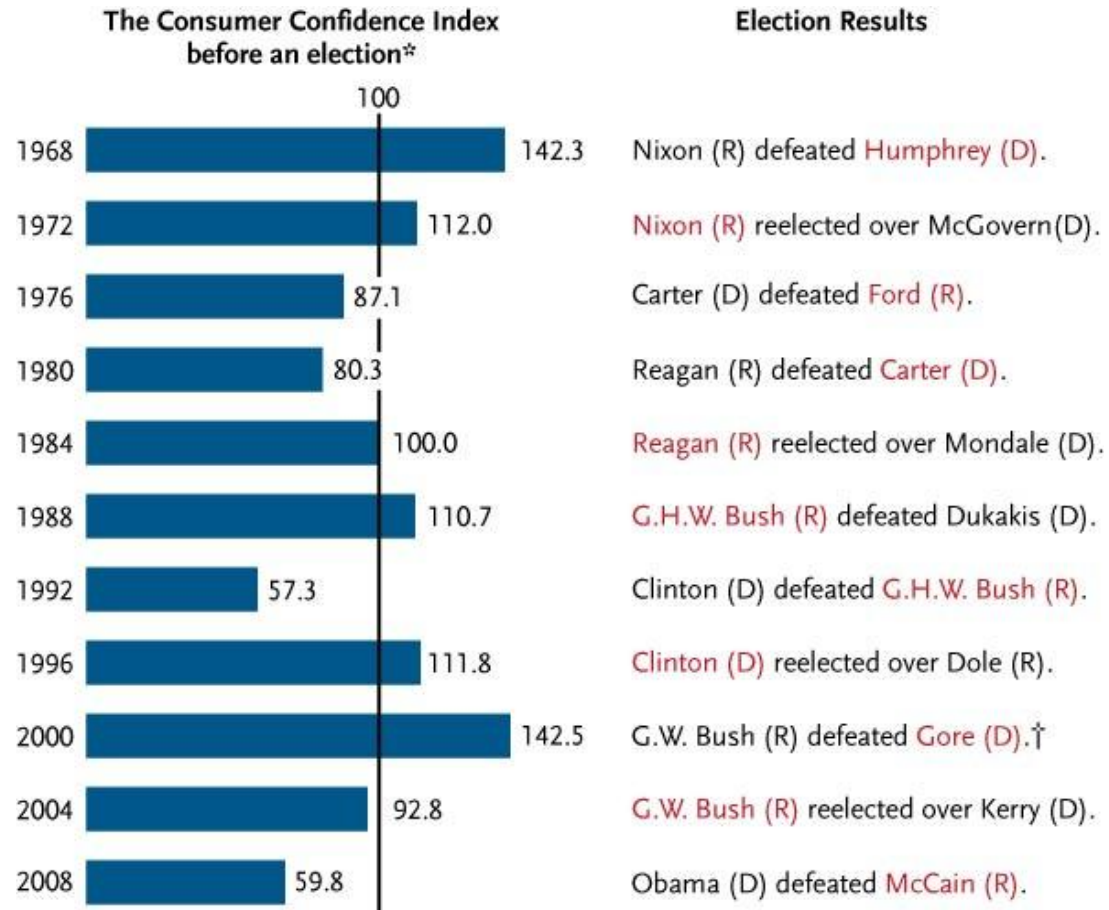




Voters who make their decisions on the basis of issues may vote **prospectively**, by estimating how a candidate might perform in the future, or **retrospectively**, whereby they judge candidates and parties based on their past performance.

Often, retrospective evaluations are based on economic performance.

