



THE CONSTITUTION

When delegates reached Philadelphia in 1787 with the charge of revising the Articles of Confederation, none could have imagined the momentous outcomes their meetings would have. While the Articles had established a government for the new nation, their failings were apparent to most. The delegates brought with them a host of historical and philosophical concerns that would shape a new constitution.

KEY TERMS

amendment process

Antifederalists

bicameral

Bill of Rights

checks and balances

constitution

Declaration of Independence

factions

federalism

Federalist Papers

Federalists

Great Compromise

judicial review

natural rights

New Jersey Plan

ratification

republic

separation of powers

Shays's Rebellion

Virginia Plan

Unalienable

unicameral

KEY CONCEPTS

- The path to independence accelerated with Britain's difficulty in administering and financing territory gained in the French and Indian War.

- The Articles of Confederation were the nation's first constitution and created a number of problems for the new nation.
- Called to revise the Articles of Confederation, the Constitutional Convention scrapped them and drafted the Constitution, which we live under today.
- There were many talented delegates to the Constitutional Convention, but it was James Madison who most profoundly shaped the Constitution.
- Proponents of the Constitution argued that it provided for a much needed and stronger national government; opponents preferred that state governments remain stronger.
- The Constitution has two amendment processes, which account in large measure for its endurance.

For a full discussion of the Constitution, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 2 / 9th ed., Chapter 2.

THE PATH TO INDEPENDENCE

Life for most colonial Americans was good by most measures of the day. Colonists enjoyed more liberty, wealth, and even equality than most of the rest of world. The king and Parliament generally ventured only into matters of trade and foreign relations. This benign relationship changed abruptly when Britain gained extensive new North American territory by winning the French and Indian War (also known as the Seven Years' War) in 1763. The expense of defending the newly won territory was overwhelming. Britain reasoned that the colonists should share in the burden of paying for the administration and defense of the new land through taxes on items such as newspapers, glass, paint, official documents, paper, and tea.

Colonial resentment towards the new taxes crystallized political and philosophical values in the colonies that had been evolving for some time. Colonial leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Robert Morris, and Alexander Hamilton, were heavily influenced by European political philosophies of the Enlightenment. Perhaps the most widely read of the European philosophers was John Locke, an Englishman who wrote *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1689). Locke outlined his belief in natural rights—rights that are inherent in all human beings apart from any form of government and can be neither taken away nor given up. Locke's natural rights included life, liberty, and property. Government, Locke argued, exists for the securing of these rights and must therefore be built upon the consent of the governed. Furthermore, government must be limited. Locke believed that laws should be written, and government should not take any part of a man's property without his consent.

As colonial unhappiness with various British taxes escalated, war broke out. Colonial leaders met almost continuously during 1775 and 1776 as the Continental Congress. By May of 1776, resolutions concerning independence were being openly debated, resulting in the Declaration of Independence being formally adopted on July 4, 1776. Written primarily by Thomas Jefferson, the document is both political

and philosophical, emphasizing many of Locke's ideas. It announces and rationalizes a revolution, listing twenty-seven specific ways that King George III had abused the Americans. Its philosophical statements, however, set forth many of the underlying assumptions of American government, then and now.

The colonists seemed badly outmatched by the mighty British army, and at several points during the Revolution the Americans appeared to be beaten. Nevertheless, in 1783, after a variety of unlikely twists and turns and with international aid from the Spanish and especially the French, the Americans won their independence.

THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

The Declaration of Independence merely created a voluntary union of the former colonies. The Continental Congress appointed a committee to devise a more formal and permanent union. The result of the committee's work was the Articles of Confederation, the nation's first constitution. The Articles created a national legislature that was unicameral. Several delegates could be sent to the new Congress by a particular state, but each state had only one vote. Passing a new law required nine of the thirteen states to vote in favor. There was only a powerless executive and no judicial branch included in the national government, and legislative powers were severely limited. Most power was reserved for the state legislatures. The Continental Congress adopted the Articles in 1777, but they did not go into effect until 1781, when Maryland ratified them, because unanimous consent was required for them to become operative.

From the beginning, the Articles appeared to create more problems than they solved. Among the notable weaknesses were the following:

- Congress had no power to tax. To obtain money, Congress had to request funds from the states, which often refused.
- Congress had no power to regulate commerce. This severely hindered efforts to create a national economy.
- The national government had no court system to deal with disputes between states.
- Congress *did* have the power to maintain an army and navy, yet it lacked the resources to adequately do even that.

The ineffectiveness of the Articles was further revealed in 1786, when a band of farmers in western Massachusetts staged a rebellion to protest the loss of their land to creditors. Led by a Revolutionary War captain, Shays's Rebellion was a series of attacks on courthouses to keep judges from foreclosing on farms. Neither the national government nor the state of Massachusetts was able to raise a militia to put down the rebellion. A privately funded force was hastily organized to do the job. National leaders cringed at the seeming chaos.

Shays's Rebellion and the perceived weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation convinced many that bold solutions were needed to mend the country's post-Revolutionary War problems. A handful of leaders met in Annapolis, Maryland, in September of 1786 to offer suggestions for putting the country on better footing. Because only

five states were represented, the meeting had little effect. The Annapolis delegates petitioned Congress for a meeting of all the states the following year. Congress agreed, and in May of 1787, delegates convened in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Although the fifty-five delegates to the convention were commissioned only to revise the Articles of Confederation, they dismissed this as impossible because it would have required the unanimous consent of the states. Instead, they set about writing a new constitution.

Of the fifty-five delegates, only about thirty participated consistently. Rhode Island refused to send any delegates. Most were relatively young, though Benjamin Franklin was already past eighty. They were mostly wealthy planters, lawyers, or merchants. Some famous names were notable for their absence: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were serving abroad; Sam Adams was too ill to attend; Patrick Henry refused to attend, fearing the convention would create a government tending towards monarchy.

Some of the most contentious and difficult issues were the following:

- **Representation** The composition of the new Congress was hotly contested. The Virginia Plan called for representation to be based on a state's proportion of the total American population. The New Jersey Plan insisted on equal representation for each state. The solution is known as the Connecticut Compromise or the Great Compromise. The Senate would have two members from each state. The House of Representatives would be based on population.

AP Tip

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention wrangled over the question of representation for some six weeks. The Great Compromise, which provided the basis for our federal system, also served to keep the Convention together. Delegates spent another two months working on the Constitution, but no issue proved as contentious as that of representation. The Great Compromise is sure to appear on the exam.

- **Slavery** The contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and slavery were evident. Slaves were allowed to count three-fifths in the population census, a compromise between southern delegates, who wanted slaves counted in their entirety, and northern delegates, who wanted slaves not counted at all. Congress was given the power to end the importation of slaves, though not slavery itself, after 1808.

- **Voting** The delegates ultimately evaded the difficult question of who should be permitted to vote by leaving the issue to the individual states.
- **Economic Issues** The extent to which their own economic interests influenced the delegates has been debated ever since the Constitution was ratified. Many features were designed to empower the national government to make economic policy and protect property. Congress was given the power to tax and borrow, to regulate foreign and interstate commerce, and to create currency.
- **Individual Rights** The delegates assumed that state constitutions would continue to assure individual rights. As a result, the Constitution says little about personal freedoms (which would create a major issue during the ratification process). The Constitution does prohibit the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus (which enables persons detained by authorities to receive immediate justification for the cause of their detention). It also prohibits bills of attainder (which punish people without trial), ex post facto laws (which punish people for acts not illegal when they were committed), and religious qualifications for holding national office. Treason is defined, and conviction for treason is carefully described. Lastly, the right to trial by jury in criminal cases is explicitly stated.

The Constitution was finally finished and signed on the 109th day of the meetings. Not all the remaining delegates were willing to add their name to the document, however, foreshadowing the difficult process of ratification ahead.

