Elections invite citizens to choose leaders and register their opinions on how they have performed. Sometimes elections provide decisive outcomes—like in 2008 when a relative newcomer named Barack Obama (left) won 10 million more votes than his experienced opponent and garnered 365 of the 538 Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency. But from time to time elections are quite close. The 2016 presidential election was one of those. Despite winning the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes, Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first woman nominated as a major party candidate, lost the Electoral College vote 306–232 to political outsider, real estate developer, and reality television star Donald J. Trump (right).
As the presidential campaign got under way in 2015, most Americans were relatively optimistic about the country’s economy, more so than they had been for much of the past decade. The aftermath of the 2008 recession and global financial crisis had been difficult, but finally, people were feeling good about the state of the nation’s economy and their own finances.

But, in the minds of many observers, there was something else brewing among the American electorate. Americans were said to be angry, anxious, and fearful—even though their views of the economy were optimistic. In an October 2015 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 69 percent of Americans agreed with this statement: “I feel angry because our political system seems to be working for the insiders with money and power like those on Wall Street or in Washington, rather than it working to help everyday people get ahead.” And 54 percent agreed that “The economic and political systems in this country are stacked against people like me.” It was this sentiment that Donald J. Trump recognized and capitalized on as he won both the Republican Party nomination and the U.S. presidential election in 2016.

But the story was not that simple. In that same October survey in which a majority said they were “angry” about the political system, 58 percent agreed with this statement: “I feel cautiously optimistic about where things are headed.” Put these facts together and what was most striking about Americans leading up to the 2016 election was not their sense of anger but the disjuncture between their optimism about the economy and the distinctly less positive assessment of the overall direction of the country and their president, Barack Obama. This disjuncture suggests that Americans as a whole were not so much “angry” as ambivalent. They saw both good and bad in the country—and the 2016 presidential candidates fought hard to convince voters to weight one of those assessments over the other. Trump reminded voters every day that America was failing, that nothing worked anymore, and that things had gotten profoundly off track. The Democratic Party’s candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, took the opposite tack, reinforcing the idea that America was growing into a new era and a new economy in which we would all be stronger working together to keep the growth and prosperity going. In the end, the election was very close—Clinton won more votes than Trump in the nation as a whole, but not in enough states to win a majority of Electoral College votes. Had just 78,000 or so votes in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania switched sides, the outcome would have been a Clinton victory—that’s how close the 2016 election was. Voters responded to the divided outcomes in the popular and Electoral College votes by coordinating their behavior and taking to the streets in protests. For several days after the election, major cities across the U.S. were home to marches and rallies in response to Trump’s victory.
Elections are best thought of as the link between the governed and those who govern them. They enable ordinary citizens, in aggregate, to reward or punish elected officials for their performance in office and to influence national policy by selecting or replacing leaders according to their actions or proposals. Elections not only prompt elected officials to take voters’ views into account when they make policy choices but also provide a reason for citizens to think about and form opinions on issues and candidates. For candidates and their parties, these opinions serve as the raw material of electoral politics. As we saw in Chapter 10, Americans are divided on a broad range of political issues. Often, the divisions do not form consistent patterns; different groups come together on different issues. The challenge for each candidate or party is to find ways to persuade voters of disparate and often conflicting views to agree on a common action or candidate, and to vote for their side. Building coalitions—getting people to agree on an action in the absence of agreement on the purposes of the action—is what pluralist politics is all about, and it is as fundamental to electoral politics as it is to governing. The challenge for voters is to figure out which candidate or party will best serve their interests and represent their values. The way voters, candidates, and parties attempt to meet these challenges is the subject of this chapter. To begin, however, we need to examine the logic of elections and their historical development in the United States.

THE LOGIC OF ELECTIONS

Democracy in America is representative democracy. James Madison, in defending the Constitution in Federalist No. 10, adopted the term republic to emphasize the distinction between democracy as eighteenth-century Americans saw it and the proposed new system:

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

The sheer size of the new nation made self-government by direct democracy impossible (imagine the transaction costs). If the American people were to govern themselves at all, they would have to do it indirectly through the delegation of their authority to a small number of representative agents. But delegation raised the unavoidable danger, immediately acknowledged by Madison, that these agents might use their authority to serve themselves rather than the people they are supposed to represent: “Men of fractious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages [votes], and then betray the interests of the people.”
As noted in Chapter 1, any delegation of authority raises the possibility of agency loss. Whenever we engage someone to act on our behalf, we face the risk that they will put their interests ahead of ours. Worse, it is often difficult to tell whether they are faithful agents because we cannot see what they do or know why they are doing it. The problem of delegation has no perfect solutions. One effective, if imperfect, solution adopted by representative democracies is to hold regular, free, competitive elections. Elections ameliorate the delegation problem in several ways. First, they give ordinary citizens a say in who represents them. Second, the prospect of future elections gives officeholders who want to keep (or improve) their jobs a motive to be responsive agents. And third, elections provide powerful incentives for the small set of citizens who want to replace the current officeholders to keep a close eye on representatives and to tell everyone else about any misconduct they detect.

Elections do not guarantee faithful representation; indeed, many Americans today do not feel faithfully represented (see Figure 10.5, page 424), even though the United States holds more elections for more public offices than any other nation in the world. But the absence of regular, free, competitive elections does make it unlikely that ordinary citizens will be represented at all. Competitive elections in which virtually all adult citizens are eligible to vote are the defining feature of modern democratic governments.

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The practice of selecting leaders by ballot arrived in North America with the first settlers from England. So, too, did the practice of limiting suffrage. Every colony imposed a property qualification for voting, and many denied the franchise to Catholics, Jews, Native Americans, and freed black slaves. Women were rarely allowed to vote.

Many of these restrictions survived the Revolution intact; only about half of the free adult male population was eligible to vote at the time the Constitution was adopted. The story since that time has been the progressive, if sometimes frustratingly slow, extension of the franchise to virtually all adult citizens (defined as people who have celebrated their eighteenth birthdays) not in prisons or mental institutions. Every expansion of suffrage had to overcome both philosophical objections and resistance rooted in the mundane calculations of political advantage. The triumph of (nearly) universal adult suffrage reflects the powerful appeal of democratic ideas, combined with profound social changes, the struggles of dedicated activists, and the perpetual scramble of politicians for votes.

Wider Suffrage for Men

The property qualifications and voting restrictions brought over from England in colonial times reflected the basic social realities there. Most adults were poor, illiterate, and dependent; they were servants, tenants, hired hands, or paupers. Members of the upper-class minority—a well-born, prosperous, and educated elite—took for granted their right to govern. They were not about to risk the existing social order, which served them so well, by extending voting rights to people whose interests might be better served by changing it. The trip across the Atlantic took some of the bite out of the property qualifications. Land was easier to acquire and far more evenly distributed in the colonies than in England, so a larger proportion of adult men qualified to vote. In the more fluid colonial communities, property restrictions often were enforced laxly if at all. By the revolutionary period any
“respectable” man—meaning white, Protestant, and gainfully employed—was, in practice, allowed to vote in many places.¹

The Revolutionary War exerted a powerful influence on the demands to enlarge the franchise. The rallying cry against England of “no taxation without representation,” initially a demand for home rule, also implied that anyone who paid taxes should have the right to vote. Men who risked their lives in the fight for independence felt entitled to full political citizenship regardless of wealth. More important and more long lasting, the ringing pronouncements in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and enjoy unalienable rights to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” and that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed” left little ground for denying voting rights to any citizen.

Still, universal suffrage for (white) men was not fully achieved until the 1840s in the wake of the triumph of Jacksonian democracy. The rear-guard defense of suffrage restrictions rested on traditional arguments: people without a stake in the social order should not have a voice in governing it. If every man were allowed to vote, the votes of those dependent on the wealthy for their livelihoods—employees, tenant farmers, servants, and apprentices—would be controlled by their patrons, enhancing the power of the rich. If, to avoid such untoward influence, a secret ballot were used, the more numerous poor might support unscrupulous demagogues promoting schemes to redistribute wealth. The argument for limiting suffrage boiled down to this: only the independent and virtuous were fit to govern, and the best evidence of independence and virtue was being a property-holding, white, Protestant man.

Gradually, however, this view lost ground to the argument for political equality implicit in the Declaration of Independence, and opposition to universal male suffrage became a political liability. The more democratic the electorate, the more politically suicidal it was to oppose more democracy. French observer Alexis de Tocqueville noted with his usual clarity:

There is no more invariable rule in the history of society: the further electoral rights are extended, the greater is the need of extending them; for after each concession the strength of the democracy increases, and its demands increase with its strength. . . . Concession follows concession, and no stop can be made short of universal suffrage.²

**Suffrage for Women**

As Tocqueville correctly observed, the democratic logic that justified giving the vote to all white men did not stop there; it also nurtured demands that all adult citizens, regardless of race or sex, be eligible to vote. For more than a century, race, sex, and the institution of slavery interacted to complicate suffrage politics. The women’s suffrage movement grew directly out of the antislavery movement, sharing its underlying ideals and some of its activists. Suffragists felt betrayed when the Civil War amendments (formally, if not in practice) enfranchised the newly freed black men but not white or black women. The largely successful effort by white southerners to purge blacks from the electorate after the end of Reconstruction (see Chapter 4) raised a major barrier to giving women the vote. Southern whites opposed any action that might focus national attention on repressive local electoral practices. As one Mississippi senator candidly put it in the 1880s, “We are not afraid to maul a black man over the head if he dares to vote but we can’t treat women, even black women, that way. No, we’ll allow no woman suffrage. It may be right, but we won’t have it.”³
The resistance to women’s suffrage was gradually overcome by a combination of social change—the expansion of education for both sexes, the entry of women into the workforce outside the home—and political need. Western territories (later states) were the first to grant women the right to vote, not because places like Wyoming and Utah were hotbeds of radical democracy but because women were expected to vote for “family values” in raw frontier communities. The campaign for suffrage sometimes took on nativist overtones, proposing to use women’s votes to uphold Anglo-Saxon civilization; indeed, many suffragists did not object to the literacy tests, poll taxes, and other devices designed to keep the “wrong” sorts of people out of the electorate. As women’s suffrage grew at the state and local levels, politicians competing for women’s votes naturally supported further expansion. Once party politicians sensed an irresistible trend, they scrambled to make sure their side was not stigmatized for standing in the way. Only southern Democrats held out to the bitter end; the defense of white supremacy trumped everything else. The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1920, finally guaranteed women everywhere the right to vote.