Consumer Confidence and Presidential Elections

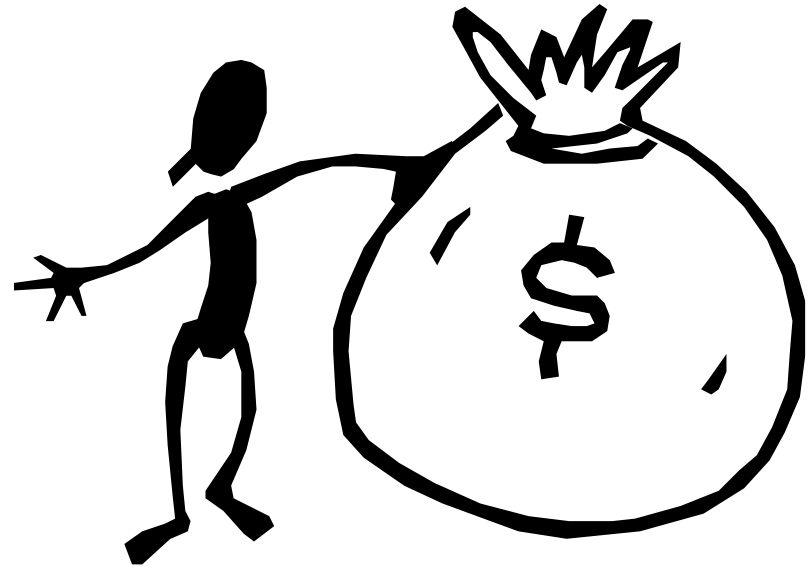


Increasingly in the media age of American elections, individual candidate characteristics such as “decisiveness,” “honesty,” and “vigor,” affect individual vote choice.



Money and Politics

As contemporary election campaigns have come to rely more on media, polls, and other “capital-intensive” means of reaching voters, candidates and their campaigns increasingly rely on donors.

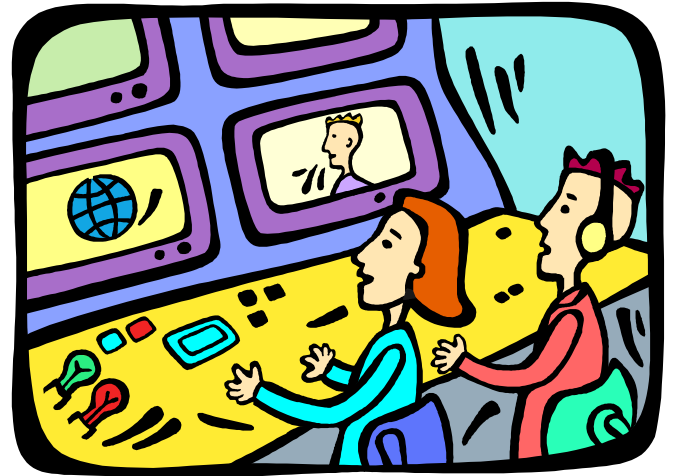


Individual donors largely contribute based on issues and ideology, whereas professional givers like **political action committees (PACs)** often donate money to campaigns to advance their cause and gain access to political officeholders.

In recent years, campaign finance reforms have sought to reduce the impact of money and fund-raising on political campaigns.

For example, the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) sought to reduce the amount of **soft money** contributions to political parties.

Still, critics charge that BCRA led to an increase in the influence of independent **527 Committees**, which funnel large amounts of money into elections through **issue advocacy ads** but are less accountable than political parties.



Federal Campaign Finance Regulation

The Rules for Presidential Primaries and Elections

| Candidates . . . | may receive . . . | if . . . |
|----------------------|---|---|
| In primaries | federal matching funds, dollar for dollar, up to \$5 million | they raise at least \$5,000 in each of twenty states in contributions of \$250 or less. |
| In general elections | full federal funding (but may spend no more than their federal funding) | they belong to a major party (minor-party candidates may receive partial funding). |
| In any election | money from independent groups (PACs and 527 committees) | the groups' efforts are not tied directly to the official campaign. |

Important Definitions for Campaign Finance Regulation

- **Political action committee (PAC):** Private group that raises and distributes funds for use in election campaigns.
- **527 committee:** Tax-exempt organization that engages in political activities, often through unlimited “soft-money” contributions. The committee is not restricted by current law on campaign finance, thus exploiting a loophole in the Internal Revenue Service code.
- **501(c)4:** Not for profit group that may engage in unlimited political spending so long as amount spent does not exceed 50 percent of its budget. Unlike the 527s, 501(c)4s are not required to disclose contributor and recipient information.
- **Federal matching funds:** Federal funds that match, dollar for dollar, all individual contributions of \$250 or less received by a candidate. To qualify, the candidate must raise at least \$5,000 in individual contributions of \$250 or less in each of twenty states.
- **Federal Election Commission:** The commission that oversees campaign finance practices in the United States.