JAMES MADISON AS ARCHITECT

More than any other individual figure, James Madison was the principal visionary of the government's structure. Madison feared factions of self-interested individuals banding together to create tyranny. To prevent the possible evils of powerful factions, Madison drew on examples from state constitutions and proposed (and eventually saw instituted within the Constitution) the following:

- **Separation of powers** Each of the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—would be given independent powers so that no one branch could control the others, yet no branch could operate with total independence. Power would not be divided absolutely but would be shared among the various branches.
- **Checks and balances** Because the three branches would share power, each could check the powers of the other two branches to a certain extent. For instance, the president could veto legislation passed by Congress. Congress could confirm or deny certain presidential appointments. The Supreme Court could interpret laws.
- **Limits on the majority** Madison feared the power of the masses and worked to keep most of the government beyond

their control. Only the House of Representatives had members directly elected by the majority. State legislatures selected senators, and an electoral college chose the president. Judges were to be nominated by the president and serve for life.

- **Federalism** Political authority was divided between the national government and the various state governments. Madison assumed that this would check any tyranny by the national government.

The delegates knew that it is impractical to have the citizenry make all decisions. Instead, the Constitution created a republic, in which representatives of the public make policy and exercise power. Representation ensures that the principle of the consent of the governed will prevail. The American system is moderate and prone to compromise.

RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION

The proposed Constitution called for nine of the thirteen states to approve the document at special state ratifying conventions. This was technically illegal because the Articles of Confederation, which were still in effect, called for the approval of all thirteen state legislatures in order for there to be any amendments. The Framers of the Constitution wanted to evade this requirement because they feared that the legislatures would resist the new document, thus retaining their extensive powers.

Advocates of the Constitution called themselves Federalists, though they might have more accurately called themselves "nationalists." Their opponents, those wanting to thwart the ratification of the Constitution, became known as Antifederalists, though they might well have been called "states' righters."

To help persuade the public of the merits of the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton published a series of articles in the New York newspapers. Soon he recruited John Jay and James Madison to help him, and the trio wrote eighty-five articles from late 1787 through 1788. Known as the *Federalist* papers, they provide rare glimpses into the Philadelphia meetings and important elaborations regarding the Constitution itself. Although Hamilton wrote fifty-one of the articles, Madison penned the two most famous: *Federalist* 10 offers Madison's warning about factions and strategies to deal with them; *Federalist* 51 elaborates on checks and balances as the solution to factions.

The Antifederalists countered with articles of their own that made scathing and insightful attacks on the proposed Constitution. Antifederalists argued that a strong national government would be too distant from the people and would abuse its powers by absorbing functions that appropriately belonged to the states. They feared that Congress would tax far too heavily and that the Supreme Court would overrule state courts. They also feared that the president would become the head of a large standing army.

If a strong national government was to be created, argued the Antifederalists, it should be restrained by much more explicit guarantees of individual liberties than those found in this Constitution. Leading Federalists were persuaded by this argument and promised to

add amendments to the document with explicit protections of individual liberties. Later James Madison, at the First Congress in 1789, proposed twelve constitutional amendments that restrained the national government from limiting civil liberties. Ten of these were ratified by the states by 1791. Collectively they have become known as the Bill of Rights. Another of Madison's original amendments, regarding congressional salaries, was ratified 201 years later as the Twenty-Seventh Amendment.

Using special conventions for ratification (which met independently of the state legislatures for the express purpose of examining the Constitution) proved to be a winning formula for the Federalists. State legislatures would have likely voted down the new Constitution. Delaware became the first state to approve, on December 7, 1787. Though bitter opposition continued in Virginia and New York that seemed to threaten ratification, within six months New Hampshire became the ninth to approve, and the Constitution was ratified. Virginia and New York joined shortly thereafter, seeing that further resistance was futile. North Carolina and Rhode Island waited for the Bill of Rights to be ratified before they joined in 1791.

CHANGING THE CONSTITUTION

The Framers of the Constitution wisely allowed for changes to be made in accord with the needs of later times. Constitutional changes can be made either through a formal amendment process or through informal processes.

- **The formal process** Article V of the Constitution sets forth procedures for formal amendments. For an amendment to pass, it must survive two stages of the process—proposal and ratification. In turn, each of these stages has two possible courses of action. An amendment may be proposed by either a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress or by a national convention called by Congress at the request of two-thirds of the state legislatures. An amendment may be ratified by either the legislatures of three-fourths of the states or by special state conventions in three-fourths of the states. All but one of the amendments to pass (the Twenty-First) was the result of being proposed by Congress and ratified by the state legislatures. Formal amendments have tended to emphasize equality and expand voting rights.
- **Informal processes** There are several ways that the Constitution can change informally. Judicial interpretation is one. Though the Constitution only implies the power of the Supreme Court to consider the constitutionality of a case, the Court has exercised such power since the *Marbury v. Madison* case of 1803. The power of judicial review enables the Court to settle disputes regarding interpretations of the Constitution. Changing political practices also change the Constitution. Many Americans would be surprised to know that the Constitution mentions nothing of political parties, much less a two-party system. The electoral college system as outlined in the Constitution does not include any provisions that require

an elector to vote for the winner of the popular vote in a particular state, yet this is now a firm tradition and even the law in most states. Technology has affected the role of the media in politics, the ability of the civil service to provide services, and the power of the military in ways the Framers could never have imagined. The president now commands a position in the world that has significantly increased presidential powers far beyond the powers described in the Constitution.

The flexibility of the Constitution has served the nation well for over two hundred years. Ongoing issues—for example, the line-item veto that would allow the president to veto only part of a bill—continue to be debated and might well become part of the Constitution in the future. Though the United States is a young country in relation to much of the world, it has the oldest functioning constitution. By way of comparison, France had seven constitutions within a generation of its own revolution. Despite the enormous changes and the diversity and size of the nation, it continues to operate effectively and legitimately.

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FEDERALISM

Federalism is a philosophy of government based on the division of power between the state and federal government. In the United States, it has been a persistent source of political conflict.

KEY TERMS

| | |
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| block grants | grants in aid |
| categorical grants | initiative |
| conditions of aid | mandates |
| cooperative federalism | <i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> |
| devolution | nullification |
| dual federalism | referendum |
| federalism | revenue sharing |
| federal system | unfounded mandates |
| <i>Gibbons v. Ogden</i> | unitary system |

KEY CONCEPTS

- Federalism is the sharing of power between local and national governments.
- Defining the relationship between the national government and state governments has been—and continues to be—a major issue in the nation's history.
- The cornerstone of federal and state government relations today is the system of grants-in-aid, or funds distributed by Congress to state and local governments.
- The federal government tells a state government what its activities and policies must be in the form of mandates and conditions of aid.

For a full discussion of federalism, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 3 / 9th ed., Chapter 3.

SHARING POWER

Federalism is a political system in which power is shared between local units of government—states—and a national government. Only a handful of the world's governments are federal. (The United States, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, and Switzerland are examples.) Most are unitary systems, in which the national government has final authority over all government activities.

In the United States, federalism has endured mainly because of the American commitment to local self-government and because Congress consists of people who are elected by and responsible to local constituencies. Even though the national government has taken on vast powers, it often exercises those powers through state governments. The national government often finds itself seeking state compliance through regulations, grants, and other forms of pressure.

Among Americans, federalism has its advocates and its opponents. To some, federalism has meant that state governments can block important national actions, prevent progress, upset national plans, and protect powerful local interests. Historically, federalism has allowed the perpetuation of slavery, segregation, and racism, particularly in the South. Advocates argue, however, that the federal system has created a unique and beneficial separation of power between national and state governments. It allows for political flexibility and assures individual rights. They note that local control in some places has led to ending segregation and regulating harmful economic practices long before these ideas gained national support or became national policy.

One advantage is undeniable: federalism facilitates political participation and activity. Average citizens are often likely to become involved in organized politics if they can have impact. This is far more likely within a relatively small constituency. Local politics can draw in more activists and voters. Whether this was one of the Framers' intentions in instituting federalism is impossible to say because they were unclear in their writings about how the system was supposed to work. Instead, questions about the jurisdiction and powers of the national and state governments had to be settled by many years of various, often bitter, conflicts.

