

Introduction to American Politics

Week 6: Elections

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Attendance



Outline

- Kernell et al. (Ch. 11)
- Popkin, Jacobson, Schudson (Kernell & Smith)
- Additional readings (if time)
- Wrap-up

Section 1

Discussion

The Logic of Elections

- ***Why do we have elections?*** → a partial solution to the agency loss problem that occurs due to delegation
 - Give citizens a say in who represents them
 - Encourage officeholder to be responsive
 - Prospective challengers have opportunities to “blow the whistle”
- ***But***, elections don’t automatically guarantee faithful representation

The Right to Vote

- Roughly 50% of the free adult male population was eligible to vote at the founding, but this quickly changed in the post-Revolutionary War era
 - Tax-paying citizens demanded a voice
 - Soldiers felt entitled to full political citizenship
 - Many found it difficult to reconcile the denial of voting rights with promises made in the Declaration of Independence
- Full suffrage for property-holding, white, Protestant men came in the 1840s
- After significant struggles, the franchise was also extended to freed slaves, racial/ethnic minorities, and women

Using the Right to Vote

- According to RCT, it's entirely reasonable that citizens simultaneously demand the right to vote *while also not bothering to vote themselves*
- This is the quintessential **collective action problem** in democratic states, because democratic accountability and free/fair elections are **collective benefits**
- Logically, however, following this logic to its conclusion means we should see no voting *at all*
- Turnout may be low (58-67% on average), but it's not zero
- ***So, why do people vote instead of just free riding?***

Deciding *How* to Vote

- Voting is essentially as series of “best guesses” about the future political environment that citizens can make in (at least) two ways:
 - Retrospective voting
 - Prospective voting
- It is well understood that voters most commonly use **party identification (PID)** when deciding how to vote, because it provides information about:
 - Performance voting
 - Issue voting
- Voters use a variety of other cognitive shortcuts on top of PID (e.g., listening to opinion leaders)
- Candidates’ identities (e.g., race) and qualities (e.g., experience) also tend to matter

Campaigns: The Bare Necessities

- A candidate to run
- A message to run *on*
- A way to *inform* voters about the candidate's message

Campaign Finance

- Modern political campaigns are *expensive*, but regulating the money in the process is extremely difficult
- This raises two important issues for democracy:
 - Principles of democratic equality are threatened by unequal wealth distribution
 - Privately-financed elections cause concerns over *who* elected officials are beholden to
- Most attempts at regulation since the 1970s have been relatively unsuccessful, in no small part due to congressional foot-dragging and the Supreme Court's "campaign spending as political speech" approach
- The most expensive part of campaigns is advertising, followed by "overhead" costs (e.g., staff, equipment)

The Electoral College

- One of the most controversial and misunderstood institutions in the American democratic framework
- Included by the Framers as a means of mitigating the passions of the majority, but it's worth considering whether it still serves this purpose effectively

Popkin: From *The Reasoning Voter*

- Voters use **low-cost cognitive shortcuts** to obtain information, make decisions, and (partially) overcome ignorance
 - The identities/characteristics of candidates themselves
 - Media coverage of candidates
 - Opinion leaders' views
- PID is used by voters as a “running tally” of past information/shortcuts related to previous experiences with the parties
- More recently used shortcuts are more likely to be used in voting decisions, and campaigns are critical because they help create these cognitive *focal points* for voters
- *But, the use of these heuristics is not entirely without problems*

Jacobson: “The Electoral Origins. . .”

- Polarization in the electorate is directly connected to polarization in Congress, because MCs seek to please these evolving electoral coalitions
 - Voter attitudes have become more internally consistent *and* more distinct between parties
 - Electoral coalitions have become more homogeneously partisan
- Increasing congressional polarization leads to **gridlock** (and Jacobson demonstrates this empirically), which MCs ironically condemn despite the fact that it arises due to their own electoral choices

Schudson: “America’s Ignorant Voters”

- “Informed” voters may not actually form the foundation of a sound democracy, because even those who are ignorant about politics may still be able to vote in entirely reasonable ways
- Politics in the U.S. is significantly more complex than in other democracies, which results in *relatively* lower political knowledge among everyday Americans
- Ideological inconsistency *within* the parties also makes it difficult for voters to make predictions using Popkin’s “low-information rationality”
- *The notes include links to the referenced works by Delli Carpini and Keeter*

Additional Materials

- Zeleny → independent “strongholds” and how partisan candidates still struggle in these areas
- Liptak → Supreme Court’s *Chiafalo* decision on “faithless elector” laws
- Faden → also discusses *Chiafalo*, but in the context of the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact
- *WaPo* → brief overview of the Electoral College process
- Cheney → illustrates challenges with altering longstanding institutional arrangements (the Electoral College and congressional certification)
- Wines → the Court’s *Purcell* doctrine and how it’s manipulated by policymakers

Section 2

Outro

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- We'll return to in-person next week (2/28)
- **The Midterm Exam is March 9th!** (Week 8 on the syllabus, and there's no sections that week)

Attendance