Federal Campaign Finance Regulation

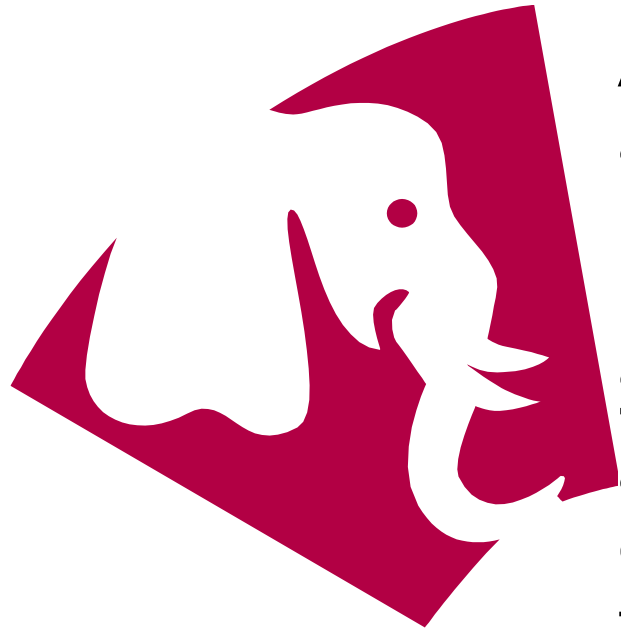
The Rules for Campaign Contributions

| Who | may contribute . . . | to . . . | if . . . |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Individuals | up to \$2,300 | a candidate | they are contributing to a single candidate in a single election. |
| Individuals | up to \$28,500 | a national party committee. | |
| Individuals | up to \$5,000 | a PAC. | |
| PACs | up to \$5,000 | a candidate | they contribute to the campaigns of at least five candidates. |
| Individuals and PACs | unlimited funds | a 527 committee | the funds are used for issue advocacy and the 527 committee's efforts are not coordinated with any political campaign. |
| Individuals and PACs | up to \$10,000 | a state party committee | the money is used for voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts. |

The Rules for Campaign Advertising

| Who | may not finance . . . | if . . . |
|---|---|---|
| Unions, corporations, and nonprofit organizations | broadcast issue ads mentioning federal candidates | they occur within sixty days of a general election or thirty days of a primary. |

The 2008 Elections



Arizona Senator John McCain revived a lagging campaign to win the Republican presidential nomination.

Selecting Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his running mate, the McCain campaign fared better at mobilizing the Republican base than winning over the Independents, which had once been McCain's strong suit.



Illinois Senator Barack Obama rode the momentum of a surprise victory in the Iowa caucuses to best the presumptive favorite, former first lady and New York Senator Hillary Clinton, for the Democratic nomination.

Choosing Delaware Senator Joe Biden as his running mate, Obama sought to solidify the “experience” on the Democratic side.