FEDERALISM'S HISTORICAL TRAIL

The goal of the Founders in regard to a federal system seems clear enough: dividing power between the national and state governments was another way of hindering runaway power and assuring personal liberty. A federal system was a new idea in the eighteenth century; thus the delegates to the Constitutional Convention groped to define it. Because it was assumed that the federal government would have only those powers given to it, the Constitution does not spell out state powers. According to the Tenth Amendment, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

Interpretation of the Tenth Amendment has been inconsistent over the centuries. Early Supreme Court rulings attempted to give states powers beyond the domain of the federal government, but those rulings were later contradicted.

The relationship between the national government and the state governments is explained clearly in some clauses of the Constitution. For instance, states may not make treaties with foreign nations, coin money, or issue paper currency. Other clauses are far vaguer. Knowing that the Constitution could not provide an exhaustive list of all things that the federal government could do, the Founders added the so-called elastic clause in Article 1, which allows Congress "To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers ..." This language meant different things to different Founders. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, viewed the national government as superior in political affairs with broadly defined and liberally constructed powers. Thomas Jefferson, while not a Founder, held the view that the powers of the national government were to be as narrowly construed and strictly limited as possible. Thus the Constitution alone is of limited use in defining relationships between the states and the national government.

The Supreme Court became the arbiter of what the Constitution means and the focal point of the federalism debate that has lasted throughout United States history. The evolution of federalism can be observed in several distinct cases and periods:

- The first important case to define federalism arose in 1819 when James McCulloch, the cashier of the Baltimore branch of the bank of the United States, refused to pay a tax levied on the bank by the state of Maryland. The Court's ruling on the case answered two questions that expanded the powers of Congress and confirmed the supremacy of the federal government. The first question was whether Congress even had the right to set up such a bank, since such a power is not explicit in the Constitution. Chief Justice John Marshall held that while the federal government possessed only those powers mentioned in the Constitution, the meaning of those powers required interpretation. Because the power to manage money is in the Constitution, Congress may reasonably charter a national bank as "necessary and proper" (referring to the elastic clause). The second question was whether a federal bank could be taxed by a state. Here Marshall urged the ideal that the government of the United States was not established by the states but by the people. The federal government was therefore supreme in those powers conferred upon it. The states could not challenge those powers and destroy them, as a tax might do. *McCulloch v. Maryland* was clearly a victory for those favoring the supremacy of the national government.
- On the heels of *McCulloch* came another case that furthered the supremacy of the national government. The Constitution gives Congress the power to regulate interstate and international commerce. An 1824 case, *Gibbons v. Ogden*, forced clarification of the difference between intrastate and interstate commerce. The Supreme Court defined commerce

very broadly in the case to include virtually any form of commercial activity, again strengthening federal power.

■ Leaders of southern states attempted to settle the ongoing power struggle through the doctrine of nullification. Nullification first arose in 1798 when Congress passed laws punishing newspaper editors critical of the federal government. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, in statements known as the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, suggested that the states had the right to declare null and void a federal law that a state considered unconstitutional. Later, southern leaders revived nullification in opposition to federal efforts to restrict slavery. This time the issue was settled by war. The northern victory in the Civil War settled the issue of nullification, establishing that states cannot declare acts of Congress unconstitutional.

■ After the Civil War, the interpretation of federalism focused on economic issues and the commerce clause of the Constitution. Out of this emerged the idea of dual federalism: the idea that the national government is to be supreme in its own sphere and states are to be supreme in theirs. In the economic realm, interstate commerce was regulated by the federal government, and intrastate commerce was regulated by the states. As more modern transportation and communication techniques developed, however, this distinction blurred. The federal government was increasingly allowed to regulate a greater amount of commerce.

■ In recent decades a certain measure of state sovereignty has been reestablished. This trend is known as devolution. A 1995 Supreme Court case, *United States v. Lopez*, held that Congress had exceeded its commerce clause power by prohibiting guns in schools. Other cases also reaffirmed the view that the commerce clause does not justify every federal action taken using its authority. The rise of deficits as a major issue and the deficit reduction programs led by Congresses with Republican majorities has also promoted devolution. Two of the federal government's biggest grant-in-aid programs, welfare and Medicaid, became block grant programs (grants given by the federal government to state and local authorities for general purposes) even though they had not been created to be administered by states. Currently, as a general rule, the most important activities of state and local governments involve public education, law enforcement and criminal justice, health and hospitals, roads and highways, public welfare, and control over the use of public land and water supplies. Many states also offer avenues to direct democracy through initiatives, which allow voters to place legislative measures directly on the ballot, and referendums, which enable voters to reject a measure adopted by the legislature. There is also some early evidence that the devolution of federal welfare programs has triggered second-order devolution, a flow of power and responsibility from the states to local governments, and third-order devolution, the increased role of nonprofit organizations and private groups in policy implementation.

FEDERALISM AND STATE MONIES

Most political scientists today argue that the concept of dual federalism is outdated, and cooperative federalism now prevails. Not only are powers and policy often shared between states and the national government; so too are costs and administration. Today the cornerstone of the federal and state government relationship is the provision of federal grants to the states. Grants-in-aid, or funds designated by Congress for distribution to state and local governments, are the main vehicle the national government uses to both help and influence the states and localities. There are three major forms of aid:

- **Categorical grants:** These grants are for specific purposes defined by federal law—to build an airport or a college dormitory, for example. Such grants often require that the state or locality put up money to match some part of the grant. They also come with strings attached, such as provisions for nondiscrimination.
- **Block grants:** Because many governors and mayors found categorical grants too narrow to adapt to their local needs, block grants were begun in the 1960s. They are given regularly to states and localities with few strings attached in order to support broad programs in areas such as community development and social needs.
- **Revenue sharing:** As another response to dissatisfaction with categorical grants, revenue sharing became a common practice. Revenue sharing is federal aid with no requirement as to matching funds and freedom to spend the money on almost any governmental purpose. It occurs when there is a budget surplus.

With billions of dollars of federal grants at stake, states and cities often compete with each other for a larger share. Most states and some cities have full-time staffs in Washington to vie for federal grant money. More and more grants, however, are based on distributional formulas, which provide grants automatically and objectively. These make the census, taken every ten years, monumentally important in establishing the amount of monies available to a state or locality. The federal government continues to hold great power over the actions of the states through grants-in-aid, and other ways of exerting control over the states have arisen in the form of mandates.

MANDATES

There are two kinds of federal controls on state government activities. Sometimes the federal government tells a state government what its activities and policies must be in order to receive grant money. These stipulations are called conditions of aid. Conditions of aid can be attached to grants-in-aid. When the federal government imposes its will outside the context of grants, these requirements are called mandates.

AP TIP

Because conditions of aid and mandates are the primary ways that the federal government pressures state governments to do what it wants, they are a significant aspect of federalism and are likely to appear on the AP exam.

Most mandates concern civil rights and environmental protection. States may not discriminate in their programs. States must comply with federal standards for clean air, pure drinking water, and sewage treatment. On the surface these appear to be quite reasonable, and they often are. Yet some mandates are written in vague language that creates administrative and financial problems. They give federal administrative agencies the power to decide for themselves what states and localities are supposed to do.

Medicaid is a good example of the problems that mandates can create for state governments. Medicaid provides health care for the poor and is administered by the states. It is widely supported by both political parties. Beginning in 1984, Congress moved to expand Medicaid, requiring states to cover certain children, pregnant women, and the elderly poor. By 1989, states could not keep up with the expanded coverage, and all but one governor called for a two-year moratorium on the mandated expansions of Medicaid.