Suffrage for African Americans and Young Americans

Despite ratification of the Civil War amendments, the effective extension of the vote to blacks and other minorities came much later as a result of social changes and the political incentives they produced. The story, crowned by the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, is told in Chapter 4.

The most recent expansion of voting rights—the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (1971), which lowered the voting age of citizens to eighteen years—also was a political move, one provoked by the Vietnam War. The idea appealed to antiwar activists because young people were so prominent in their movement. Politicians who supported the war also endorsed the amendment because it enfranchised the troops fighting in Vietnam, most of whom were under the age of twenty-one. The movement echoed the logic advanced after the Revolutionary War that those who risk their lives on the battlefield ought to have a voice in governing the nation they are defending.

Consider, though, what consequences did not ensue from the formal expansions of suffrage. The propertyless did not despoil the propertied; hence the conformity cost most dreaded by defenders of limited suffrage never materialized. Votes for women did not
immediately transform electoral politics in any measurable way: no distinctive pattern of women’s voting was evident until the 1980s, following a steep increase in the proportion of single working women in the electorate. The only discernible consequence of granting eighteen-year-olds the right to vote was a decline in the percentage of those eligible who turn out to vote. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments did not prevent a century of racial discrimination at the polls. Only the Voting Rights Act quickly and effectively achieved its goals of increasing African American voting in states practicing discrimination.

**WHO USES THE RIGHT TO VOTE?**

Most Americans agree that the right to vote is the very essence of democracy. On Memorial Day and other holidays the nation honors the soldiers who have fought and died for that privilege. If the right to vote is so valuable, then, why do millions of Americans choose not to exercise it?

It might seem paradoxical that many people who think that the right to vote is worth dying for do not bother to go to the polls. But this reality is not paradoxical at all: it is inherent in the logic of elections. The benefits of elections—in both the broad sense of maintaining democratic accountability and in the narrower sense of electing a preferred candidate—are collective benefits. People enjoy these payoffs even if they have not helped produce them by voting. It makes perfect sense for citizens to insist on the right to vote, for it gives leaders a reason to care about people’s interests, opinions, and values. But it makes equal sense not to bother voting if the only purpose in voting is to influence leaders. After all, the likelihood that any single vote will influence anyone or anything is minute. Totaled up, votes are decisive; individually, they count for next to nothing. Why, then, spend the time and energy required to go to the polls if individual participation, or its absence, makes no difference in the outcome of the election? The real question is not so much why millions of Americans do not vote, but why millions of Americans forgo free riding and do vote in elections where they are unlikely to be pivotal (in small elections where the chances of swaying the outcome are not negligible, it may not be rational to free ride!).

The same logic applies to gathering information about the competing candidates and parties if a person chooses to vote. There is no point in investing time, energy, or money in becoming better informed about electoral options because the payoff for casting the “right” vote—for the candidate who would, in the voter’s view, do the best job—is for all practical purposes nil. If there is no real chance that a vote will be decisive, it is of no consequence whether the vote is right or wrong. Ignorance, like abstention from voting, is rational.

Followed to its logical conclusion, this line of reasoning would lead to the collapse of electoral politics and thus to the collapse of democracy: no voters, no accountability, no consent of the governed. In practice, however, these free-rider problems are overcome, but they are overcome quite imperfectly and in ways that have important consequences for how American democracy actually works.

The share of eligible voters who go to the polls has varied widely over American history (turnout patterns are traced in Chapter 12). The most important change in the past half-century was the sharp decline in voter turnout between 1968 and 1972. Since then, an average of only about 58 percent of the eligible electorate has bothered to register and vote in presidential elections; even the hotly contested 2016 presidential race inspired a turnout of only 60 percent of those eligible to register. Variations in turnout pose the questions
we address in this section: who votes, why, and to what effect? Why do turnout rates vary, and does it matter?

**Individual Factors Affecting Turnout**

A great deal of research has gone into figuring out who votes, who does not, and how to get people who don't usually vote to do so. Age and education have the strongest influence on voting, but many other things affect turnout as well. African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to vote (taking all other factors into account), as are people who live in southern states or states bordering the South. People with deeper roots in their communities (longer time residents, homeowners, church members, and people with jobs) are more likely to go to the polls, as are individuals with greater confidence in their own ability to understand and engage in politics (internal efficacy, as it is known in political science) and in their ability to influence the decisions of government (external efficacy). Turnout also is higher among people with stronger partisan views and electoral preferences and those who live in areas with active parties and competitive campaigns. Finally, turnout is higher where legal barriers to registration are lower.

Why is sex missing from this list of influences on voting? Other things being equal, the voting rates for men and women were roughly the same for a long period of time, but recently this has started to change—and change steadily year after year. Today, it is estimated that given comparable incomes, educations and ages, a woman is 5 percentage points more likely to turn out than a man in presidential elections. Also absent are measures of trust in government and beliefs about government responsiveness; the cynical and distrusting are as likely to vote as everyone else. This point contradicts a popular explanation for the decline in participation between the 1960s and 1990s—that it resulted from the dramatic increase in public cynicism and mistrust since 1960.

The explanation for these general patterns is straightforward. Voting and other forms of political participation, such as contributing money or time to campaigns, writing letters to elected officials, and attending political meetings, incur costs but produce benefits. People participate when they can meet the costs and appreciate the benefits. Those with money, education, experience, free time, and self-confidence find it easier to meet the costs; those with a greater psychological stake in politics—from a concern with issues, a sense of obligation to carry out their duties as citizens, or a strong interest in parties or candidates—receive greater benefits (also mainly psychological) from participation. Voting, therefore, is rational for the millions of individuals who derive personal satisfaction from going to the polls. Expressing themselves through voting outweighs the typically modest cost of casting a ballot.

**Institutional Factors Affecting Turnout**

Differences in participation cannot be explained completely by individual differences in resources and psychological involvement, however. The institutional context—for example, variations in registration laws—affects turnout. The more onerous the registration requirement, the higher the cost of voting. In the decades after the Civil War, southern states adopted devices such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the requirement that voters reregister periodically to discourage African Americans from voting. In many cases, these practices discouraged poor whites from participating as well. But after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests and authorized the Justice Department to oversee voter
registration in states with a history of flagrant racial discrimination, voting among African Americans (and whites) increased sharply. Still, the effects of old practices linger on. Even with the end of formal and informal restrictions on voting and the advent of two-party competition in their region, southerners are notably less likely to vote than are Americans who reside elsewhere. Schemes to skew the electorate for political advantage are by no means a thing of the past. Prior to the 2012 election, more than a dozen states adopted a requirement that voters show a picture ID at the polls, raising the cost of participation for poor and minority voters, who are less likely to possess driver’s licenses or passports. They are also more likely to vote for Democrats, and all but one of the state governments that adopted this requirement were controlled by Republicans.

Social circumstances also play a crucial part in stimulating turnout. Social connections create personal incentives to participate when, for example, coworkers take note of who is performing their citizen’s duty to vote (and who is wearing the “I voted” sticker). These connections also provide plenty of free information through casual conversation touching on politics. Even more significant, however, are the deliberate efforts of political activists of all kinds to get people to vote. Often, people participate because they are asked, a fact that has never been a secret to politicians. The desire to win elections has inspired extensive efforts by candidates, parties, interest groups, and other campaigners to get their potentially free-riding supporters to show up at the polls. The massive and effective turnout efforts mounted by the Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012 are cases in point. Not surprisingly, research has shown that one of the most effective ways to turn a nonvoter into a voter is through a personal appeal—often done at the doorstep—asking the nonvoter to make a plan for how, when, and where he or she will vote on Election Day. Personal appeals, and social pressure from others, work well in stimulating turnout. A study by two political scientists in 2008 showed that mailing postcards...
to registered voters with the names of people who lived on their blocks and who stayed home on the last Election Day increased turnout by double digits! No one wants to be the person on their block who shirked their civic duty. The mailing was by far the best way to increase turnout in elections. The other more institutional changes produce only single-digit increases. According to estimates made by the political scientists Jonathan Nagler and Jan Leighley, absentee voting, early voting, and Election Day registration can increase turnout in elections by about 3 percentage points, depending on the details of how each is carried out in the state.

The assorted demographic and institutional influences on voting produce an electorate in which wealthy, well-educated, older white people are overrepresented and the poor, uneducated, young, and nonwhite are underrepresented. Unequal resources are only part of the reason. The other is that people with social advantages are more likely to be mobilized by parties, interest groups, and campaign organizations. Political leaders deploy their scarce resources efficiently, targeting the people who are cheapest to reach and likeliest to respond. In other words, they go after people like themselves (educated and relatively affluent), people already organized and identified by membership in voluntary associations, and people whose social characteristics already incline them to participate. It takes an extraordinary effort backed by abundant organizational resources to counteract this tendency.

Variations in Turnout over Time

If these factors explain variations in participation among individuals, what accounts for variations in turnout over time? More specifically, why did turnout decline from an average of about 68 percent in 1952–1968 to about 55 percent in 1992–2000 before rising above 58 percent again in the three most recent presidential elections? (See Figure 12.3, page 491.) The initial decline was especially puzzling to scholars because voter registration laws were eased and educational attainment rose over the period—two trends that should have increased turnout. But from 1960 through the 1980s, these trends did not emerge because their effects were more than offset by contrary factors like an increasingly young electorate and a decline in mobilization efforts by parties and other political groups. Starting in the 1990s, institutional efforts were made to ease registration with the hopes of increasing turnout in elections, especially for voters who were disproportionately represented at the polls. Simultaneously, parties and nonprofits began researching the most effective ways to mobilize voters once they were registered.

The decline in voting turnout after the 1960s was much more pronounced among those whose participation is most dependent on outside stimulation: the poorest and least educated citizens. In general, the smaller the electorate, the greater its upper-class bias. Logically, a biased electorate should produce biased policy because politicians naturally cater to the people whose votes control their futures. In times of tight budgets, for example, Congress has been more willing to cut social welfare programs benefiting poor people (food stamps, job training programs, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children) than to cut social welfare programs benefiting the politically active middle class (Social Security and Medicare).

How Do Voters Decide?

