

CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

J. Alexander Branham

Spring 2016

INTRODUCTION

- The US has *very* frequent elections
- President, (most) governors every four years
- Federal and state legislators every two years
- Thousands of other offices (mayors, councilors, commissioners, etc)
- There are somewhere around 90,000 governments in the US, most of which are elected

- A typical election asks a voter about some of the aforementioned offices, bond issues, referenda, initiatives, and other issues
- Most Americans can vote three or four times a year

- Incomplete information
- Knowing what politicians will do once elected

ELECTIONS AS INSTITUTIONS

- Elections are run through a combination of federal and state laws
- These laws determine everything from the timing to who can vote, how votes are counted, what it takes to win, etc

WHO CAN VOTE

- Most citizens over the age of 18
- This has changed since the founding, where oftentimes only white male property owners over the age of 21 could vote
- *Who* can vote is different than who *actually* votes
 - Presidential election: usually ~60% of people eligible to vote do so
 - Midterms: ~45%
 - Local: ~10-20%

- Voting isn't mandatory
 - It is in some other countries (e.g. Australia, Brazil, etc)
- Should the US have mandatory voting?

TURNOUT RATES

- Turnout in the US is on the lower end of other comparable countries
- **Turnout rate** is simply the number of people who vote divided by the number of people who are allowed to vote
- The denominator is actually harder to define
- Most of the time voting age population is used
- There's roughly 320 million people in the US
 - Under 18 not allowed to vote (~75 million people)
 - Noncitizens not allowed to vote (~20 million people)
 - Prison and felons (and sometimes ex-felons) (~3 million)

- Registration
 - “Motor voter” helps since 1993
 - Registration is atypical in a democracy
 - Only about 80% of the electorate is registered
 - Helps determine precincts
- Voter ID laws

- Today, voting viewed as a private matter
- Voting is done by **secret ballot**
- Only the case since the end of the 1800s as a way to end vote buying and voter intimidation
 - Not all votes in the US are secret - for example, town halls and (some) caucuses

- Along with the secret ballot the US adopted the **Australian ballot**
 - This lists the names of all candidates on a single ballot
- This allows/encourages **split-ticket voting**
- Also lets voters choose *candidates* rather than *parties*
 - Allows for the personal vote
 - Allows for incumbency advantage
- Produces greater fragmentation in control over government

- The US mostly employs **single-member districts**
 - The House, most state legislatures, most local governments
 - One representative per district
 - All districts have equal population

HOUSE ELECTIONS - SINGLE MEMBER DISTRICTS

- House members elected by different rules
 - Some states used single-member districts
 - Others elected all at large
 - Most states from the 1840s onward use single member districts
 - In 1967, Congress mandates single-member districts

- The Supreme Court mandates beginning in the 1960s that House districts must be equal in population
- 1971 is the first election with single-member districts with equal populations
- Eventually, civil rights groups and the courts extend this to most other elections (city councils, school districts, etc)

- Not single-member districts
 - Two senators per state
- States don't have equal population
 - California ~ 39 million people
 - Wyoming ~ 0.6 million people

- Senators originally elected by state legislatures
 - 17th amendment changes this

- Electoral college
- Number of votes is number of Senators plus number of representatives

- Using single-member districts magnifies the power of the majority
- In 2014, Republicans won about 52% of the vote but get 57% of the seats in the House
- In 2012, Barack Obama won 51% of the vote, but 62% of the electoral votes
- This makes it hard for small parties to get any seats
- Majority tendency of districts makes it hard for minorities to get representation

- Today, about a quarter of the US population is black or Hispanic, but only about 15% of Congress is
- **Gerrymandering** can give unfair advantage to one party
 - Today, the bias tends to be about 5 percentage points
 - This is down from the 1960s (~11 points)
- Gerrymandering can dilute the influence of a group too - **cracking**

- Most elections in the US are decided by **plurality rule**
- Plurality rule inflates winners:
 - 2005 in the UK: Labor gets 35% of the vote, 55% of the seats
 - Conservatives get 31% of the vote and 31% of the seats
 - Liberal Democrats get 22% of the vote and 8% of the seats
- Main alternative to plurality rule is **proportional representation**

- Duverger's law states that plurality rule systems tend to produce two-party systems
- Politicians don't want to split the vote
- Voters don't want to waste theirs