At times Congress passes laws that create expenses for the states but provide no funds to meet the expenses. These are known as unfunded mandates. In 1990 Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. Accessible facilities (such as government offices, courtrooms, colleges, and universities) for individuals with disabilities were mandated. No money, however, was allocated to implement the new law. The Clean Air Act of 1970 is another law that created an unfunded mandate. National air quality standards were established, but states were required to pay for the administration and implementation of the policy. Gun buyers have also received unfunded mandates. They must bear the cost of background checks.

Federalism was built into the Constitution to prevent concentration of power and threats to liberty. It no doubt expands democracy in many ways. However, the multitude of state and local governments has also created problems, such as inequalities among states in several vital areas. The inevitability of some policies being controlled by the national government because of global, technological, economic, and social changes has given the states a reduced role in American government. The states continue, nevertheless, to play a central role in American political life.

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PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL BELIEFS

Government action and inaction do not always match public opinion. This apparent contradiction to the animating principle of democratic government occurs for several reasons. First, the Framers of the Constitution set up a government that does not always give the majority what they want. Measuring public opinion is also very difficult. Finally, active participants in government are more apt to achieve their goals than is the uninvolved general public.

KEY TERMS

conservative

liberal

moderate

political cleavages

political elite

political ideology

political socialization

public opinion

KEY CONCEPTS

- Defining public opinion in the United States is a difficult task.
- Political attitudes are derived from many sources, among them family, religion, gender, and education.
- Social class, race and ethnicity, and region create cleavages in public opinion.
- Political ideology is a coherent and consistent set of beliefs.
- Political elites have great influence on American public opinion.

For a full discussion of public opinion and political beliefs, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 5 / 9th ed., Chapter 5.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion, or the collection of attitudes and views held by the general public, is very difficult to assess. The public is often uninformed about what the government is doing. A study that asked Americans about a fictitious piece of legislation found that over a quarter of those interviewed actually expressed opinions on the issue, fully thinking the legislation was real! The public also is quite capable of changing its mind. Another study that asked the same questions to the same respondents six months apart found that many people had changed their views.

An even greater problem exists in the polling techniques themselves. How a pollster words a question can dramatically affect the answer received. For instance, rates of agreement or disagreement with a one-sided statement can differ when two balanced statements on the same issue are offered. The order in which possible responses are listed can also have an effect on the poll. Accurate polling requires a random sample; there is a correlation between large samples and greater accuracy, but expense can prohibit large samples.

Americans are not ignorant, fickle, or gullible. However, for most Americans government and politics are not as big a priority as jobs, family, or friends. Democracy is not dependent on people investing major amounts of time on understanding government. In fact, it perhaps works best when people are given simple, clear-cut choices. Furthermore, attitudes towards specific issues are probably less important than larger values such as liberty, equality, individualism, and civic duty.

SOURCES OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Our political choices are based on our individual orientation. For adults, this is generally a combination of several factors and the result of a complex process known as political socialization:

AP TIP

The importance of family as an agent of political socialization is a widely known fact and would likely be part of any AP question regarding sources of political attitudes.

- **Family** The most thoroughly researched aspect of opinion formation concerns party identification. The majority of young people identify with their parents' political party. This identification starts in elementary school. As people grow older, they naturally become independent of their parents in many ways, including their political outlook. Yet a strong correlation exists even between mature adults and their parents' political party preferences (probably around 60 percent).

- **Religion** Religious tradition often has an impact on political orientation, again most often through the family. For instance, studies have shown that Catholic families are somewhat more liberal on economic issues than white Protestant ones, while Jewish families are much more liberal on both economic and social issues than both Catholics or Protestants. Strong political movements associated with religious groups such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition show that religious differences can certainly impact a person's politics.
- **Gender** A gender gap exists in American politics. The extent of that gap and its tendencies vary according to different time periods. Men have become increasingly Republican since the mid-1960s, while the voting behavior of women has changed little (they are about 58 percent Democrat). The biggest reason for this gap appears to be attitudes about the size of government, gun control, spending programs aimed at the poor, and gay rights.
- **Education** College students are more liberal than the general population, especially at the most selective colleges. Moreover, the longer students stay in college the more liberal they tend to be. Because Americans today are far more likely to be college graduates than a generation ago, college plays an increasingly important role in political socialization, most likely because of the ideas and movements encountered there.

Politics, like other aspects of life, is a learned behavior. Americans learn to vote, pick a party (or remain independent), and evaluate political events in the world around them. All of these factors help create public opinion.

CLEAVAGES IN PUBLIC OPINION

The process of political socialization helps explain why political cleavages exist among Americans. These cleavages overlap and crosscut in a bewildering array. Today there are cleavages based on social class, race and ethnicity, and region:

- **Social class** Though social class can be an ambiguous distinction, socioeconomic differences no doubt play a role in politics. They play less of a role in the United States, however, than they do in Europe, and in both, class has had a declining impact. Nevertheless, unskilled workers are more likely than affluent white-collar workers to be Democrats and have liberal views on economic policy. Class is playing a diminishing role because of the increasing importance of noneconomic factors in our ideologies. Political ideologies are now more likely to be framed by issues such as race relations, abortion, school prayer, arms control, and environmentalism.
- **Race and ethnicity** African Americans are overwhelmingly Democrats, while whites are more likely to be Republicans, but this traditionally strong cleavage seems to be weakening a little. More young African Americans are identifying themselves as Republicans. Latinos generally identify

themselves as Democrats, but to a less significant degree than African Americans. Asian Americans are more identified with the Republican party than are whites. However, all of these generalizations conceal important differences within these ethnic groups. For example, Japanese Americans tend to be more conservative than Korean Americans, and Cuban Americans tend to be more conservative than Mexican Americans.

- **Region** The most significant regional cleavage in American politics has been between southern and northern voters. The South has traditionally been more accommodating to business enterprise, and the Northeast supports labor unions. The biggest difference among white voters, however, has been on the issue of race. Today the political views of white southerners are less distinct from those of whites living in other parts of the country. The South, West, and Midwest continue to be conservative, while the Northeast and West Coast tend to be more liberal.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

When we refer to people as liberals or conservatives, we assume they have a coherent and consistent set of beliefs—a political ideology. A strong ideology implies consistency over time in patterns of voting and stances on issues. With some inevitable fluctuations, studies show that moderates are the largest group among American voters, conservatives the second largest, and liberals the smallest.

The definitions of *liberal* and *conservative* have changed over time. Originally, a liberal was a person who favored personal and economic liberty, free from the controls and powers of the government. The term “conservative” was first applied to those who opposed the excesses of the French Revolution. Beginning with the time of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, liberal in the United States was used to describe someone who supported an active national government that would intervene in the economy and create social welfare programs. Conservative described those who opposed this activist national government. Conservatives supported a free market rather than a regulated one, states’ rights over national supremacy, and greater reliance on individual choice in economic affairs. The meanings of these terms continue to evolve. For instance, liberals were once known for favoring laws guaranteeing equality of opportunity among the races, yet now many liberals would favor affirmative action plans that include racial quotas. Conservatives once opposed American intervention abroad, yet now many would support an active role internationally. The table below gives some indication of the contemporary views of modern liberals and conservatives.

| Policy | Support Among Self-Declared Liberals | Support Among Self-Declared Conservatives |
|---|---|--|
| The government should provide more services even if that means raising taxes | 82 | 57 |
| The government should guarantee a job for every person who seeks it and a good standard of living | 82 | 27 |
| Government should run a plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone | 82 | 27 |
| The government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks | 85 | 38 |
| The U.S. should spend less on defense | 85 | 35 |
| Aid to Russia should be increased | 86 | 37 |
| Women should have an equal role in running business, industry and government | 90 | 81 |
| The United States should always permit abortion, a matter of personal choice | 72 | 36 |
| Homosexuals should be allowed to serve in U.S. Armed Forces | 70 | 45 |
| Oppose death penalty for persons convicted of murder | 85 | 35 |

Source: Robert Erikson and Kent Tedin, *American Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 69. Copyright © 1995 by Addison-Wesley Longman. Reprinted with permission.