Casting a vote is making a prediction about the future—that electing one candidate will produce a better outcome in some relevant sense than electing another candidate. To make such a prediction, a voter has to choose the standards for “better” and “relevant” and then
Beginning in 1998, two political scientists at Yale University conducted a series of experiments on voter turnout on nearly thirty thousand registered voters in New Haven, Connecticut. The experiments were done “in the field” during actual elections and involved canvassing, phone calls, and direct mail—all aimed at encouraging people to get out and vote in the upcoming election. The League of Women Voters was a partner in the project and helped in the development of the scripts and the implementation of the experiment.7

Through a series of random assignments, a sample of registered voters was divided into treatment and control groups. Roughly 11,000 people received no treatments; 7,369 were sent at least one mailing but nothing else; 2,686 got only personal contact; and 958 were contacted only on the phone. The remaining 7,567 people received a mix of the mail and phone call efforts. Of these three types of voter contact, one emerged as massively more effective than the others: personal contact. A personal visit increased turnout by almost 9 percentage points. The other methods didn’t even come close.

To encourage people to turn out and vote, the researchers used three different appeals in their messaging. The first was a plea to civic duty that reminded people that “democracy depends on the participation of our country’s citizens.” The second focused on the closeness of the election outcome, underscoring for voters that their ballot could be pivotal. The final message highlighted neighborhood solidarity and said, “Politicians sometimes ignore a neighborhood’s problems if the people in that neighborhood don’t vote.” Which one worked the best? As you might have guessed, the largest effect seemed to have come from the message stressing the closeness of the election—and therefore increasing people’s chances of being pivotal to the outcome. The differences between the messages were large (5 percent for neighborhood solidarity and 12 percent for closeness), but even so, the differences were not big enough to be sure that the effects of the messages weren’t all the same on average.

The work of these Yale professors and their students gave rise to a renewed interest in canvassing by both political parties—but with a twist. Randomized experiments were built in to campaign operations to assess the effectiveness of different tactics.

Past Performance and Incumbency

One way to predict the future is to look at the past. Voters may treat an election as a referendum on the incumbent’s or majority party’s performance in office. Has the current agent done an adequate job of serving the voters’ values and interests? One simple rule is to vote for incumbents who have performed well. The question then becomes, performance on what? The
answer depends on the office, the circumstances, and what the voter considers important. Presidents seeking reelection often are held accountable for the national economy—the rates of inflation, unemployment, and economic growth. Economic problems probably cost Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush their jobs, while a strong economy contributed to Ronald Reagan’s reelection in 1984 and to Bill Clinton’s in 1996. The question famously posed by Reagan captures this standard: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” Since the New Deal, for example, the change in the nation’s growth rate (the gross domestic product) in the first six months of the election year serves as a strong predictor of whether the incumbent president’s party will win reelection. When the economy is growing the incumbent party is typically returned to office—75 percent of the time to be exact. This robust relationship provides evidence on the stability of presidential election outcomes—and how closely they are tied to the government’s performance in office. In 2016, for example, this prediction yielded an incredibly close election outcome, one essentially on the 50–50 mark.

While one party may benefit from the state of the nation’s economy, the other looks to focus the election on to something else, thus some presidents also may be reviewed for their conduct of foreign policy. Dwight Eisenhower’s success in ending the war in Korea helped ensure his reelection in 1956; Carter’s inability to obtain the release of the U.S. diplomats held hostage by Iran damaged his reelection chances in 1980. The performance of representatives and senators, by contrast, is often measured by their success in providing services and projects for their states and districts or in casting acceptable votes in Congress (see Chapter 6). But some voters hold the president’s party as a whole responsible, casting their congressional votes according to how well they think the administration has governed. Voters unhappy with President Bush and the Iraq War took it out on congressional Republicans in 2006; similarly, voters objecting to President Obama, his policies, and the sorry state of the economy punished Democratic candidates for Congress in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections. In 2006 and 2010, the president’s party lost majority control of the House and, in 2006 and 2014, the Senate as well.

Assessing the Issues and Policy Options

How can voters assess performance efficiently? Personal experience supplies a good deal of politically relevant information. Looking for a job, shopping at the supermarket, or trying to get a mortgage to buy a house teaches people about unemployment, inflation, and interest rates. Taking out a student loan or applying for veterans’ benefits teaches

Affiliations or endorsements from well-known interest groups give voters cheap and reliable cues about the policy inclinations of candidates. Here, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks at the National Rifle Association (NRA) convention in May 2016, an unmistakable signal to voters on either side of the gun control issue that Trump stood with the NRA against greater regulation of firearms.
something about government programs. Millions of retired Americans are keenly aware of the size of their monthly Social Security checks. The threat of a military draft certainly raised the political consciousness of college-age Americans during the Vietnam War. Those without direct experience with certain issues learn about them through the news media. For example, crime became a bigger public issue in the 1990s than it had been a decade earlier—even though the crime rate had actually declined—because of the greater emphasis the news media put on it. And, of course, Americans needed no direct personal experience of terrorist attacks and the Iraq War for these events to shape their judgments of George W. Bush’s fitness for reelection in 2004.

Another strategy for predicting which candidate will be the more satisfactory agent is to compare the future policy options each represents. By the positions they take on issues, by their overall ideological stances, or by their party affiliations, candidates offer choices among alternative national policies. Which policy positions matter? The answer depends on the voters and current circumstances. For voters with strong views on abortion, any difference between candidates on this issue may be enough to settle their choice. Single-issue voters also coalesce around causes such as gun control (its most adamant opponents) and environmental protection (its most adamant proponents). Instead of a single issue, other voters may consider bundles of issues, choosing between, say, the expectations of lower taxes and more generous social spending. The times also may determine which issues become important to voters. Civil rights became critical in the 1964 election when the Republican candidate, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. What to do about Vietnam dominated voter opinion while American soldiers were fighting there. Similarly, the wisdom of invading Iraq was central to voters’ deliberations in 2004. Iraq was expected to be the central issue again in 2008, but with the collapse of housing prices, frozen credit markets, a plummeting stock market, and a looming recession, the economy overwhelmed all other issues. In 2016 issues like immigration and terrorism played a central role as Donald Trump highlighted the changing demographics of the country, a series of terrorist attacks in the year prior to the election, and white Americans’ attitudes about how they were faring in a racially transformed country.

**Voter Cues and Shortcuts**

The news media and the campaigns supply plenty of free information about candidates’ positions on issues and policy promises. But voters cannot take the information at face value, for candidates have an incentive to misrepresent themselves (and their opponents too) in order to win votes. Voters can deal with this problem by taking cues from opinion leaders (see Chapter 10). In electoral politics, opinion leadership is often formalized through endorsements from organizations and individuals. A candidate supported by NARAL Pro-Choice America, Reverend Jesse Jackson, or the Sierra Club is certain to have rather different policy objectives from one endorsed by the Christian Coalition, the NRA, the National Taxpayers Union, or the Tea Party Express.

Voters also make predictions based on the candidates’ personal characteristics. One set of personal considerations includes qualities such as competence, experience, honesty, knowledge, and leadership skills. Another set includes characteristics such as sex, race, ethnicity, age, and place of residence. The rationale for such criteria is straightforward. Voters cannot anticipate all the problems and issues that will come up after the election, nor can they easily monitor the behavior of their elected officials. Much of what these agents do is out of public sight, and much of the information they act on is unknown to
their constituents. Under these circumstances, using personal criteria makes a great deal of sense. A candidate’s demographic features give voters clues about his or her personal values. Voters feel that people who are like them in some tangible way are more likely to think and act as they would in the same circumstances. As an African American, Barack Obama faced the challenge of convincing a majority of voters that, although he may not look like them, he nonetheless understood their needs and values and would thus be an effective agent for them. His rival in 2012, Mitt Romney, with a fortune estimated to be worth $230 million, struggled to persuade voters of modest means that he could nonetheless feel their economic pain. In 2016, Hillary Clinton banked on the fact that a candidate’s competence, background, and character could give voters clues about how far he or she can be trusted to do the right thing even when no one is watching. She never missed an opportunity to point out that her opponent, Donald Trump, was unfit for office. Of course, Trump did the same and had the help of the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), James Comey, who in the middle of the campaign released a report saying Secretary Clinton was “careless” in her handling of classified documents while she was at the State Department.

The most important information shortcut voters use to make predictions is the party label. A large majority of voters continue to take their cues from party affiliations, even though popular attitudes toward parties as institutions tend to range from indifference to outright hostility.1 The party label provides useful information for both performance voting (voting for the party in control, or “in-party,” when one thinks the government is performing well; voting for the “outs” when one thinks the party in charge is performing poorly) and issue voting (the typical positions of Republicans and Democrats differ in predictable ways on many issues). Most voters drastically simplify their electoral evaluations and decisions by developing a consistent bias in favor of the candidates of one of the major parties, making the party label the most influential “endorsement” of all.

The Power of Party Identification

As the best single predictor of the vote in federal elections, party identification is a central focus of modern electoral research (see Chapter 10). Since the 1950s a nationally sponsored survey, the American National Election Study, has asked scientifically selected samples of the American public a set of questions probing the strength and direction of their partisanship. In recent years, a new set of projects, the Cooperative Election Studies, has also started asking people the same questions. Respondents are first asked, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?” Those who answer “Democrat” or “Republican” are then asked, “Would you call yourself a strong Democrat (Republican) or a not very strong Democrat (Republican)?” Those who answer “independent” or something else are then asked, “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” Answers to these questions locate respondents on a seven-point scale: strong Democrats, weak Democrats, independents leaning Democratic, pure independents, independents leaning Republican, weak Republicans, and strong Republicans. This scale serves as the standard measure of party identification.

Party identification has proved to be a strong predictor of the vote in any election in which candidates run under party labels. In 2016, for example, about 90 percent of partisans voted for their own party’s presidential candidate, while independents split their votes 48–42 for Trump. In general, the weaker a survey respondent’s partisanship, the more likely he or she was to vote for a minor-party candidate.
The connection between party identification and vote choice varies over time but is always quite powerful. Figure 11.1 shows that in elections from 1956 through 2016, typically about 80 percent of presidential voters were self-identified partisans supporting their party’s candidate. Their portion of the electorate has been growing since the 1970s. The proportion defecting to the opposing party’s candidate ranged from 7.6 percent to 24.1 percent, and the proportion voting for independent or third-party candidates varied from less than 1 percent to 15.3 percent. Usually, fewer than 10 percent are pure independents who claim to favor neither party. Still, there are enough independents and partisan defectors to keep party identification alone from determining who wins or loses elections.

**ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

If voters are short of information and uncertain about their choices, the candidates and their allies are only too happy to help them out. Experienced campaigners are fully aware of voters’ reliance on free information and cognitive shortcuts, and they concoct strategies for winning votes accordingly. Each campaign emphasizes selected facts and cues aimed at getting at least a plurality of voters to the polls. The choice among strategic options depends on what the candidate and campaign staff believe will work in this contest in this year with this electorate. Campaigns are intensely pragmatic, opportunistic affairs, highly variable because they must adapt to circumstances that are highly

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**Figure 11.1** Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections

![Graph showing partisan voting trends from 1956 to 2016](image)

variable—the office in question, whether the contest is a primary or general election, and current political events and issues. Nonetheless, all competitive campaigns have features in common because they face many of the same challenges.

The Basic Necessities: Candidates and Messages

The basic necessities of any campaign are a candidate, a message, and a way to inform voters about both. A candidate is a person who can be portrayed as sufficiently qualified and trustworthy for the job. Achieving this status is not as simple as it sounds. Members of the House of Representatives often run unopposed because no one is willing to take them on in the primary or general election. Even more often, members run against candidates so lacking in political experience, talent, temperament, or background that voters do not consider them seriously as viable choices. Sometimes, although less frequently, senators are equally lucky: Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, for example, was opposed in 2010 by a candidate who raised no money, did almost no campaigning, and was under federal indictment on an obscenity charge. Who do you think won?

Because potential candidates think strategically, the quality of House and Senate candidates varies with their prospects for success. The smaller the chances of winning, the less likely the talented and ambitious are to run (see box “To Run or Not to Run”). Presidential contests usually attract plenty of political talent, but even the pool of presidential candidates may be affected by expectations: when President George H. W. Bush seemed unbeatable in 1991 after the Gulf War triumph, some prominent Democratic presidential prospects decided not to run, leaving room for Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, a relative unknown, to move to the front of the pack.

The 2016 presidential race cast doubt on many of the long-standing beliefs about what candidates needed to do to win elections—and what they could do and still remain viable options. Donald Trump won the endorsement of only nine newspapers in the nation; few co-partisans endorsed him; he raised far less money than his opponent and ran many fewer ads on television—and he won the presidency. Future candidates should take note, however, of an important element of Trump’s candidacy that likely made him the exception rather than the rule: his preexisting fame. As one of the world’s richest billionaires, with his name on everything from grand hotels to neckties, Donald Trump was a household name before he even declared his candidacy. Add to this his long run as the host of one of television’s most popular reality shows, The Apprentice, and you begin to understand how people may have believed they knew everything they needed to know about Donald Trump before he even started campaigning, something that is unlikely to be true for future candidates who want to follow his campaign tactics but don’t have his preexisting level of fame.

GETTING OUT THE MESSAGE. The message is the answer to the voter’s question: why should I vote for this candidate rather than another? It tells voters why, in their terms, this particular candidate is their best choice. Messages are shaped by candidates’ theories about the political beliefs, perceptions, values, and responses of different segments of the electorate. Uncertainty is so pervasive and good information about voters so valuable that campaigns invest heavily in research—if they can afford it.
Variations in the quality of House and Senate candidates reflect the rational strategies of people interested in successful political careers. Politically ambitious people with the skills, resources, and experience to be effective candidates hesitate to try to move up the political ladder unless they are likely to succeed, for defeat will stall, and may effectively end, a career in politics. Unless conditions are promising—say, the incumbent is in political trouble or the seat is open—the strongest potential candidates will stay out of the race and leave the field to weaker candidates for whom defeat will be less costly to their already unpromising careers.

As politicians decide to run or not to run, they also gauge the national partisan breezes. A strong economy, the absence of party scandal, or a president who enjoys the public’s support might tilt the election toward the president’s fellow party members, while the opposite conditions will shift the political winds toward the out-party’s candidates. Because quality candidates have career investments to protect, more will come forward when national conditions are favorable to their side. Moreover, because the presence of quality candidates greatly affects the election outcome, their anticipated responses will tend to reinforce and magnify the effect of national conditions on congressional elections. The figure shows how differences in challenger quality affect election results. Note that the party with the most quality challengers for the House tended to gain a larger share of seats.

Entering fall 2001 Democratic and Republican Party officials were busy trying to entice quality candidates to run in the 2002 midterm elections. With economic indicators pointing mostly toward recession, Democrats were optimistic that they might take back control of the House and strengthen their grip on the Senate. “On Labor Day, we had them exactly where we wanted them,” recalled the director of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee. “We were talking Social Security. It was nirvana.” Then on September 11 the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon totally changed the national agenda. Suddenly potential challengers in both parties found it unseemly to tout their partisan aspirations for political office. At the same time, many of the mostly Republican incumbents who had been leaning toward retirement announced that they would do their patriotic duty and serve another term. Knowledgeable observers from both political parties concluded that the terrorist attacks and subsequent events deterred many quality Democratic candidates and limited the party’s prospects in the 2002 elections.

The political climate in 2006 was far different. The unpopularity of the Bush administration and the Iraq War was apparent well before the election (see Chapter 10), encouraging vigorous Democratic challenges and discouraging potentially strong Republican candidates from taking on Democratic incumbents. Anticipating a favorable national tide, Democratic operatives, candidates, and contributors positioned themselves to exploit it. As a result the Democrats picked up thirty Republican seats while losing none of their own.1 Effectively exploiting similarly favorable national conditions in 2008, the Democrats picked up another twenty-one House seats. The tide turned decisively in 2010, when popular unhappiness with the economy and the general direction of the country promised a banner year for Republicans. The result was the largest Republican advantage in challenger quality and the party’s largest gain in House seats for the entire period. In 2012, in contrast, the Democrats’ modest advantage in challenger quality was echoed by an equally modest increase in House seats, a gain of eight over 2010.

Presidential campaigns can afford it, and they use the full range of research techniques. They run hundreds of opinion surveys and conduct numerous focus group sessions in which a small number of ordinary citizens are observed as they talk with one another about political candidates, issues, and events. Presidential campaigns use focus groups to test their general themes as well as the specific advertisements promoting those themes. They monitor the effects of campaign ads and events with daily tracking polls that sample citizens’ views on a continuing basis to measure changes in responses. In 1988 there was nothing accidental about the Bush campaign’s relentless attacks on the Democratic opponent, Michael

Dukakis, for being “soft on crime.” Nor was it simple intuition in 1992 that made Clinton’s campaign manager, James Carville, put up the now-famous sign reminding himself and the rest of the staff of their campaign’s most powerful theme: “the economy, stupid.” Nor was there anything mysterious about Clinton in 1996 endlessly repeating the vow to protect “Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment,” or about George W. Bush choosing to define himself as a “compassionate conservative” in 2000 and as the nation’s shield against terrorism in 2004, or in Barack Obama’s effort to tie John McCain to Bush’s unpopular legacy in 2008, or in the 2012 Obama campaign’s depiction of Mitt Romney as a cold-hearted capitalist with retrograde social views. In each case the campaign’s research told it that these messages were winners.

In 2016, both the Trump and Clinton campaigns settled on the same idea for their messages, but from opposite points of view. Understanding that the changing demographic composition of the country was making people’s attitudes about race and ethnicity more important in their political decision making, both candidates leveraged this in their campaigns. The Trump campaign focused on “making America great again” by identifying groups of people as being like “us” or being like “them.” The “us” group included people like Trump while the “them” group often included the media, protestors—and people who did not exhibit “American values.” During the campaign, Trump said he wanted to keep undocumented citizens out of the country, deport those who were currently in the country, and ban the entry of Muslims to the country until the government could figure out “what the hell is going on.” He proposed a divided nation of “us” versus “them.” The Clinton campaign message took exactly the opposite approach to the same idea. Her message, “stronger together,” was routinely coupled with images of people from all walks of life—different ethnicities, different kinds of couples, children and adults—everyone together in Clinton’s notion of a strong country celebrating its differences. She proposed a unified nation of “togetherness.”

These examples illustrate something else about campaign messages: they are chosen opportunistically. Slow economic growth during the administration of George H. W. Bush handed the Clinton campaign in 1992 a powerful, ready-made theme, and the campaign really would have been stupid not to make the most of it. This holds for the Obama campaign in 2008 as well; its strongest argument for replacing the Republicans was an economic collapse larger than any seen in recent memory. Clinton’s questionable candor about his draft record, experimentation with marijuana, and alleged extramarital adventures handed the Bush campaign its central message in 1992: Bill Clinton was too untrustworthy to be president. By embracing “compassionate conservatism,” the younger Bush sought to attract moderate swing voters weary of the Democratic administration but repelled by the hardline conservatism displayed by congressional Republicans. Bush also vowed repeatedly to “uphold the honor and dignity of the office” of president, a not-so-subtle appeal to voters disgusted by Bill Clinton’s behavior. Imagine how different the 2004 campaigns would have been had the terrorist attacks of September 2001 never occurred, or how different the 2008 campaigns would have been had the economy been booming and had Bush been popular. The messages candidates use in their campaigns depend very much on two things: the national context and who is running against them. In 2016, the economy was so mixed that coupled with the Democrats seeking a third term in office, the election was predicted to be a very close one from the outset. This is perhaps one of the reasons why neither candidate spent much time discussing the nation’s economy—it didn’t help either one of them very much.
The same opportunistic strategy is applied to congressional races. The House bank scandal (see Chapter 6) gave House challengers a powerful message for their 1992 campaigns: vote the self-serving deadbeats out of office. The controversial hearings in 1991 over the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court provided another stick. Anita Hill’s accusations that Thomas sexually harassed her were handled clumsily by a committee of middle-aged men, who, many women thought, “just didn’t get it.” The result was that a candidate’s sex became an important shorthand cue for many congressional voters in 1992, who thus elected nineteen additional women to the House (raising the total at the time to forty-seven) and four to the Senate (for a total of six).

Candidates work hard to convey the message that they do “get it,” that they understand and care about the concerns of their fellow citizens. Like other job seekers, candidates prepare glowing résumés highlighting their credentials, experience, and accomplishments. But they also try to show that, regardless of their backgrounds, they share some common ground with voters of all sorts. Patrician Yale graduate George H. W. Bush advertised his fondness for pork rinds and bass fishing to connect with ordinary folks during his campaign in 1988. Bill Clinton’s impromptu saxophone jams showed that he could be just one of the gang. It is a robust appetite for votes, not food, that leads candidates to eat bagels and lox at a corner deli in a Jewish neighborhood in the morning, black-eyed peas at an African American church at lunch, and green chili enchiladas at a Mexican American fiesta in the evening. The implicit message is empathy: “Though I may not be one of you, I appreciate your culture and understand your needs and concerns, so I can serve effectively as your agent.”