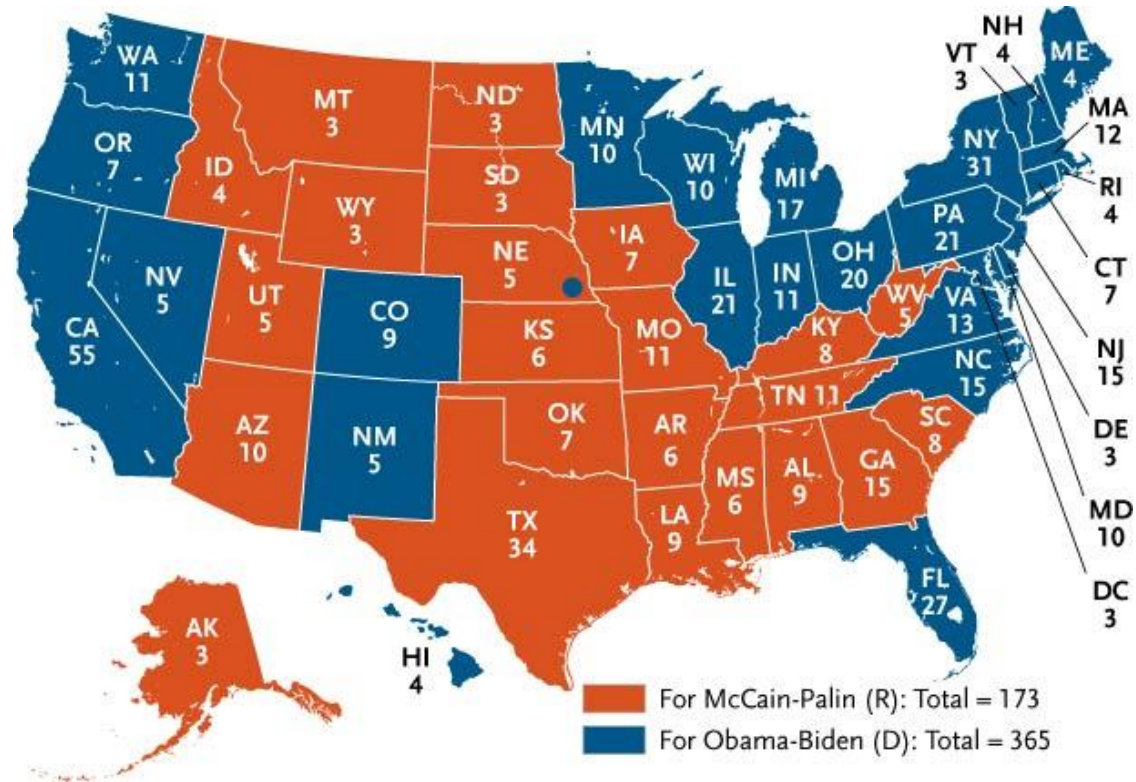
Saddled with the unpopularity of the Bush administration and a deeply damaged Republican brand, McCain found it difficult to court his Republican base and reach out to independents simultaneously.

The fall 2008 financial collapse on the Republican administration's watch, along with key missteps by both McCain and Palin, stalled any momentum McCain could muster.

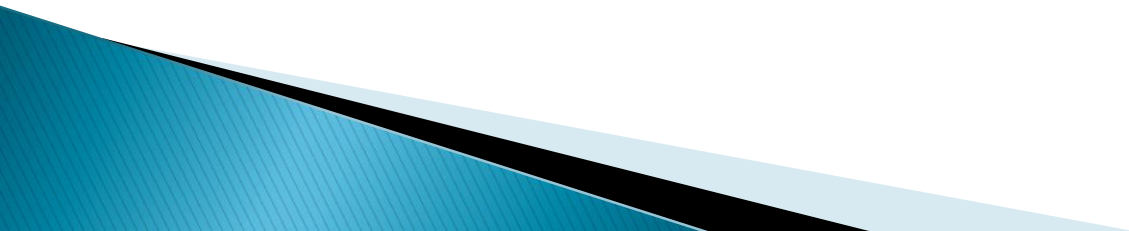
Although the Obama campaign made some mistakes and experienced difficult moments, the candidate's remarkable political skills and the overall climate produced a significant electoral victory.

Winning typically Democratic states; swing states like Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio; as well as some previously Republican states like North Carolina and Virginia; Obama sailed to a 365 to 173 electoral college victory.