In some respects, the categories of liberal and conservative seem too broad to be useful in understanding the ideologies of Americans. For instance, one can be liberal economically but not socially. Others might be quite conservative economically yet not agree with conservative positions on foreign policy. An ideology can be consistent and still contain liberal and conservative values. Overlapping values are so prevalent that liberal or conservative in their pure form describes relatively few people. Libertarians, for example, are conservative on economic matters and liberal on social ones.

POLITICAL ELITES AND PUBLIC OPINION

The political elite is likely to espouse a purely liberal or purely conservative ideology. The political elite is made up of those who have a disproportionate amount of power in policy-making. In the United States the political elites are activists. While an elite might be an officeholder, he or she might work for campaigns or newspapers, head interest groups or social movements, or have a wide audience in speaking out on public issues. The more a person is an activist, the more likely it is that he or she will show ideological consistency and take a position more extreme in its liberalism or conservatism. Congress, for instance, has a high degree of ideological consistency, as do delegates to national conventions.

Political elites and average voters see politics in different ways, making the power of the elites important for at least a couple of reasons. First, the political elite has more access to the media. This creates the power to raise and frame political issues. For instance, environmentalism at one time received little attention. Later it became an important concern of government. A major study found that elite views shape mass views by influencing both which issues capture the public's attention and how those issues are debated and decided.

Second, elites determine the range of acceptable and unacceptable policy options on an issue. For instance, civil rights leaders have said over and over again that racism and sexism are wrong. This repetition has created so much pressure that their opponents, even if not convinced that racism and sexism are wrong, must find ways to make their positions less obvious or less strident.

Elites do not have unlimited influence in American government. For instance, elites cannot *hide* unemployment from the general public. But by emphasizing—or not emphasizing—the problem and framing policy options, the elite can wield great power. The public needs to discriminate between public opinion and the opinions of the elites. Further, it is wrong to suppose that there is just one elite, unified in its interests and agendas. There are many elites, and hence many elite opinions. Whether there is enough difference among elites to consider the process for new and revised policy competitive is one of the major issues in the study of American government.

While a democracy must be sensitive to public opinion and the political beliefs of the citizens, discerning what the public thinks is a formidable task. Political scholars continue to consider the ever-changing views of the American political spectrum.

6

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The low rate of participation in national elections in comparison with European democracies is a source of great embarrassment to the United States. However, the problem might be based less on apathy and more on problems of voter registration. Americans participate in ways other than voting to a much greater extent than other democracies.

KEY TERMS

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| activist | poll tax |
| conventional participation | registered voters |
| Fifteenth Amendment | Twenty-sixth Amendment |
| grandfather clause | unconventional participation |
| literacy test | Voting Rights Act of 1965 |
| motor-voter law | white primary |
| Nineteenth Amendment | |

KEY CONCEPTS

- The American electorate has expanded through extended voting rights for minorities, women, and youth.
- Voter turnout in the United States is relatively low, and the relatively difficult process of voter registration probably accounts for it.
- There are many levels and forms of participation in the American political system.

For a full discussion of political participation, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 6 / 9th ed., Chapter 6.

THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE

The Framers of the Constitution, unable to reach a compromise on voter eligibility, left the matter mostly in the hands of the states. The Constitution does give Congress the right to alter state regulations regarding congressional elections. The only constitutional provision regarding a popular election was that "people of the several States" would choose members of the House of Representatives.

Control of the voting process has moved gradually from state to federal control. Early federal elections, under state management, varied greatly. Some states picked their representatives at large rather than by district. Others had districts but picked two per district. Still others had elections in odd-numbered years. Through law and constitutional amendment, Congress has required that all members of the House be elected by district and that all federal elections be held in even-numbered years on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November. The most important congressional changes over the years, however, have been those giving the vote to African Americans, women, and eighteen-year-olds.

The Fifteenth Amendment, adopted in 1870, stated that the right to vote would not be denied to any "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Though the language seems plain, several states passed laws to deny suffrage to African Americans—for example, literacy tests and poll taxes. To allow poor or illiterate whites to vote, a grandfather clause said that a person could vote while not meeting all the requirements if his ancestors voted before 1867. White primaries, in which African Americans were kept from voting in primary elections, emerged later. If none of these kept African Americans from the polls, they were intimidated, harassed, and threatened by government officials, law enforcement, and vigilantes.

Each of these restrictions has been challenged and overturned at the federal level. The grandfather clause was declared unconstitutional in 1915, and the white primary in 1944. Blatantly discriminatory literacy tests were also overturned. In 1965, the passage of the Voting Rights Act suspended all literacy tests and allowed the federal government to send registrars to states and counties where less than 50 percent of the voting-age public was registered or had voted in the previous presidential election. African American voting rose sharply, particularly in the South.

Suffrage for women was also slow in developing. Several states in the West had given women the vote by 1915. The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, provided most women with their first opportunity to vote after decades of struggle. In one stroke the size of the voting population virtually doubled. Initially, women voted more or less in the same manner as men, squelching fears that dramatic changes would result from the amendment.

The Twenty-sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, gave suffrage to eighteen-year-olds. The impact of this has also been less dramatic than expected. Voter turnout for people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five has been lower than for the population at large. Immediately after the ratification of the amendment, candidates courted the youth vote carefully, but it has since become less of a priority. This amendment was the latest in the evolution of national standards for voter eligibility, which is now almost completely in federal rather than state hands.

VOTER TURNOUT

With the additions to the electorate that the centuries have brought, one might expect that participation in elections would have risen sharply. During the elections of the late 1800s, at least 70 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls, the number at times getting as high as 80 percent. Voter turnout for the past several decades has remained about the same—between 50 and 60 percent of those eligible—and lags behind the large turnouts of the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The meaning of these figures is a source of debate. One view is that a popular decline in interest in elections and a weakening of the competitiveness of the two major parties have occurred. During the late nineteenth century, parties fought bitterly and had great influence over the electorate. They worked hard to get as many voters to the polls as possible, and caucuses and conventions provided other motivating opportunities to participate. Legal barriers to participation (such as complex registration procedures) were kept at a low level, and great general excitement surrounded elections. Interest waned in the early twentieth century as Republicans dominated national elections, and politics seemed to lose its relevance to the average voter.

Another view is that the perceived decline in turnout is misleading. Voting fraud during the late nineteenth century was more commonplace. The famous slogan "Vote early and often" was not meant as humor but as a fact. Parties controlled the counting of votes. As a result, the number of votes counted was often larger than the number cast, and the number cast was often larger than the number of individuals eligible to vote. As safeguards to the validity of voting developed in the early twentieth century, numbers of votes decreased. This may explain the decline in voter participation.

Strict voter-registration procedures were developed to fight the fraud of the late nineteenth century, but these have had unintended consequences. Voting declined because it was difficult for some groups of voters, such as those with little education, to register. Voter registration is one reason why Americans lag behind other democracies in voter turnout.

Most Americans believe low voter turnout reflects voter apathy. This is misleading. In this country, only two-thirds of the voting-age population is registered to vote. In most European nations, registration is done automatically, requiring no effort of the individual voter. Registering to vote in this country falls entirely on individual voters. They must learn how, when, and where to register; they must go to the time and trouble to process their registrations; they must register again if they relocate. The 1993 motor-voter law, which requires states to allow people to register to vote when applying for driver's licenses, was an attempt to simplify voter registration. There was an initial surge of new registrations, but results have been mixed since. (It has also been observed that states with election-day registration have significantly larger turnout rates without evidence of voter fraud.) The United States compares more favorably with other democracies when turnout of registered voters is the standard of comparison. The real problem, therefore, is the relative percentage of registered voters rather than apathy. Two careful studies found that almost all of the differences between voter turnout in the United States

and other democracies could be explained by party strength, automatic registration, and compulsory voting laws.

