Elections

1. **Why do people vote?**

Historically, American voter turnout is pretty low: presidential elections averaged between 55% and 65% over the years, while nonpresidential elections are far worse, averaging 40% or less.

There are lots of reasons why people do not vote:

* Many citizens feel their vote does not make a difference.
* Citizens feel there is a lack of quality candidates.
* No interesting, clear-cut choices due to the nature of the two-party system.
* Negative television advertising turns voters off by the end of the election cycle.

Political scientists debate whether or not nonvoting is bad for democracy.

1. One school says that low voting is bad for democracy and that nonvoting illustrates a lack of legitimacy.
2. The other school suggests that nonvoting means citizens are basically satisfied.

Americans vote less when compared to Europeans because of automatic registration, elections on Sundays, the ballots are simpler, and there are heavier limits and controls on television advertising.

1. **Who votes?**

In most democracies, the average voters are middle aged people who are better educated, living in urban areas and they likely to identify with a political party.

* 1. **Income and Education**

Voter turnout is affected by both income levels and education levels.

People with high income levels are much more likely to vote than those with lower income levels.

People with higher education levels vote at higher rates than those with less education.

The two factors are reinforcing: the higher your education level, the more likely it is that you will make more money.

A factor that explains the difference between the two demographics is efficacy.

Higher education leads to a feeling that you at least have a little power and means to influence the system.

Efficacy is much higher for citizens who are professionals and much lower for those in the working class.

Education also has the effect of broadening interests and increasing the perception of having a stake in the system.

There is a puzzle of voting behaviour with respect to education: as education levels have increased, voter turnout has declined, which may mean that education as a predictive factor of voting behaviour means less than it used to.

Some of this can be attributed to the effects of post materialism in advanced societies. (*theory according to which all industrialized countries have moved away from manufacturing and into knowledge and information industries, which cause a shift in values from the society to the self, which means that only personal thing matter in the New Age*)

* 1. **Race**

Until recently, African Americans had a much lower turnout rate than other groups in society. The gap closed when African American income and education levels rose when Barak Obama ran for president.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act removed many of the barriers to voting for African American individuals, that had kept turnout levels low.

* 1. **Age**

young people vote at consistently lower rates than older citizens: young people under the age of 25 are less likely to vote (about half are not registered to vote)

The 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18 in the United States, but young people still do not vote.

Young people are less economically involved and therefore have lower voter turnout rates.

This changes as they age, they pay taxes, and their stake increases.

* 1. **Gender**

Traditionally, women have voted at lower rates than men, but this has changed in recent years, with women's turnout rates surpassing men.

This is correlated with education rates increasing among women.

* 1. **Place of Residence**

Urban areas have higher voting turnout rates than rural areas.

This is a reflection in part of the higher turnout rates among people with higher levels of education, as urban areas have higher concentrations of people with higher levels of education.

Polling stations are also nearer in urban areas than in rural, which makes voting much easier for many citizens.

Regional differences do matter in voter turnout as well: U.S. South used to have lower voter turnout rates than many other parts of the United States, but this has changed in recent years.

Southern France has lower voter turnout rates than Northern France.

1. **Who Votes How?**

Voting is affected by two kinds of factors:

* Long-term factors affect how a person votes over the course of his/her lifetime.
* Short-term factors affect how a person votes in a given election.

Besides the factors listed below there is also to take into consideration the issues involved and the characteristics of the candidates

* 1. **Partisan Identification**

The attachments that citizens feel toward a party for a long time, will influence how a citizen votes in elections.

Citizens with strong party identification will habitually vote for one party, while citizens with weak party identification will be much easier to swing and may cross party lines.

A person's party identification is heavily influenced by his/her parents, and people will usually adopt the party ID held by their parents.

Party identification is important in helping to ensure electoral stability. If party ID is stable, then politicians are able to anticipate what voters want and will work to deliver it.

Weak party identification leads to volatility in voter preferences.