Distribution of Electoral Votes in The 2008 Presidential Election

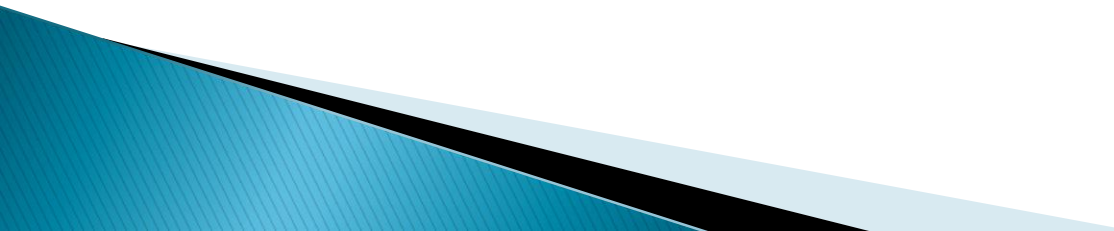


Not only was this a significant and large Democratic victory, but Obama's election as America's first African American president was a historical milestone for America as well.



The Benefits of Elections to Elites

Democracies derive legitimacy from popular consent and, having been elected by the public and political elites, work to translate the public support conferred on them in elections into a tool of governance.

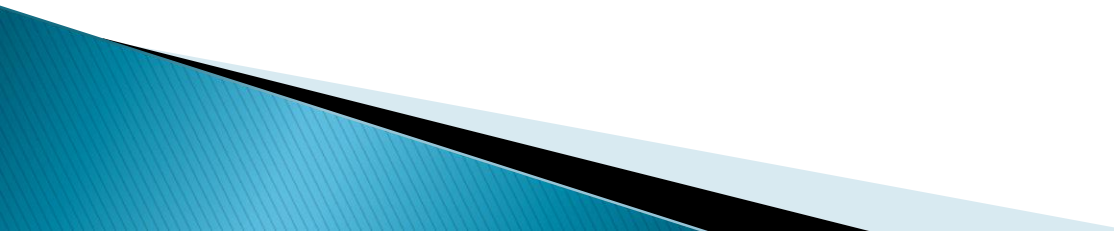




Individual politicians claim **mandates** for governmental actions based on electoral outcomes.


- ▶ When they win, politicians claim that their victories amounted to a referendum for a certain set of policies;
- ▶ The larger the margin of victory, the more plausible the case is that voters conferred a mandate.

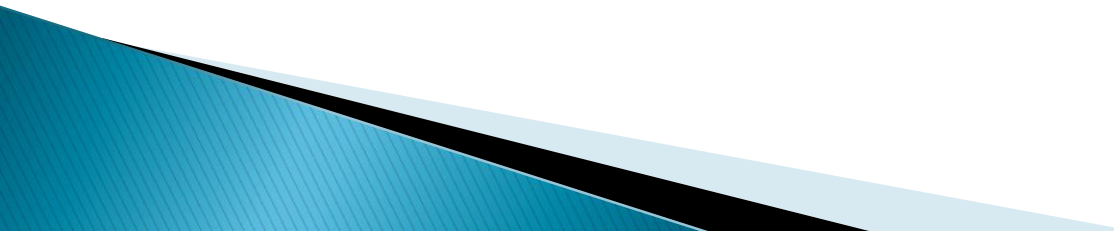
Claims to mandates are often dubious:

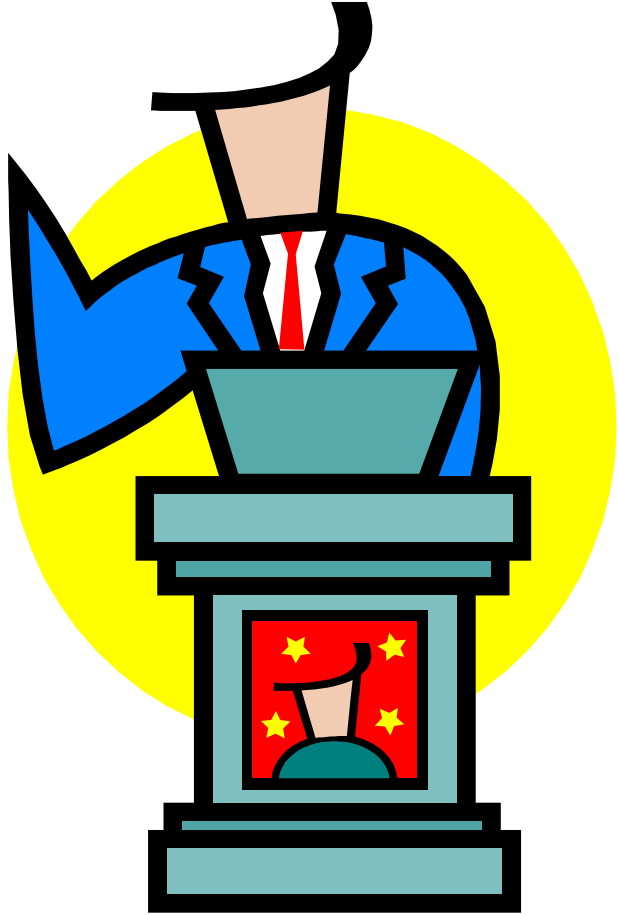
- People tend to vote for or against politicians for a variety of reasons, including policy, party, and personality;
 - There is good evidence that voters vote *retrospectively*; that is, they vote to reward or punish the incumbent party rather than confer a mandate on an opposition candidate.
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The Incentives to Vote