PARTICIPATION

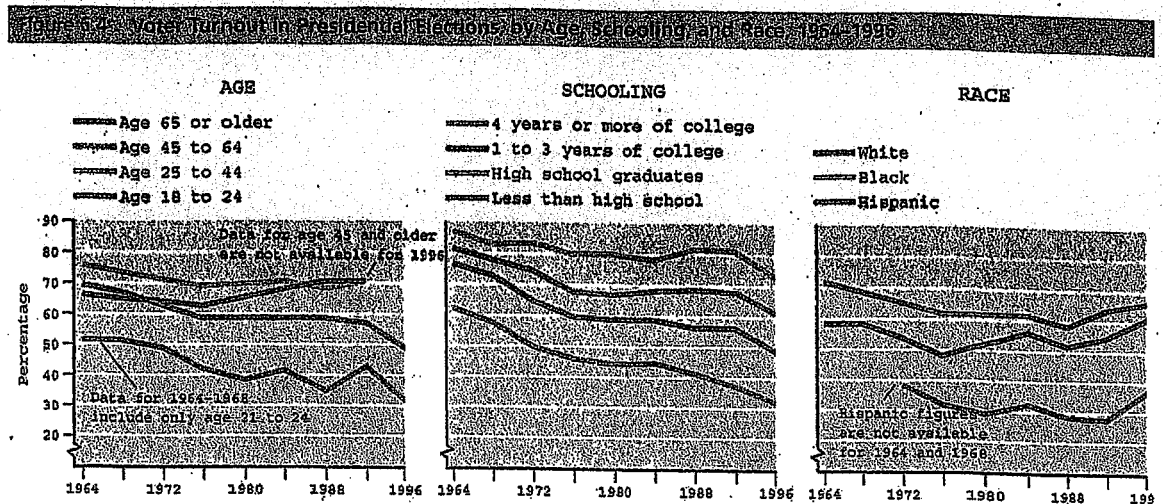
Voting is by far the most common form of political participation, but it is certainly not the only form. One model of participation assigns six levels of participation to Americans:

- **Inactive** About one-fifth of the population does not participate in any way. They do not vote, and probably do not even talk about politics very much. They would typically have little education and a low income and be young.
- **Voting specialists** These are people who vote but do not participate in any other substantial way. They tend to have little schooling and tend to be older than the average citizen.
- **Campaigners** These people not only vote but also enjoy getting involved in campaigns. They are generally better educated than the average citizen. They tend to engage in the conflicts, passions, and struggles of politics. They often have strong identification with a political party, and they have strong positions on issues.
- **Communalists** These have social backgrounds similar to campaigners' but are far more nonpartisan. They devote their time and energy to community activities and local problems, often contacting local officials about these problems.
- **Parochials** These stay away from elections but often contact local politicians about specific, often personal problems.
- **Activists** Constituting about one-ninth of the population, these are people who are often highly educated, have high incomes, and tend to be middle-aged. They participate in all forms of politics.

AP Tip

Profiles that suggest likelihood of voting and likelihood of not voting are generally found on the multiple-choice section of the AP exam.

Certain profiles are far more likely to produce voters and other forms of political participation. College graduates are more likely to participate than those with less education, and in fact the more education one has, the more likely he or she is to participate. Aside from the elderly who have difficulty getting to the polls, older people (especially those above the age of forty-five) tend to vote and participate more than younger people do. Regular churchgoers tend to participate more than nonchurchgoers if all other factors are equal. Men and women vote at about the same rate. Minorities vote less than whites. However, this is most likely a socioeconomic phenomenon, as minorities with the same level of education and income as whites tend to vote more than whites. Political elites and those with high levels of external efficacy are the group most likely to vote. The charts below illustrate the correlations between age, schooling, and race and voter turnout.



Sources: Updated from Gary R. Orren, "The Linkage of Policy to Participation," in *Presidential Selection*, ed. Alexander Heard and Michael Nelson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987). Data for 1996 are from *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1998*, 296, as supplied by Christopher Blunt.

Americans may be voting less, but there is evidence that they are participating more in campaigning, contacting government officials, and working on community issues. Other forms of participating seem to be growing as well. One helpful scheme groups participation into two camps:

- **Conventional** Widely accepted modes of influencing government such as voting, trying to persuade others, petitioning, giving money to campaigns and even running for office are considered conventional forms of participation. Aside from voting itself, these forms are all on the rise.
- **Unconventional** More dramatic activities such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence are considered unconventional. The media's frequent attention to protest can make it a successful kickoff of an effort to change a policy. Civil disobedience was very successful for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Although supported by very few people, violence has had a way of pressuring government to change its policies throughout the nation's history.

Although Americans vote at lower rates than do people abroad, the meaning of voting is different because of federalism. The United States has far more officials than any other country. One estimate of the number of elected offices in the United States is 521,000. It is likely that virtually every week of the year sees an election taking place somewhere in the country. A typical citizen can vote for a lengthy line of political offices: president, two senators, a member of the House of Representatives, a governor, a state senator, a state representative, a state attorney general, a state auditor, a state treasurer, and other state and local officials as well. Many Europeans, in contrast, vote for one member of a parliament once every four or five years.

Voter turnout rates in the United States, when compared with those in other democracies, should probably be considered less an embarrassment and more a matter of very different voting systems. While voter turnout is not a source of pride, it is the result of the nation's unique voting system and environment.

7

ELECTIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

American campaigns are unique. Running for national office requires an *individual* effort—in many other democracies, running for national office requires a party effort. The candidate decides to run, raises money, and appeals to voters on the basis of personality and definition of issues. Political parties are playing a decreased role in American elections.

KEY TERMS

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| caucus | party realignment |
| Federal Election Commission | political action |
| general election | committees |
| gerrymandering | position issues |
| incumbency | primary election |
| independent expenditures | soft money |
| malapportionment | spots |
| 1974 Federal Campaign Reform Law | valence issues |
| party coalitions | visuals |

KEY CONCEPTS

- Presidential and congressional campaigns have significant differences.
- Campaigns are long and expensive, relying increasingly on media to communicate.
- Campaign finance is a continual source of reform in campaigns.

- Elections can cause a realignment of coalitions that form political parties.

For a full discussion of elections and campaigns, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 8 / 9th ed., Chapter 8.

COMPARING PRESIDENTIAL AND CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS

Several striking differences exist between congressional and presidential elections. Presidential races are generally more competitive than congressional races, with the narrower margin of victory. While a president is limited to two terms of office, congressmen often serve for decades and hold a greater incumbency advantage. While congressmen can take credit in their home states or districts for grants, projects, and programs, constantly reminding constituents of these achievements via mail or visits home, presidents have significant national power but little local power. They must rely more and more on the media for communication. While a congressional candidate can detach his or her record from Washington and even campaign against the "insiders," presidents are held accountable for all that flows from the nation's capitol. With the reduced role of political parties in American politics, congressional candidates have stopped hanging on to presidential coattails and increasingly run campaigns independent of the president.

Running for president is a commitment of several years, of dizzying effort and energy, and of a staggering amount of money. When the media notices an individual and refers to him as having presidential "caliber," a candidacy has begun. Congressmen and senators running for president can stress their sponsorship of significant legislation. Governors, particularly from large and powerful states, often command attention quite naturally. Candidates set aside years to run for the presidency. Ronald Reagan, for instance, spent six years running a campaign. Huge sums of money must be raised. A large, paid staff must be established as well as hundreds of volunteers and advisors. Finally, a campaign strategy and campaign themes must be envisioned and coordinated, with incumbents defending their records and challengers attacking incumbents.

Running for Congress is a different sort of animal indeed. With no term limits in Congress, incumbents have an extraordinary advantage. Each state has two senators, who serve for six years, and House representatives (the number is determined by population), who serve for two years. House races can be affected by district boundaries, and these boundaries have traditionally been characterized by two problems:

- **Malapportionment** Districts have at times been created with very different populations, giving votes in less populated districts more clout.
- **Gerrymandering** District boundaries have been drawn to favor one party rather than another, which can lead to very odd-shaped districts. In addition, gerrymandering can be used

to make minorities the majority of a district, an issue that has received contradictory rulings from the Supreme Court.