Party ID used to be very important in European elections but seems to be weakening as a predictor of voting behaviour. This can be attributed in part to the decline in class voting in Europe, in addition to the effects of post-materialism.

Groups that tend to identify with certain parties are called voting blocs, and politicians design their campaigns to try to win the blocs most likely to vote for them.

No bloc is entirely solid, though.

Increasingly, Americans occupy alternate universes, with very little common. A study finds 81% of voters say they cannot agree with the other side on basic facts.

* 1. **Class Voting**

Social class is a determinant of voting behaviour, and people will support political parties based on how they perceive their social class.

Class voting lower in the United States than in Europe, but still relevant.

Two things that muddy class voting.

* Working-class people who vote for conservative parties due to self-identification as middle-class, family traditions, or individual convictions.
* Middle- and upper-class citizens who vote for parties on the left due to a working-class family background or the effects of higher education.

As a result, class voting is not as accurate of a predictor of voting behaviour as we would like, although it is still extremely relevant.

* 1. **Regional Voting**

Some regions identify strongly with certain parties. This is especially true in states that have a core/periphery struggle.

Ex. Celtic fringe votes for the British Labour Party.

U.S. South solidly Republican since the 1980s, the Northeast votes solidly Democratic.

Regional voting can change over time: The North/South voting patterns in the United States are now the reverse of the period following the Civil War.

* 1. **Race and Ethnicity**

Non-whites are a growing electoral force in U.S. politics; this is especially true with the increased growth of the Hispanic population in the United States, the voting patterns of which seem to support the Democratic Party. African Americans also vote for the Democratic Party.

Racial minorities form 28% of electorate.

Working-class whites usually vote Republican.

American political parties seem to be polarizing along racial lines, which is not good for American democracy. If republicans cannot find a way to win African American or Hispanics votes Democrats will dominate elections.

How the mainstream parties, especially Republicans, will bridge this gap as yet is unclear.

* 1. **Religious Blocs**

Single strongest factor in U.S. voting, with those who identify as being religious much more likely to be conservative and vote for Republicans.

Other states have religious/secular divide as well, they are just not as pronounced as the United States'.

* 1. **Age Groups**

Young people "catch the tide" of their youth and stay with it: young people socialized to politics during the Great Depression vote Democratic for most of their life.

Reagan’s enthusiasm among young voters in the 1980s gave them a permanent identification with the Republican Party.

In the 2012 election young voters identified with Obama and it is likely that many of them will continue that identification through their lives.

Young People’s Voting Behaviour in Europe by Nicola Maggini

Book about young people’s voting behaviour in six European countries in a long-time perspective. The methodology used is “stacked analyses”, which considers not only the tradition individual variables obtained by surveys but also the relationship between parties and electors.

What emerges from the book is that what matters is the generation-effect that is to say the period when political socialization occurred + the period effect, that is the occurrence of an event in a specific year which potentially influenced all the generations regardless of their age.

So, for young people values and political involvement are more important than the social identities; whereas for adults traditional sociological variables still play a significant role: as time goes by the importance of traditional cleavages will progressively decrease, as newer generations will replace older ones.

The progressive disengagement from politics among young generations is shown also by the low level of trust towards institutions, or just by the increase in abstentionism: the tendency to collocate themselves in the centre is an indicator of the fact that young people are getting distant from politics.

The fact that young people do not base their vote anymore on traditional social identities makes their voting behaviour less predictable than those of older generations and young people in the past, generating electoral volatility, which impacts the stability of European political systems.

* 1. **Gender Gap**

The growing gap between the voting behaviour of men and women is becoming increasingly important in politics in the United States.

Women used to be more traditional and conservative than men, but now are more liberal by several percentage points and consistently vote for Democratic candidates, something that helped the candidacy of Obama.

* 1. **Marriage Gap**

Unmarried people are much more likely to vote for Democrats than are married people, who tend to be more conservative and vote for Republicans.