If elected officials are the “agents” of voters in a principal–agent relationship, it is clear why there are incentives for each of us to vote.

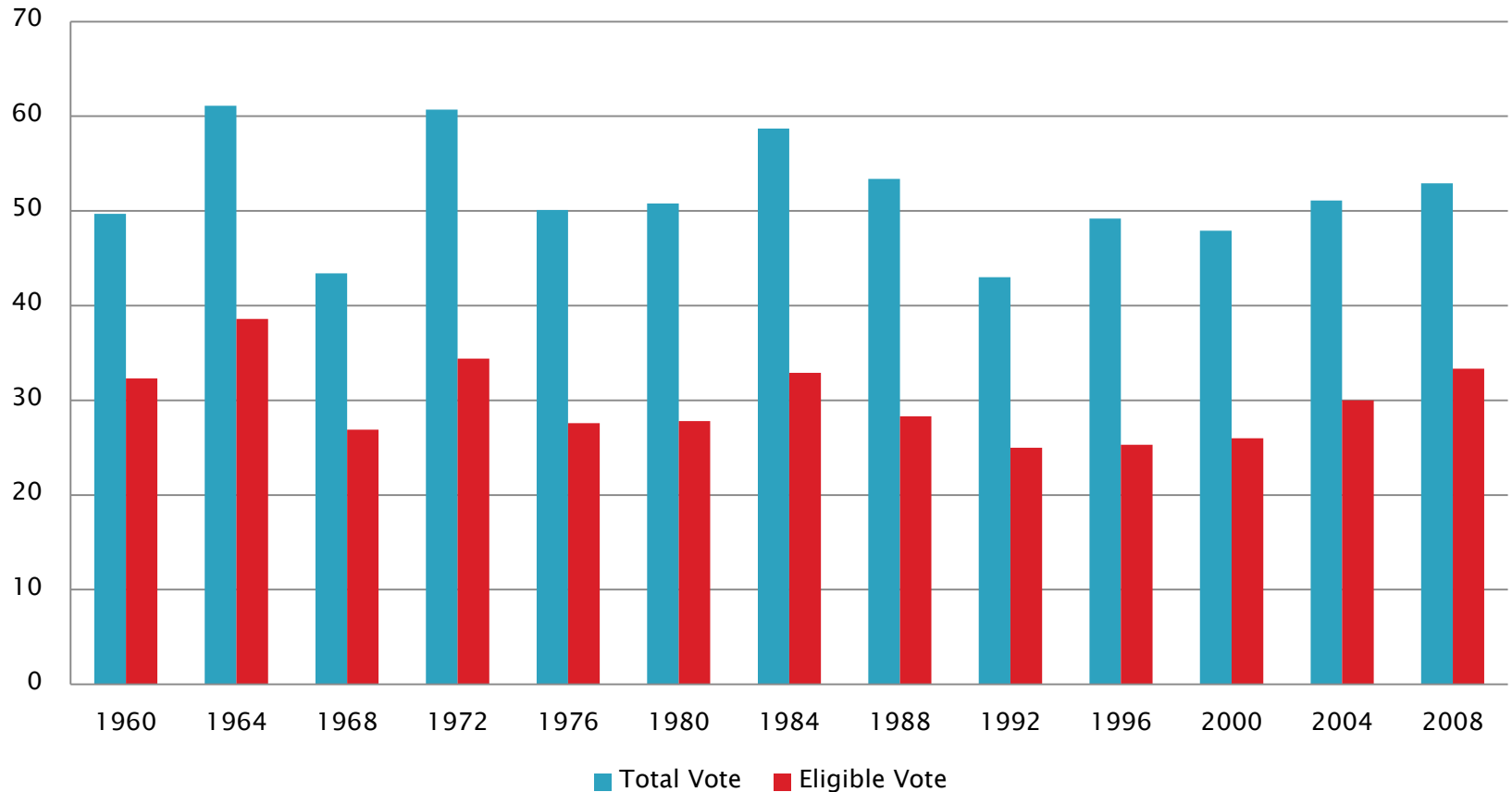
- Elected officials act in your name. As such, you should play as much a role in their selection as you can;
 - Any good principal–agent relationship requires the principal to monitor and guide the agent. Voting helps to enhance the “faithfulness” and accountability of your elected agents.
- 