Actions intended to symbolize a candidate’s concerns do not always work as planned, however. In 1972 the Democratic candidate, Senator George Mc Govern of South Dakota, displayed his ignorance rather than appreciation of Jewish culture when he ordered milk to go with his kosher hot dog while campaigning in a Jewish neighborhood in Queens, New York. Handed a tamale while campaigning among Mexican American voters in San Antonio in 1976, Gerald Ford took a vigorous bite out of the inedible cornhusk wrapper, a gaffe that made all the network news broadcasts. During the 1988 presidential campaign, Michael Dukakis reaped widespread ridicule, not enhanced credentials on defense issues, when news broadcasts showed him peering out dolefully from under an ill-fitting helmet while riding on an Army tank. In 2012, Mitt Romney expressed his enthusiasm for the U.S. auto industry by telling a Detroit audience, “I drive a Mustang and a Chevy pickup truck. Ann [his wife] drives a couple of Cadillacs,” inadvertently reinforcing the Democrats’ depiction of him as an out-of-touch millionaire. In each instance, the action conveyed a message subverting the one intended. Campaign advisers may want to display their candidates as all things to all people, but the human material often proves recalcitrant.

Acquiring and maintaining a public image appropriate to the office sought is a particular challenge for presidential candidates, who are subject to intense scrutiny by both their opponents and the news media over many months of campaigning. Most presidential primaries now take place so early in the election year—roughly two-thirds of the states select convention delegates for one or both parties by the end of March—that campaigns begin shortly after the midterm election, if not earlier. In years with crowded primary fields (at one time six Democrats and seventeen Republicans were officially in the race for the 2016 nominations) aspirants have to fight for attention and to make sure that they, rather than their opponents or skeptical reporters, shape their public images. Candidates blessed with famous names (in 2000 George W. Bush, governor of Texas and son of a former president, and
Elizabeth Dole, holder of cabinet positions in the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations, president of the Red Cross, and wife of the 1996 Republican candidate, Bob Dole; in 2008 and 2016 Hillary Clinton; and perhaps the most famous of all, Donald Trump in 2016) and ample money enjoy a distinct advantage in these endeavors, but front-runners also become all the other candidates’ favorite targets, and the candidate with the most money doesn't always win the nomination, as Howard Dean learned in 2004, Romney learned in 2008, and Jeb Bush learned in 2016.

Televised debates are another special challenge for presidential candidates trying to convey the message that they are right for the job. For clear front-runners, especially those not fully comfortable in front of television cameras, the risks of damaging missteps during a debate outweigh the potential gains from winning it. But the media and public now expect debates, so there is no graceful way to avoid them. For challengers and candidates behind in the polls, the nationally televised debates offer a chance to share equal billing with the leader and to make up lost ground before the largest audiences of the campaign. Independent candidate Ross Perot, for example, made the most of his opportunity in 1992, stealing the first debate from Bush and Clinton with his folksy style, populist rhetoric, and handmade charts, thereby giving his candidacy a boost. Usually, however, independent and minority candidates are excluded; Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan protested vigorously but fruitlessly when they were kept out of the debates in 2000 on the ground that their support in preelection polls was too low to make them viable candidates and thus eligible to participate. Only Obama and McCain shared the debate stage in 2008; Obama, looking younger and calmer than his better known opponent, was the consensus winner of all three of their debates, giving his candidacy an important boost. Ironically, Obama’s first debate with Mitt Romney in 2012 nearly derailed his reelection bid; Romney’s forceful performance and Obama’s lackluster responses turned an Obama lead into a tie in the preelection horse-race polls. In 2016, the candidacy of a reality TV star transformed the debates into
major television events. In 2012, 67 million people watched the first Obama-Romney debate, but 83 million tuned in for the first Clinton-Trump debate in 2016—the largest audience for a presidential debate since the first debate more than sixty years ago. The second closest was the single 1980 debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, to which 80 million people tuned in.

Debates rarely cover new campaign ground, but they remain popular among the media and public because they show the presidential candidates up close under sustained pressure. They may also help frame the choice in clear terms for voters, but the effects of debates in general elections are largely ignorable.

**POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND ATTACKS.** The effects of ads, whether promotional or attack, are likely small and fleeting. This is why candidates advertise so much—they have to maintain a sustained advertising effort to keep the effects from disappearing. It is also why they advertise so much near Election Day—they have to keep their message fresh in voters’ minds. Advertisements are special forms of communication because they combine visual and aural elements in unique ways. Viewers see images and words on the screen. They hear background sounds, music, and voice-overs too. Critically, they can be seeing and hearing all of these things at the same time. In this way, ads are a special medium. While no single element of the ad may be misleading or untrue, the combination of the elements may lead viewers to draw a misleading inference. It’s the way the parts of the ad make up the whole that makes political advertising powerful. For example, an ad that shows an image of children and a voice-over that says, “The lack of health care in America is a big problem” invites viewers to draw the inference that the lack of health care is a big problem for kids. But when the ad-maker supplies one more element—an on-screen piece of text that reads “14 percent uninsured”—the ad takes on a new meaning. Now, the viewer is led to conclude that 14 percent of kids in America are uninsured. It’s actually 14 percent of adults. Only 5 percent of kids are uninsured. You can watch collections of campaign ads from presidential races going back to 1952 at the online exhibit called The Living Room Candidate (www.livingroomcandidate.org). As you watch the ads, pay attention to how the ad-makers use these elements to persuade viewers.

Campaign messages emphasizing one candidate’s personal suitability for the job invite rebuttals from the other side. **Negative or attack campaigning,** pointed personal criticism of the other candidate, is thus a normal if sometimes ugly component of the electoral process—and an effective one. Negative ads exploit voters’ uncertainty inherent in the delegation of authority to powerful agents. Research suggests that negative ads inform people about both candidates and may also increase interest in elections. There is little evidence that people stay home on Election Day because they dislike attack ads.12

As negative campaigns have proved effective, candidates have sought to erect defenses against them. In 1988 Bush campaign adviser Lee Atwater created a series of attack ads that succeeded in branding Dukakis, who began the campaign unfamiliar to most voters, as a far-out liberal, soft on crime and weak on defense. Four years later, Clinton’s strategists, determined to prevent a similar fate for their candidate, organized a rapid response team that blanketed the news media with forceful rebuttals of every charge made by Bush or his supporters, often on the same day charges were made. They also replied swiftly to negative television ads. For example, within forty-eight hours of the broadcast of a spot criticizing Clinton for his tax record while governor of Arkansas, the Clinton campaign
produced, tested with a focus group, revised, and aired its own spot that included some text from the Bush ad with “UNTRUE” stamped across it. The idea was to counter negative messages before they could sink in. The wisdom of this strategy was apparent in 2004, when John Kerry was evidently hurt by his slow reaction to charges from a group calling itself the “Swift Boat Vets and POWs for Truth” that had mounted an independent campaign harshly assailing his Vietnam service. In 2008 the McCain campaign’s attempt to portray Obama as someone who, as Sarah Palin put it in her stump speech, “pals around with terrorists” was forcefully countered by the Obama campaign (and by Obama himself during the third debate), and most Americans came to regard the charge as unfair. One common explanation among commentators for Romney’s loss in 2012 was his campaign’s ineffective response to ads broadcast in swing states during the spring and summer, when many voters were just getting to know him, attacking him as a greedy venture capitalist, indifferent to the fates of people working for the companies he made a fortune buying, restructuring, and selling. Uncovering the effects of campaign ads on final vote choice, however, is challenging, because campaigns are cumulative, contemporaneous, and competitive enterprises. In other words, one side’s gains may be immediately negated by the other side’s response to those initial gains, making the observed effect of all this campaign effort small to nonexistent. The media like to report on elections as if they are boxing matches, with one side about to deliver a knockout blow, but in reality, campaigns are more like a tug-of-war, with both sides pulling equally hard on the rope and the flag in the middle barely moving.

This was not the case in 2016, which provides a unique chance to sort out whether campaign ads move people. In 2012, the candidates and groups advertising on their behalf ran nearly the same number of ads in the general election. In 2016, however, Hillary Clinton out-advertised Donald Trump by a factor of about three to one. All told, there were nearly 390,000 ads aired on behalf of Clinton and 123,000 on behalf of Trump. Interestingly, most of Clinton’s advertisements were about the candidates’ fitness for office—namely Trump’s failings on that score. Nearly 76 percent of the appeals in Clinton’s advertisements were about candidate traits between June 1 and Election Day. Almost half of Trump’s appeals were about this, too. It seems in 2016 both candidates thought their best approach was to frame the other person as unfit to serve the highest office in the land (see Figure 11.2).

Between June and October, Clinton out-advertised Trump by at least 80 percent to 20 percent in eighteen states: Arizona, Tennessee, Ohio, Colorado, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, California, Iowa, South Carolina, Vermont, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Florida, Alabama, Nevada, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

Negative campaign ads are a staple, if often disdained, component of presidential campaigns. The most effective ones take advantage of a candidate’s mistakes. Here, the Trump campaign reminds voters of a statement Hillary Clinton made at a fund-raiser to underline its claim that she is an elitist who looks down on ordinary middle Americans. The ad reminds viewers, that she thinks Trump’s supporters are “deplorables,” and then points out she’s talking about “people like you.”
Trump out-advertised Clinton by at least 80 percent to 20 percent in only four states: Wisconsin, Michigan, Maine, and Texas.

Using these imbalances and the candidate vote share on each day in each state (as forecasted by the Upshot at the *New York Times*), you can see how the change in each candidate’s share of the advertising in each state over this period affected the change in their vote share over the same time. As a candidate’s vote share goes up, so do his or her poll numbers. In places like Arizona and Tennessee, where Clinton was on the air nearly alone between June and October, she gained nearly five points in vote share over the same time. Since the candidates control only their own advertising effort and not their opponent’s, they don’t have control over where on the horizontal axis a state ends up. This makes it unlikely that they are just particularly good at guessing where there are easy votes to pick up by advertising there and more likely that the dominance of the advertising space is driving the increasing vote shares. On average, Clinton probably picked up about 2.6 points in the places she out-advertised Trump between June and October 2016.