Referendum a measure proposed by the legislature that is referred to the vote of the electorate for approval or rejection

Initiative citizens may petition to place a policy proposal on the ballot for vote

Recall removing a public official by vote

- Texas only allows legislatively referred proposed constitutional amendments

HOW VOTERS DECIDE

- Two decisions to make in any election:
 - Whether to vote or not
 - Who to vote for
- Age and education play a large role in determining whether someone will vote or not
- In 2012, about 60% of the voting eligible population voted
- However, only 41% of those under 25 voted
- 71% of those above 65 voted

- More highly educated individuals tend to turnout more
- More than 75% of college-educated people vote
- Less than 40% of people without a high school degree voted,
- 52% of people with a high-school degree

- Other factors also matter
- 51% of people who have lived in their current residence less than a year voted
- 76% of people voted who lived there more than 5 years
- 67% of homeowners voted, only 49% of renters

HOW DO PEOPLE VOTE?

- After deciding whether to vote, need to decide who to vote for
- Strongest single predictor is partisanship

- People tend to identify with a political party
- Only about 10% of Americans identify as an independent
- Partisans vote with their party about 90% of the time
- But what is partisan identification?

- People identify with a party not unlike how they identify with a religion or community
- The first few presidential elections someone experiences have a profound experience
- Those 18–25 in 1984 ID with the Republicans (Reagan)
- Those 18–25 in 2008 ID with the Democrats (Obama)

- People ID with parties that pursue policies that they will like
- Today's parties are much more ideologically coherent than those in the 70s and 80s

- Party ID reflects experiences with leaders, especially the president
- Which party is able to govern better?
- Each president lets us update our beliefs about that

- Of course, partisanship doesn't totally determine individuals' votes, especially in non-presidential elections
- Voters vote for candidates based on the issues too
- **Prospective voting**: making choices that focus on future behavior
- **Retrospective voting**: making choices that focus on past performance

- Many issues can be mapped in a continuous space
 - e.g. tax rates, spending, abortion, etc
- **Median voter theorem** pushes candidates towards the middle of the spectrum

- Valence issues lack conflict about what is desirable
 - Everyone wants less crime, better health, peace, etc
- The economy is the most important valence issue
- When the economy is improving, people tend to vote for the party in power
- When the economy is in decline, people tend to vote for the opposition

- Voters tend to vote for people like them
- Race, ethnicity, religion, gender, geography, and social background all matter
- Personality also matters - people tend to like candidates who appear “honest,” or “competent”

CAMPAIGNS

- Elections in the US are unregulated compared to other countries
- Millions of dollars spent on elections
- Advertising on TV, radio
- Door-to-door canvassing and direct mail

- Campaigns mount competitive campaigns to win votes
- Campaigns spend millions or billions of dollars
- Campaigns inform voters through competition

- Campaigns are long, often lasting a year or more
- The Federal Election Commission (FEC) calls the election the two-year period leading up to the war
- Super expensive - in 2012, the Obama campaign spend 1.2 billion, Romney spent 1.25 billion

- Many other countries have a much shorter campaign cycle
- Government calls for election, campaign for a month or three, then have an election
- Most other democracies also limit expenditures and fundraising activities

- 1971 Congress passes the Federal Elections Campaign Act
 - Imposes limits on (some) giving
 - Sets up political action committees (PACs)
 - Creates the Federal Election Commission
 - Public funding for presidential elections

- *Buckley v. Valeo*: the Supreme Court decides that money is a form of speech
 - 1976
 - Candidates, groups, and parties may spend as much as they like, but the donations must come in small amounts

- 2002: Congress enacts the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA, McCain-Feingold Act)
 - prohibited unlimited party spending (soft money)
 - Banned certain sorts of political attack advertisements in the last weeks of a campaign

- *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*: 2010
 - Strikes down limits on independent expenditures by corporations
 - Decides that corporations have the same right to political speech as individuals

- An important difference between presidential elections and congressional elections is the **incumbency advantage**
- Seems like it's around 5–10 percentage points in most non-presidential elections

- Whether campaigns are effective or not has been studied by political scientists quite a bit
- While individual ads can have a large impact, their effect tends to die out relatively quickly
- Competing campaigns also tend to cancel out each others' effects