The problem for Republicans is that fewer people are getting married, which is a product in part of post-materialism.

* 1. **Gay Gap**

2012 was the first time exit polls asked about sexual orientation, so the data we have concerning this trend are relatively limited but still compelling.

5% identified as gay and three-quarters of these supported Obama, which seems to suggest that gays and lesbians have a strong identification with the Democratic Party, although as rights-based issues such as same-sex marriage get resolved and other issues become salient this may change.

1. **10 Urban Voting**

Big cities vote strongly liberal or left.

This is due in part to both a high concentration of working-class voters as well as greater levels of education.

Small towns and rural areas tend to vote conservative.

This because these voters embrace conservative political values.

1. **Electoral Realignment**

Electoral realignment is a theory that seeks to explain how party identification can change.

In general, people retain party identification for years. However, according to realignment theory, certain watershed elections lead to voters dissolving existing, long-term partisan identifications in favour of new ones.

Critical elections set the stage for the emergence of new issues, debates, and topics.

This can lead to one party having dominance but not absolute control of government and the direction of public policy.

* 1800: Jeffersonians Democrats emerge
* 1828: Jacksonian Democrats emerge
* 1860: Lincoln Republicans emerge
* 1896: Business Republicanism emerges
* 1932: New Deal Democrats emerge
  1. **A New Realignment?**

Republicans argued that sweeps of 1980 and 1984 were signs of a new realignment that would end the dominance of the Democratic Party at the national level.

Party registration rose for Republicans and declined for Democrats.

In addition, young people registered and voted Republican.

Democrats argued that 2008 and 2012 were realignments in their favour.

This then speaks to one of the major difficulties of realignment theory.

If there has been a realignment, it may be difficult to spot.

Problems with realignment theory

* Some political scientists want to throw the whole theory out.
* It applies only to presidential elections.
* Americans sometimes choose to vote for divided government.
* Clinton’s and Obama’s victories were based on the economy, which undermines realignment theory.
  1. **What Wins Elections?**

In modern elections, the rational choice of voters is heavily manipulated by candidate personality and the mass media. Modern parties showcase their leaders' personalities, and that ideology is rarely mentioned or advertised.

It is the image of leaders that matters, and candidates are presented as charismatic, calm, and caring.

Ex. Reagan and Obama

Candidates who are optimistic about the country and its prospects tend to win.

In 2008 Obama appeared more optimistic than McCain, which was a contributing factor in voters casting ballots for him.

The campaigns are also media intensive, with photo opportunities and a heavy emphasis on managing the candidate by professionals as the worldwide trend.

Increase is due to the influence of mass media: television is the campaign itself.

The television spot, an American invention, now dominates campaigns worldwide. There are three types:

1. The jingle clip: attention-getting
2. The ideological clip: ideas in images
3. The allegorical quip: candidate as the epic hero

Increasingly, elections are won by candidates with the best ads, which also means the candidates with the most money.

* 1. **Retrospective Voting**

Retrospective voting occurs *when citizens vote based on their overall evaluation of the incumbent's performance* according to Fiorina.

They look at the last four years in retrospect and choose a reward or punishment model: rewards the incumbent's party if things (especially the economy) are going well; punishes the incumbent's party if things are going badly.

Ex. Financial meltdown of 2008 swung the election decidedly in Obama's favour as voters punished Republicans for what they perceived as a mishandling of the economy.

* 1. **Candidate Strategies and Voter Groups**

Candidates want to avoid alienating their home base and want to win swing independent voters.

This is a difficult task as candidates are pushed and pulled by competing forces. In the end, this pressure makes candidates and campaigns incredibly centrist.

Presidential candidates focus on close, battleground states in the Electoral College.

States that are lopsided for one party over the other get little time and money.

Ex. Even though California and Texas have large electoral vote totals, because the states are so solidly in one corner or the other candidates spend little money and time there, as there is little to swing or win over.

Strategy reached high point in 2012 when presidential candidates campaigned in only ten swing states.