Negative or not, campaign ads are rarely subtle, for their targets are the rationally ignorant, marginally involved voters who have not already made up their minds—not the informed political sophisticates or the confirmed partisans for whom the information provided by campaigns is superfluous. As one campaign consultant put it,

> The voters have a lot more important things on their minds than political campaigns. . . . Most of the people we are trying to reach with our message don't think about [campaigns] at all until late October. They don't read all the news magazines, the *Wall Street Journal*, and two local dailies. They don't watch CNN and C-SPAN. They watch “Wheel of Fortune,” and they think about politics and campaigns less than five minutes a week.16

Simplicity, repetition, exaggeration, and symbolism (images of home, family, neighborhood, and flag) are therefore the staples of campaign advertising. Accuracy is not a priority; as Romney’s chief pollster put it, “we’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers.”17 Flat-out lies are typically avoided in campaign ads, although 2016 saw a surge in the number of false claims made during the campaign. In ads, campaigns “source” the facts they use in their campaign ads with citations at the bottom of the screen to think tanks or government agencies that support their view or information. Of course, a supporting source can be found for almost any piece of information, and the same voters who watch *Wheel of Fortune* are also unlikely to know the difference between the Government Accountability Office in the U.S. government and the U.S. Office of the Comptroller General, which may—or may not—be as objective an arbiter of information.

In the end a successful campaign comes down to several basics. Its goal is to win a majority of votes, not every vote. Planners begin by using past voting records, polling, and telephone or door-to-door canvassing to figure out who is certain to support the candidate, who is up for grabs, and who is certain to support the opponent. The central clue here, at least for general elections, is the voter’s party identification. The campaign is designed to appeal to the first two groups but especially to the second—particularly if, as is usually the case, the first does not amount to a majority. Campaign staffs find out where the swing voters live, what they care about, and what their mood and concerns are this year. The most sophisticated operations also now use the reams of commercially available data on individuals’ characteristics, values, and tastes to “microtarget” specific campaign messages to those they
think are the most susceptible. Campaign strategists work to frame the choice—establish what the election is about—in a way that underlines their candidate’s strengths and plays down his or her weaknesses. In doing so, they develop a simple, coherent campaign theme that explains both why the candidate should be elected and why the opponent should not. Finally, they repeat the theme ad nauseam to reach the crucial late-deciding voters who pay almost no attention to politics. None of these things, however, can be accomplished without money.

The Other Necessity: Campaign Money

No matter how qualified the candidates are or how powerful their message, neither will count for much if voters never hear about them. Thus the third requirement of a competitive campaign is an effective way to communicate with voters. For most of America’s history, party organizations and newspapers were the chief conduits for political propaganda. Parties organized marches, rallies, and picnics; supplied the speakers; did the door-to-door canvassing of potential voters; and distributed pamphlets, broadsides, and posters bearing the campaign message. The campaign itself was a team affair, agitating for the election of all of the party’s candidates, although the spotlight usually was on the top of the ticket.

After World War II, however, patronage-based party organizations declined, and television gained popularity as a campaign medium (see Chapter 12). As a result, parties gradually lost their central role in campaigns, to the point that by the 1960s campaigns had largely become the province of individual candidates and their personal organizations. Candidates had to assemble their own campaign teams, raise the funds, hire the consultants and technical specialists, and design and execute their own individual campaign strategies, sometimes with the help of their national or local party organizations but often without it.

We may now be entering the post-television era—a time when on-demand viewing and personally cultivated media environments are beginning to dominate the way people interact with content. In 2016, for example, Donald Trump ran very few television ads relative to Hillary Clinton. Instead, Trump dominated the media environment by tweeting his often provocative thoughts on a regular basis. These tweets generated coverage by mainstream media as well as new media. More important, it didn’t cost him anything. Tweeting or sharing things on other social media platforms is free. On the one hand, these platforms may help equalize the playing field for candidates, allowing those who cannot or do not want to raise money the opportunity to reach some of the same audiences as those candidates who can afford to advertise and do. On the other hand, we don’t want to generalize too much from the campaign of a multibillionaire, reality TV star—Donald Trump may be the exception, not the new rule.

Most of the activities of typical campaigns cost money. Modern campaigns for federal office are expensive. There is simply no way for most candidates to organize and plan a campaign, do research, develop and package a message, and get that message out to potential voters on the cheap. Genuine electoral competition that gives voters a choice of agents and gives the winners an incentive to remain faithful (lest they be replaced) requires that candidates raise and spend money. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the 2000 presidential election cost roughly $1.4 billion. In 2004, that number jumped to $1.9 billion, and in 2008 it catapulted up to $2.8 billion, the most ever. The 2012 contest was slightly less expensive at $2.6 billion, and the 2016 cycle came in at just over $1 billion.
The lack of spending by presidential candidates in 2016, however, should not be taken as a sign that the importance of money in politics is waning. The non–presidential year spending is equally impressive. In 2014, for example, total spending by all interested parties was $3.6 billion. Candidates and parties accounted for $2.7 billion of that and outside groups $700 million. Individual races were as pricey as ever, but 2016 exceeded these numbers, making the last congressional races the priciest in history. Senate candidates in competitive races can spend upward of $25 million on their campaigns. Even House campaigns can be expensive, with many candidates spending multiple millions of dollars on their efforts.

REGULATING CAMPAIGN MONEY. Currently, all of the money spent on major campaigns for federal offices comes from private sources. Privately financed elections inevitably raise two related problems for American democracy. First, democracy demands political equality: one person, one vote. But because money is distributed unequally, its role in electoral politics threatens democratic equality. Second, privately financed elections raise the suspicion that elected officials will serve as agents of their contributors rather than of their constituents. The dilemma, then, is that meaningful elections require money, but the pursuit of money may subvert the very purpose of elections.

Efforts to resolve this dilemma through regulation have generally failed. Prior to the 1970s, campaign money was effectively unregulated. Congress had, from time to time, passed limits on contributions and spending, but the limits were easily circumvented and never enforced. This casual attitude toward campaign money faded with the spread of candidate-centered campaigns and the rise of broadcast campaigning, both of which quickly drove up costs. Higher costs accelerated not only the demand for campaign money but also the fear that the winners would favor contributors over constituents.

Congress’s response was the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (FECA), extensively amended in 1974. FECA provided partial public funding for presidential campaigns and required full public reporting of and strict limits on all contributions and expenditures in federal elections. It also established the Federal Election Commission to enforce the law and to collect and publish detailed information on campaign contributions and expenditures. The Supreme Court, in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), upheld the reporting requirements and contribution limits (to prevent “corruption or the appearance of corruption”) but rejected spending limits on the ground that they interfered with political speech protected by the First Amendment. Presidential candidates, however, could be required to abide by spending limits as a condition of receiving public funds for their campaigns. Also in *Buckley* the Court overturned, again on First Amendment grounds, ceilings on how much of their own money candidates could spend on their

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*Federal matching funds are available for presidential candidates in both the nominating phase of the campaign and the general election campaign, separately. Serious (read: all) candidates now refuse these funds from the government in order to avoid the spending limits they must adhere to if they accept the money. The first presidential candidate to do this in a general election was Barack Obama in 2008. It is unlikely any presidential candidates will ever return to using public funds to mount their campaigns as this limits what they can spend. In 2016, the limit was $96 million. If they refuse public financing, they can spend as much as they can raise. Clinton spent roughly $500 million and Trump about $250 million.*
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campaigns and on how much anyone could spend to agitate for or against candidates independently of candidates’ campaigns.

Concerned that spending limits were choking off traditional local party activity in federal elections, Congress liberalized FECA in 1979, amending the act to allow unrestricted contributions and spending for state and local party-building and get-out-the-vote activities. A 1996 Court decision gave party organizations the right to unfettered independent spending as well. Funds for these activities were commonly called soft money, as contrasted with the “hard money” raised and spent under FECA’s limitations. When the unregulated soft money contributions to party committees ballooned, soft money became the favorite target of campaign finance reformers, and in March 2002 Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), which among other reforms prohibited parties from raising or spending soft party money for federal candidates. Aided by the high emotions generated by the presidential race, the parties countered by raising vastly increased sums of hard money, and many former soft money donors redirected their contributions to so-called 527 committees (named after the section of the tax code dealing with them) and to 501(c) committees (“charitable” groups under the tax code that can finance campaigns if they maintain the notion that they are merely informing voters, not advocating the election or defeat of particular candidates). Such committees together spent about $500 million on independent campaigns for—or, more often, against—the presidential candidates in 2004 and another $400 million in 2008. BCRA’s attempt to limit independent campaigning by such groups was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2007. The Court went further in 2010, overturning precedent (in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission) to invalidate any restriction on independent campaign spending by any organization, including corporations and labor unions, on the ground that groups enjoyed the same First Amendment protections as individuals. The effect of these decisions is evident in the growth of nonparty independent and electioneering efforts by groups, which grew from $300 million in 2004 to about $1 billion in 2012, and nearly $1.5 billion in 2016.

THE FLOW OF CAMPAIGN MONEY. Although the proponents of the original FECA had hoped to rein in the cost of campaigns, the flow of campaign money has continued to outpace inflation. Total funding from all sources for the general election campaigns for president rose from $453 million in 1996 to $676 million in 2000, $1.3 billion in 2004, and more than $2 billion in 2008 and 2012. Spending in House and Senate campaigns also has continued to grow since FECA took effect, rising by averages of about 9 percent in House elections and 12 percent in Senate elections (in inflation-adjusted dollars) from one election year to the next. Both supply and demand have driven campaign spending up. The supply of contributions continues to grow because the stakes represented by elections are so great, and the Internet has made it easier to connect with like-minded citizens and donors.

While presidential candidates typically raise and spend about the same amount of money, House and Senate spending averages mask the huge variation in the amounts available to individual congressional candidates or spent on their behalf. Some candidates raise and spend millions, while others have to make do with almost nothing. A select minority of races attract heavy independent spending; the rest are largely ignored. These differences result from strategic choices made by contributors, candidates, parties, and independent committee entrepreneurs. Congressional candidates in search of
campaign contributions can tap four basic sources: individuals, political action committees (PACs; discussed in detail in Chapter 13), their own pocketbooks, and party organizations. House candidates typically receive most of their funds from private individuals and get a bit less from PACs; very little comes out of their own pockets. Senate candidates raise relatively more from individuals (about 60 percent) and less from PACs. Direct party contributions amount to only about 1 percent of candidates’ funds, but the parties also help out with significant amounts of coordinated campaign spending and especially independent campaign spending. Party committees make coordinated expenditures on behalf of candidates for activities such as polling, get-out-the-vote efforts, producing ads, and conducting research; the totals are, however, limited by law. Independent party expenditures are not limited and go for campaign activities (mainly advertising) that are not supposed to be coordinated in any way with the candidate’s campaign; such expenditures grew explosively after BCRA closed the parties’ soft money loophole and now account for a significant share of total spending in competitive contests. The congressional parties also help their candidates by encouraging their incumbents in safe seats to pass some of the money on to needier candidates; many incumbents have also formed so-called leadership PACs to supply funds to fellow partisans. Thus, although House and Senate campaigns are still primarily candidate centered in their activities and messages, the national parties have a far larger role in financing them than they did when FECA was adopted back in the 1970s.