- Elections are the most direct, equal, and authoritative means of gaining popular control over politicians;
 - Failing to turn out in elections surrenders the control of politicians (i.e., your agent) to those who do, in fact, turn out.
- 



Whereas the winner's percentage of **total votes** cast in presidential elections since 1960 has varied from 43 percent to 61 percent, the winning candidate usually assumes the presidency having won the votes of between one-fourth and one-third of the eligible voters.

Winner's Share of Total Vote and Eligible Vote, Presidential Elections, 1960–2008



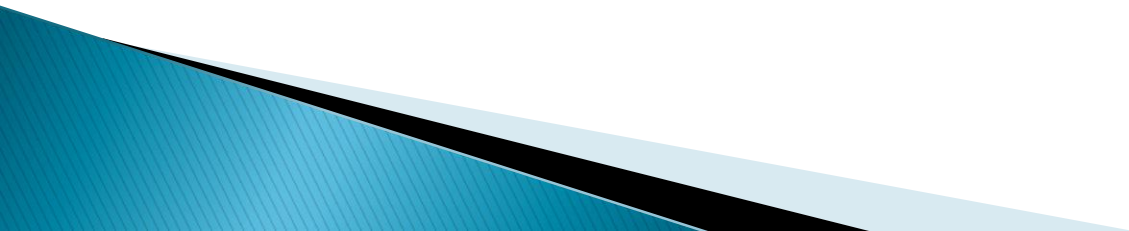
Source: Curtis Gans, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "President Bush, Mobilization Drives Propel Turnout to Post-1968 High," 11/4/2004, p. 8, www.fairvote.org/reports/CSAE2004electionreport.pdf, accessed 12/19/2007; 2008 data from Gans, "African-Americans, Anger, Fear and Youth Propel Turnout to Highest Level since 1960," <http://www1.american.edu/ia/cdem/csae/pdfs/2008pdfoffinaledited.pdf>, accessed 9/24/2009.



How much democratic authority can Presidents and other political elites claim when so few Americans actually vote?

Can a politician claim a mandate for governing when only one-third of the eligible voters actually voted for him or her?

Additional Art for Chapter 10



The method by which electoral districts are drawn following each decennial census may directly impact who gets elected from those districts. Recent decades have witnessed more states utilizing independent commissions or panels to redraw congressional districts in an attempt to limit partisanship in the districting process, but the majority of states still rely on state legislatures to reapportion House seats. At the same time, technological innovations such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software allow mapmakers to be extremely precise in terms of how individual voters are allocated among districts. As a result, congressional redistricting remains a focal point for party strategy, with parties looking to increase their advantage after the 2010 census.

Now, suppose that the Democrats are in control of the state legislature. With the same distribution of voters in the state, they could draw the districts to favor Democratic candidates as much as possible (with Democratic voters dominating three of the districts).

This concludes the presentation slides for Chapter 10: Elections

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