National and state governments continue to wrestle with these problems.

With these as a backdrop, individuals start their quest for a seat in Congress by acquiring a state-mandated number of signatures. A primary election is often held to determine each major party's candidate, though parties have limited influence over who wins. In the general election, incumbents almost always win. Their independence from the party they represent creates a couple of important consequences. First, legislators are closely tuned in to local concerns and to those who elected them. Second, their lack of dependence on a party for election means that party leaders in Congress have little influence over them.

HOW CAMPAIGNS ARE CONDUCTED

Especially in presidential campaigns, strategies in primary and general elections are different. Primaries generally draw a party's activists, who are often more ideologically stringent than voters at large. Therefore, a Democratic candidate must appear more liberal than usual and a Republican more conservative. Without the help of party activists, candidates have little success mobilizing donors and volunteers. Political elites play a critical role during the presidential primaries.

The first test of the primary season for a presidential candidate is not a primary at all, but caucuses in the state of Iowa. Held in February of every presidential election year, caucuses are small, precinct-level meetings held simultaneously throughout the state to select party candidates. Candidates must do well in Iowa or face an immediate disadvantage in media attention and contributor interest. Winners tend to be the most liberal Democrats in the race and the most conservative Republicans, reflecting the characteristics of the party elites.

New Hampshire traditionally hosts the first primaries of a campaign year. The importance of the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primaries presents a problem: those electorates hardly represent the American electorate in general. Southern states, sensing that northern states such as Iowa and New Hampshire have too much influence on the choice of the nominee, created Super Tuesday by moving all of their primaries to the same day in early March. As the primary season continues, candidates face the dilemma of being conservative or liberal enough to get nominated but mainstream enough so to hold on to moderate voters in the general election.

After the primary season has established the candidates from the two major parties, the general election campaign begins in order to determine who will be the final victor and officeholder. Two kinds of campaign issues emerge. *Position issues* are those on which the candidates have opposing views. Voters are also divided on these. For instance, in the 2000 election, candidates Bush and Gore disagreed on Social Security, defense, and public school voucher systems. Other issues are of a nature that does not divide the general public. These,

called *valence issues*, focus on the extent to which a candidate emphasizes the issue, such as a strong economy or low crime rates.

Modern campaigns are increasingly waged through television, debates, and direct mail. Television time falls into two categories: paid advertising (known as “spots”) and news broadcasts (known as “visuals”). Spots can have an important effect in some elections. Little-known candidates can increase visibility through frequent use of spots, a strategy employed successfully by Jimmy Carter in 1976. Spots tend to work better in primary elections than in general elections, as voters have far greater information from various sources available to them in general elections. Visuals are vital to any campaign because they cost little. Filmed by a news agency, a visual may have greater credibility for viewers than a spot does. Campaign staffs know that visuals depend on cameras and newsmen being around, so they work hard to have their candidate at a place and time that can be easily filmed and will be of interest to viewers. Ironically, visuals may be less informative than spots because visuals often display the “horse-race” aspect of a campaign while spots describe more substantial issues.

With the growing popularity of television over the past fifty years, debates have become an integral part of many campaigns. Even primaries often include televised debates. While some campaigns have profited from debates (notably John F. Kennedy’s in 1960 and Ronald Reagan’s in 1980), most debates do not profoundly affect campaigns. If anyone benefits, it is generally the challenger. In a debate, a candidate risks committing the dreaded slip of the tongue, which the media and opponents will then attempt to exploit. For this reason, candidates often resort to stock speeches with frequently repeated campaign themes and proven favorites among supporters.

The computer and the Internet are increasingly important factors in campaigns. The computer makes sophisticated direct-mail campaigning possible and enables candidates to address targeted voters with specific views. Howard Dean’s extensive use of the Internet in establishing himself as a viable Democratic candidate in the 2004 Democratic primaries may well have a profound effect on the way money is raised in future elections.

MONEY AND CAMPAIGNING

AP Tip

Campaign finance continues to be a hotly contested political issue. Knowledge of the 1974 law is critical to understanding recent reforms and will likely be part of the AP exam.

Campaigns acquire money from a variety of public and private sources. During the presidential primaries, candidates receive federal matching funds for all individuals’ donations of \$250 or less, creating incentives to raise money from small donors. During the general presidential election, all campaign money comes from the government unless the candidate decides not to accept federal money. Congressional elections are primarily funded by private donations, including those of individuals, political action committees (PACs), and

political parties. Most individual donors give less than \$200, with a maximum of \$2,000. PACs are limited to contributions of \$5,000, but most give significantly less than that. Incumbent candidates typically receive one-third of their campaign funds from PACs and rarely have to spend their own money on a campaign. Challengers often supply a greater percentage of their own campaign funds than incumbents do.

Coupled with other illegal donations, the Watergate scandal of the 1970s convinced Congress to pass the 1974 Federal Campaign Reform Law and, as part of it, create the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The law included several provisions:

- The limit on individual donations is \$1,000 per candidate per election.
- The previous ban on corporate and union donations was reaffirmed, but PACs can be created to raise money instead.
- PACs have to consist of at least fifty volunteer members, give to at least five federal candidates, and limit their donations to \$5,000 per election per candidate and \$15,000 per year to any political party.
- Primary and general elections count separately for donations.
- Public funding for presidential campaigns includes matching funds for presidential primary candidates who meet funding stipulations; full funding for presidential general campaigns for major party candidates; and partial funding for minor party candidates that had at least 5 percent of the vote in the previous election.

Campaign spending increased dramatically as a result of the law. Loopholes in the law include independent expenditures, allowing PACs to spend as much as they want on advertising as long as it is not coordinated with a specific campaign; and soft money, by which unlimited funds can be donated to a political party as long as a candidate is not named. Soft money can then be passed on to candidates from the party.

Independent expenditures and soft money led to campaign finance reform in 2002. Reforms included a ban on soft money given to national parties, an increase in the limit of an individual donation (up to \$2,000), and a restriction on advertisements referring to a candidate by name thirty days before a primary and sixty days before a general election. The full impact of these reforms remains to be seen.

Party affiliation, the state of the economy, and the character of the candidate probably influence voting more than money does. Congressional races are no doubt more affected by money. Challengers must spend a significant amount of money to be recognized, and big-spending incumbents also tend to do better. Even so, party, incumbency, and issues play a large role in congressional races. It is difficult for a challenger to overcome not only an incumbent's money but also his credit claiming, mailing privileges, and free publicity from sponsoring legislation.

ELECTIONS AND PARTY ALIGNMENTS

Several factors determine who wins elections. Party identification still matters, but Democrats are more likely to vote for a Republican than vice versa. Republicans also tend to get more of the independent vote. Issues, in particular that of the economy, help determine elections. A poor economy is difficult for an incumbent president to overcome; a strong economy generally means reelection. Campaigns do make a difference in an election, however, mainly by reawakening voters' loyalties and allowing voters to see the character and core values of a candidate. Retrospective voters, those who look at how things have gone in the recent past, often decide elections. They vote for the party in the White House if they like what has happened and vote against that party if they do not.

If a candidate is going to win, he or she must build a winning coalition, or combination of several distinct groups. Traditionally the Democratic coalition has been African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, Catholics, southerners, and union members. Republicans have long had a coalition of business and professional people as well as many farmers. Coalitions historically have been reorganized under certain conditions. Realignment describes this reorganization of a party's following. Realignment occurs when a new issue arises that cuts across existing party divisions—for example, slavery or a weak economy. Some political scientists feel that the nation is due for another realignment and that the 1980s might have started one. Yet neither the 1984 nor the 1988 election truly signaled a realigning shift among the voters. Perhaps parties are actually decaying far more than they are realigning as twenty-first-century politics begins to emerge—a process called dealignment by some.