Broadly speaking, campaign finance now operates through two parallel systems. Money going directly to candidates or parties is subject to limits on the size of contributions and full public disclosure of sources. Presidential candidates who accept public funds also must observe spending limits, though McCain was the last candidate who did so (and for the general election only). But in the other system, money raised and spent outside of the parties’ and candidates’ campaigns is not subject to limits or, in some forms, disclosure of contributors. In practice, this means that any citizen who wants to invest any amount of money in campaign activities can find a legal way to do so, and anonymously at that. These anonymous sources of funds have become known as dark money.

*In 2012 coordinated expenditures by federal and state committees were limited to $91,200 in House races; limits for Senate races depend on the state’s population and ranged up to $5.2 million (California).
difference. Contributors also favor likely winners whose help they might need after the election. In practice, then, congressional incumbents, usually safe—or, at worst, in tight races for reelection—have the least trouble raising campaign funds. How much they actually acquire depends in good part on how much they think they need; the safer they feel, the less they raise and spend.

Does it matter how much candidates for down-ballot races are able to raise and spend? It matters only to the degree that a lack of money prevents candidates from getting their messages out and reaching voters. Campaign money has little to do with the results of general elections for president. The presidential candidates’ campaigns always are at least adequately financed, and huge sums of additional money are now spent by party organizations and independent committees on the candidates’ behalf. Add to this the abundant free information the media transmit about presidential candidates, and the resources are nearly always balanced—of course the content of these things may not be balanced!

Campaign money does matter in presidential primaries, in which rationally ignorant voters cannot rely on party labels as default cues and so need to know something about the candidates. Well-known candidates have a leg up, but lesser known contenders, to have any chance at all, need to get the attention of voters, which almost always requires spending substantial sums of money. Held in January or February at the beginning of the primary season, the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary once gave unknowns such as Jimmy Carter (1976) and Bill Clinton (1992) an opportunity to parlay relatively inexpensive early successes into fund-raising bonanzas for later primaries (see Chapter 12). But with so many states now holding primaries in February and March, candidates have little time to exploit unexpected success and cannot compete effectively without raising a great deal of money before the election year begins. In fact, the year before the election is now called the “invisible primary” because of the importance of fund-raising leading up to those first contests in the election year. In 2016, despite raising more money than any other contender, Jeb Bush was unable to turn his fund-raising success into votes. Donald Trump, who had raised virtually no money in the year before the election, went on to come in close in Iowa and win New Hampshire—setting the trajectory for his subsequent nomination. Money is not the key to winning—strategy, messaging, and a candidate’s comparative advantage are all important elements of success.

In House and Senate races, money—specifically, the lack of it—is frequently decisive.

Typically, half of Senate incumbents and 70 percent to 80 percent of House incumbents win by default because their opponents spend too little money to make a race of it (see Figure 11.3). Voters tend to reject candidates they know nothing about in favor of those they recognize. In the elections held from 1980 through 2008, an average of 92 percent of House voters and 96 percent of Senate voters recognized the incumbent’s name. Awareness of the challengers was much less common; over the same period only 54 percent recognized the House challenger’s name and 77 percent the Senate challenger’s name. Challengers who do not improve substantially on these averages have no chance of winning, and few can do so without heavy campaign spending. But campaign spending has little effect on awareness of incumbents because voters already are familiar with them before the campaign begins.21

Campaign money, then, is much more important to challengers (and obscure candidates of any kind) than it is to incumbents or other well-known candidates. In House elections the more challengers spend, the more likely they are to win, but few spend enough to be
The story of how campaign finance reform led to the flood of “soft money” in presidential election campaigns, and how reforms aimed at stemming the flood merely rechanneled it, exemplify the partisan conflicts, dilemmas, and unanticipated consequences that vex campaign finance policy. With their party in debt after the 1968 election, congressional Democrats embraced reform proposals that would limit campaign spending and finance presidential campaigns with public funds. Republican opposition to these reforms collapsed in the wake of the Watergate scandal, in which campaign finance abuses had figured prominently. After Richard Nixon resigned in August 1974 to avoid impeachment, his successor, Gerald Ford, who like Nixon opposed public financing of campaigns, reluctantly agreed to sign the Federal Election Campaign Act amendments, conceding that “the times demand this legislation.”

Use of the new system in the 1976 elections exposed an unanticipated problem. To meet spending limits, the presidential campaigns focused on mass media advertising to take advantage of its efficiencies and maintained tight central control of all other campaign activity to avoid violating the law. State and local parties had little chance to participate, and the absence of the familiar paraphernalia of grassroots campaigns—bumper stickers, lapel buttons, yard signs—was widely noted and lamented. To preserve a role for local parties and grassroots activists in presidential campaigns, Congress in 1979 amended FECA to permit state and local parties to raise and spend money on party building, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote activities. No limits were placed on contributions or expenditures for these purposes, and, until the law was amended again in 1988, the sums involved did not even have to be reported to the Federal Election Commission. These funds were nicknamed “soft money” to distinguish them from the tightly regulated “hard money” governed by the public funding system.

Permissive interpretations by the Federal Election Commission and the federal courts of what constituted “party building” allowed presidential candidates to raise and spend unlimited sums under the legal fiction that they were merely helping fertilize the grass roots. Consequently, presidential campaign finance became almost as wide open as it had been before the reforms of the 1970s. For years, partisan disagreements kept Congress from reforming the system, but finally in 2002, scandals surrounding the collapse of energy giant Enron, a generous donor of both hard and soft campaign money to both parties, induced majorities in both houses to pass the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act despite strong opposition from Republican leaders. Among other things, BCRA banned soft money contributions to the parties, completely depriving them of this source of funds.

But soft money did not disappear. Tax-exempt groups organized under regulations in section 527 of the revenue code can raise unlimited money to spend on voter mobilization, issue advocacy, and almost any other campaign activity as long as they refrain from expressly advocating the election or defeat of a federal candidate and do not coordinate their activities with parties or candidates. In response to BCRA, most large soft money donors shifted to supporting 527 committees, whose financial participation in federal elections jumped from $151 million in 2002 to $405 million in 2004. With the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission tossing out all limits on independent spending, including campaigns paid for out of corporate and union treasuries, the total spent independently on federal campaigns by parties and political action committees reached nearly $1.5 billion in 2016. In the 2014 midterm elections, the spending by outside groups and 527 organizations was nearly $700 million. In April 2014, in McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court removed the aggregate limit that individuals could give to candidates and parties, too, although individuals must still adhere to the limits per candidate or party.

competitive. More than half of all House challengers spend less than $200,000, and only one of the 2,103 challengers in this category was successful (he defeated an incumbent under federal indictment who later served time in prison). As challenger spending increases, so does the likelihood of winning. Curiously, though, the opposite appears true for incumbents. They are much more likely to spend at high levels, yet the higher their spending, the more likely they are to lose.

This surprising fact is a by-product of the strategies pursued by contributors and candidates. The more threatened incumbents feel, the more they raise and spend, but the additional effort does not fully offset the threat that provokes it. For incumbents, then, spending lavishly is a sign of electoral weakness that is ultimately registered at the polls. For challengers, higher spending is a sign, as well as a source, of electoral strength. Challengers with better prospects (attractive candidates with potentially effective messages) are able to raise more money, and the more they spend, the more professional their campaigns, the more voters they reach, and the more support they attract. Challengers do not have to outspend incumbents to win. Indeed, only 20 percent of the successful House challengers in the past decade spent more than the incumbents they defeated. They simply have to spend enough to make their case. When both candidates spend enough money to mount full-scale campaigns, the content of the campaigns, not the balance of resources, determines the outcome.

**HOW ARE CAMPAIGN FUNDS SPENT?** Once candidates have raised campaign money, they have to decide how to spend it, unless, like many congressional incumbents, they face such feeble opposition that they are free to pass it on to other candidates, donate to party committees, or stash it away for some future contest. No one is certain about the most effective way to use scarce campaign resources. The most commonly
expressed view is that “half the money spent on campaigns is wasted. The trouble is, we don't know which half.”

Because a fundamental goal of every campaign is to reach voters with the candidate's message, the largest expense is advertising, with television and radio ads leading the way. Presidential and Senate campaigns make heavier use of television advertising, while House campaigns use more “persuasion mail.” The reason is efficiency. Media markets in large metropolitan areas may include as many as thirty House districts (greater New York). Thus House candidates opting for broadcast advertising have to pay for a station’s entire audience, not just that fraction living in the target district. Mailings, by contrast, can be targeted precisely to district residents. Still, House campaigners with enough money often use television even where it is inefficient because it is the only way to reach many potential voters and avoids the risk of campaign brochures being tossed out as “junk mail.”

Only a small proportion of spending goes for traditional campaigning—speeches, rallies, soliciting votes door to door, and shaking hands at the factory gate. Yet these activities remain a major part of every campaign because candidates hope to extend their impact far beyond the immediate audience by attracting news coverage. Campaigns display considerable imagination in coming up with gimmicks that will gain free media exposure; indeed, campaign professionals work so hard for it that they prefer to call it “earned” media. One particularly brave House challenger even traveled with a large pig to underline his opposition to the incumbent’s “pork barrel politics.” What local TV station could resist the visuals? Another tactic is running paid ads designed to provoke controversy. The ensuing news coverage then spreads the message to an audience much larger than the one originally exposed to the ad. Of course in 2016, Donald Trump pioneered the use of Twitter as a way to garner free media coverage. It is hard to believe that when Barack Obama became president in 2008, no prior officeholder had ever had a mobile device. There was considerable discussion before Obama’s inauguration about whether the president would be allowed to carry a Blackberry! (The reason was security concerns about presidential communications.)

In pursuing favorable news coverage, presidential campaigns were already in a class by themselves, but Trump took things to a new level. Modern presidential campaigns are basically made-for-TV productions. Candidates tolerate grueling travel schedules, participate in countless carefully staged events, and compose pithy “sound bites” and tweets—short comments designed to be excerpted—to get their messages on the news and out to the voters. Although the media have changed, there are a lot of similarities between the goal of George H.W. Bush’s “Read my lips. No new taxes” in 1988 and Donald Trump’s “I refuse to call Megyn Kelly a bimbo. That would not be politically correct” in 2016. Large rallies are another successful example of staged events aimed at generating media coverage. Whether Bill Clinton and Al Gore’s bus tour, Barack Obama’s stadium speeches, or Donald Trump’s overnight sold-out crowds, candidates view these events as ways to demonstrate popularity and enthusiasm—all for a TV audience far beyond the location of the event itself. Presidential candidates also exploit soft news and entertainment shows. In recent elections, both parties’ candidates have made multiple appearances on television’s talk and comedy shows. In 2008, Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton went on Saturday Night Live to joke with Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, who had been parodying them in the comedy show’s sketches, while John McCain went on David Letterman’s show to stop the needling Letterman had been giving him for having canceled an appearance a few weeks earlier. In 2015, Donald Trump made multiple
appearances with Jimmy Fallon on the Tonight Show and also hosted Saturday Night Live. The campaigns take these events seriously, for these shows likely reach audiences who do not otherwise pay much attention to political news.

When it comes to media coverage, the rich get richer, and the poor get ignored. The best-funded campaigns (for president or hotly contested Senate seats) get the most attention from the news media. Poorly funded candidates may be desperate for news coverage because they cannot afford to buy airtime, yet the very fact of their poverty makes them look like sure losers and therefore not worth covering. Campaigns that must depend on the news media to get their messages out invariably fail. Trump, of course, was different because he was already famous as a reality TV star and billionaire.

A large share of congressional campaign funds pays for expenses not directly connected to reaching voters. One study found that nearly a quarter of the money spent went into overhead—staff salaries, office and furniture rental, computers and other equipment, telephone calls, travel, legal and accounting services, and the like. Every serious campaign now also has a digital presence and branding designed to attract volunteers and contributors as well as to get out the campaign’s message. Fund-raising is another major expense, particularly for Senate candidates, who spend 20 percent of their money on just raising more money. Because of their larger constituencies, Senate candidates usually have to raise bigger sums than House candidates do.

WHERE ARE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN FUNDS SPENT? Presidential candidates invest heavily in television advertising, the most effective way to reach an electorate of more than 100 million people. In recent elections the campaigns have together spent hundreds of millions of dollars on television time. Decisions about where to spend the money are dominated by the design of the Electoral College (see box “The Electoral College: Where the Big States Hold the Cards”), which encourages a strategy of focusing on states with large numbers of electoral votes that are not securely in one party’s camp rather than on the national electorate. Whoever wins the most popular votes in a state, except for Maine and Nebraska, gets all of its electoral votes no matter how narrow the margin of victory.* The object of a presidential campaign, then, is to piece together enough state victories to win at least 270 electoral votes.

When the election is expected to be close, the obvious strategy is to concentrate on states that polls indicate could go either way, and to ignore entirely states that seem locked up by either side. For example, in 2012, the campaigns focused on a narrow set of so-called battleground states that pre-election surveys suggested were seriously in play. Both candidates invested heavily in the largest of these states in 2012—Florida (29 electoral votes), Pennsylvania (20), Ohio (18), and initially Michigan (16; the Romney campaign ceded Michigan early in the fall). But in 2016, only Hillary Clinton was on the air for much of the summer. She focused on some of the same states as the candidates did in 2012—Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—and out-advertised Donald Trump in those states by nearly two to one. But she set aside places like Michigan and Wisconsin, where Trump was out-advertising her over the summer. The vast majority of the TV campaign ads were broadcast in battleground-state media markets, with Florida and Ohio seeing the majority. Most are also shown on broadcast television networks during and around the local and morning news programs.

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* In Maine and Nebraska the electoral vote can be divided if one congressional district votes for a candidate who loses statewide.
Even a large imbalance in advertising, however, may not be able to overcome controversial events that get reported in the news. As Election Day drew near in 2016, lingering doubts about Clinton’s use of a private e-mail server reemerged as the FBI director sent a letter to Congress regarding e-mails between Clinton and her aides that were discovered on a laptop the bureau had just seized as part of the Anthony Weiner sexting investigation. After the news broke, the Clinton campaign went on the air with ads in Michigan and Wisconsin, but even after the FBI director exonerated Clinton a few days later of any additional wrongdoing in the matter of the server, she lost both Michigan and Wisconsin, along with Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania. These losses gave Trump more than enough Electoral College votes, and he became the president-elect of the United States on November 8, 2016.

The story of the 2016 election is more complicated than Trump’s Electoral College victory implies. Despite handily winning the Electoral College, Trump lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million. This is largely a function of the fact that Clinton did better than Obama in 2012 in places like California, Arizona, and Texas (places with large populations of Latino voters), but she did worse almost everywhere else, particularly in places like West Virginia, Ohio, and Iowa.

The 2016 election provides two examples of money not being the key to winning—Jeb Bush in the primaries and Clinton in the general election—but these unexpected outcomes both have one thing in common: Donald Trump. Because of this, it is premature to generalize about future elections and the role of campaigns and money.
The Electoral College
Where the Big States Hold the Cards

The Constitution’s formula for allocating electoral votes to each state is simple: number of senators plus the number of representatives equals the number of votes in the Electoral College. This formula heavily favors the populous states, which not only have a lot of electoral votes but, following a rule adopted by all states except Nebraska and Maine, award all their electoral votes to the candidate receiving the most votes. This winner-take-all rule means that California with its 55 electoral votes, Texas with 38, and New York and Florida with 29 each carry the most electoral weight. Based on the 2010 census, the ten most populous states in the nation control 256 of the 270 electoral votes needed to elect a president. By contrast, the thirteen least populous states have only 46 electoral votes—fewer than those held by the largest state, California.

The largest states do not necessarily see the most action, however, because some of them are reliably in one party’s column. In recent elections, California and New York have been safely Democratic, while Republicans have had a lock on Texas. White House hopefuls plan their campaign stops accordingly, heavily crisscrossing those vote-rich states that are not firmly in one party’s hands—such as Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, and Virginia in 2012—at the expense of the vote-poor states and those not considered in play.

An ongoing criticism of the Electoral College system is that a candidate can win a plurality of the popular vote nationally but still not be elected because of failure to gain a majority in the Electoral College. This happened to presidential candidates Andrew Jackson in 1824, Samuel J. Tilden in 1876, Grover Cleveland in 1888, Al Gore in 2000, and Hillary Clinton in 2016. Jackson and Cleveland succeeded, however, in their next runs for the office. More typically, the electoral vote merely exaggerates the margin of victory of the winner of the popular vote. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton won 43.3 percent of the popular vote but 68.7 percent of the electoral vote; Barack Obama won 52.6 percent of the popular vote but 67.7 percent of the electoral vote in 2008, and 51.1 percent of the popular vote but 61.2 percent of the electoral vote in 2012. The 2000 and 2004 elections, however, proved exceptions to the rule. In 2000, George W. Bush’s share of the popular vote (47.8 percent) nearly equaled his slice of the electoral vote (50.4 percent); the two figures were equally close in 2004, when Bush won 50.7 percent of the popular vote and 53.2 percent of the electoral vote. Despite the lack of fidelity between the margins in the popular vote and the Electoral College vote, bounding contests by geography has some advantages. One of them is the ability to contain the effects of fraud. If someone managed to manipulate the vote in two large metropolitan areas, like New York and Los Angeles, for example, the Electoral College makes it difficult for this manipulation to determine the outcome of the election, more so than under a method that relied solely on popular vote margins.

The States in Proportion to Their Electoral Votes, 2012–2020

Source: Compiled by authors.
THE LOGIC OF ELECTIONS REVISITED

Despite all the problems with U.S. elections, they work remarkably well to preserve American democracy. Regular, free, competitive elections guard the nation against the dangers that inevitably arise when citizens delegate authority to governments. Elections allow citizens, as principals, to pick their agents and to fire and replace those whose performance falls short. The threat of replacement provides elected officials with a powerful incentive to listen to their constituents. Elections also create incentives for entrepreneurs and organizations to solve the free-rider and coordination problems that beset citizens acting as collective principals. Aspiring leaders and their political allies compete for votes by keeping an eye on officials and informing citizens about their shortcomings, paying the information costs that individual citizens would not rationally pay. Similarly, by getting out the vote on Election Day they turn citizens who might otherwise rationally abstain from casting a ballot into voters. They also bear much of the cost, through polling and focus groups, of keeping track of what citizens want from their agents in government, again making up for the lack of rational incentives for individual political expression. But all of these activities cost money, and the campaign finance system presents its own set of agency problems that are not easily solved.

Elections also induce candidates and campaigns to help solve the massive coordination problem faced by millions of voters trying to act collectively to control or replace their agents. By offering competing frames for a voting decision, they clarify and focus the electoral choice to the point where rationally ignorant voters can manage it. Candidates’ opportunistic choice of issues puts voters’ concerns on the agenda and helps make election results intelligible: in 2012, for example, a crucial issue really was the appropriate strategy for invigorating the economy and bringing down the deficit. When candidates form relatively stable coalitions with other would-be leaders—that is, combine into political parties—they narrow the choices to a manageable number, often as few as two. Indeed, party labels simplify voters’ choices across offices and over a series of elections. They also allow voters to hold elected officials collectively responsible for their performance in office. In other words, elections create strong links between public opinion and government action. But they do so only because politically ambitious people have found that it serves their own purposes to engage in the activities that forge the links. One durable institutional by-product of political ambition pursued under American electoral rules, the party system, is the subject of the next chapter.
KEY TERMS

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SUGGESTED READINGS


Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America. New York: Macmillan, 1993. The most prominent and intractable question in American politics is why voter turnout has declined over the past thirty years. Rosenstone and Hansen offer the closest thing we have to an answer that is actually supported by evidence.


REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the potential problems with delegating authority to representatives in government? How do elections help reduce these risks?

2. What benefits do people get from voting? Which of these benefits do they still receive if they personally do not vote?

3. Voting, in effect, makes voters choose between a future governed by candidate A and one governed by candidate B. Most voters can’t predict the future. What tools allow voters to make these predictions of future performance?

4. What is the most important personal characteristic for predicting a person’s vote in a federal election for president or Congress?

5. What is the most important aggregate statistic in predicting which party is likely to win a presidential election?

6. What do candidates spend most of their money on? Is money enough to win? Does it help all candidates equally? What type of candidate benefits the most from increased spending?