8

POLITICAL PARTIES

American political parties are among the oldest in the world. At one time parties could mobilize voters in a way that gave local machines enormous power. Today, parties are relatively weak because the laws and rules under which they operate have taken away much of their power. In addition, many Americans have lost their sense of commitment to any particular party.

KEY TERMS

divided government
economic-protest party
factional party
Federalists
ideological party
Jacksonian Democrats
minor party
nominating convention
one-issue party
plurality system
political machines

political party
realignment
Republicans
solidarity party
split ticket
sponsored party
superdelegates
third party
two-party system
Whigs
winner-take-all system

KEY CONCEPTS

- Political parties, once strong in the United States, are now increasingly weak.
- Political parties function differently at the national, state, and local levels.

- The United States has a strong two-party system that makes it difficult for minor parties to succeed.
- Political party delegates often differ ideologically from average voters.

For a full discussion of political parties, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 7 / 9th ed., Chapter 7.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

A political party is a group that seeks to elect candidates to public office by giving those candidates an identification that is recognizable to the electorate. While European parties generally command great loyalty, parties in this country have become relatively weak.

Parties change over time. Critical periods produce sharp, lasting realignments of the parties. Such a shift might occur at the time of an election or just after. Good examples include the election of 1860, which made the Republicans a major party, and the election of 1932, which began the era of the New Deal. Electoral realignments seem to occur when a new issue of great importance cuts across existing party lines and replaces old issues that previously had held a party together. New coalitions combine to form a different composition within a party.

Although the Founders disliked parties and guarded against them, parties quickly emerged in the young republic. Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had a number of policy disagreements even while serving in George Washington's administration. Their followers developed into loose caucuses that became the first political parties. Jefferson's followers were labeled the Republicans—not the precursors of today's Republican party—and Hamilton's followers were called the Federalists. Though the Republicans had early success in national elections that led to the demise of the Federalists, the parties were both relatively weak and little more than heterogeneous coalitions.

Andrew Jackson and his followers changed the party system by making it a fixture of the masses. By 1832, presidential electors were selected by popular vote in most states, giving the common man greater impact. Jackson's party, the Democrats—the original members of today's Democratic party—built from the bottom up. Presidential caucuses, at which party leaders nominated presidential candidates, were replaced by a national party convention. Another party, the Whigs, emerged to oppose the Jacksonian Democrats.

The two parties that came out of the Jacksonian period were the first truly national parties, but they were unable to survive the sectionalism created over the issue of slavery. The modern Republican party began as a third party and became a major party as a result of the Civil War. Republican dominance of the White House, and to a lesser extent of Congress, for the following seventy-five years was the result of two forces. Supporters of the Union during the Civil War became Republicans for several generations, while former Confederates consolidated as Democrats. Republicans later benefited from the presidential candidacy of Democrat William Jennings Bryan in 1896. Bryan's populist stances made him unpopular with Democrats

in the Northeast, furthering the North-South split of the parties. Because of this sectionalism, most states came to be dominated by one party, with factions developing within each party.

Reform of the party system began with the progressives of the early 1900s and was amplified during the New Deal. Progressives pushed measures that were designed to curtail the power and influence of both local and national party activities. Primary elections were favored over nominating conventions. Nonpartisan elections at the local and sometimes state levels became commonplace. Party alliances with business were halted. Strict voter registration requirements became the norm, as did civil service reform to eliminate patronage. Initiative and referendum measures were started in many states to allow citizens to vote directly on proposed legislation. These reforms reduced the worst kinds of corruption. At the same time, they weakened the parties by allowing officeholders to be less accountable to them and by hindering coordination of parties across the branches of government.

In recent decades the Democrats and Republicans have seemed to be decaying and dealigning, not realigning as in earlier eras. The proportion of those identifying with a party declined between 1960 and 1980 while the proportion of those voting a split ticket (voting for one party for certain offices and another party for other offices) increased. Ticket splitting creates divided government, in which different parties control the White House and Congress. Divided government is strong evidence of the overall weakening of the parties.

AP Tip

The number of voters who practice ticket splitting continues to increase. Divided government is a direct result of ticket splitting. Both ticket splitting and divided government are likely to appear on the AP exam.

PARTIES AT THE NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL LEVELS

At the national level, the two major parties appear to be quite similar. Both hold national conventions every four years to nominate the presidential candidates. Both have a national committee composed of delegates from the states, who manage affairs between conventions. Congressional campaign committees support congressional candidates with party money, and a national chair manages daily work.

The party structures of the Democrats and Republicans took different paths in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Republicans became a well-financed, highly staffed organization devoted to funding and electing Republican candidates, especially to Congress. Democrats changed their rules for nominating presidential candidates, altering the distribution of power in the party. Consequently the Republicans became an efficient bureaucracy while the Democrats became quite factionalized. Republicans were also the first to take advantage of computerized mailings, building a huge file of names of people who had given or might give money to the party. Eventually

the Democrats adopted the same techniques, and both parties began to focus on sending money to state parties, sidestepping federal spending restrictions, a loophole referred to as soft money.

The major event of the national parties is the national convention. The national committee sets the time and place for each convention, held every presidential election year. Different formulas are used to allocate delegates at the conventions. Democrats in recent decades have tended to shift delegates away from the South to the North and the West. Republicans have shifted delegates away from the East and towards the South and the Southwest. Ideologically this has caused the Democrats to move more to the left and the Republicans more to the right.

In addition, the Democrats have established different rules for their convention. In the 1970s, the McGovern-Fraser Commission was charged with making representation at conventions more diverse and democratic. As a result, the power of local party leaders was weakened and the proportion of women, African Americans, youth, and Native Americans attending the convention was increased. Later reforms reestablished some of the influence of elected officials by reserving 14 percent of the delegates for party leaders and elected officials, who would not have to commit themselves in advance to a presidential candidate. These became known as superdelegates.

Democrats have also changed the distribution of delegates drawn from state primaries and caucuses. A state's delegates are divided among candidates who receive at least 15 percent of the vote, rather than the traditional winner-reward system that gave primary and caucus winners extra delegates.

The conventions of both parties have changed fundamentally, and probably permanently. Primary elections and grassroots caucuses now choose delegates once selected by party leaders. As a result the national party conventions are no longer places where party leaders meet to bargain over the selection of their presidential candidates. They are instead places where delegates come together to ratify choices already made by party activists and primary voters.

National party structures have changed, but grassroots organizations have withered. As a result, state party systems have sought to redefine their role. Every state has a Democratic party and a Republican party, each of which typically consists of a state central committee, county committees, and sometimes various local committees. Distribution of power differs from state to state.

At one time, state and local parties held power through political machines. These recruited members through incentives such as money, jobs, and political favors. Party leaders held great control and power, and abuses were commonplace. Gradually the corruption of machines was controlled through voter registration, civil service, and the Hatch Act, which made it illegal for federal civil service employees to take an active part in a political campaign while on the job. Changes in the profiles of voters also doomed the machines. Voters grew in education, income, and sophistication, and they came to depend less on the advice, help, and leadership of local party officials.

Today state and local parties deal with several modern trends that seem to be taking parties in the opposite direction from the old political machines. Many voters are drawn to ideological groups for whom principle is more important than winning an election. These

tend to be single-issue activists within one of the two parties. Other modern voters are motivated by the "game" of politics. Loyal voters, they nonetheless are often difficult to mobilize. Sometimes a strong party organization can be created from a preexisting organization. These are known as sponsored parties. For example, the local Democratic party in Detroit was developed out of the United Auto Workers union. The drawbacks of solidary groups (political party organizations based on a friendship network) and sponsored parties have led many candidates to seek personal followings at state and local levels. These require an appealing personality, an extensive network, name recognition, and money. The Kennedys in Massachusetts, the Talmadges in Georgia, the Longs in Louisiana, and the Byrds in Virginia, all have developed strong personal followings in their states. Dealing with these trends is difficult for local parties as they struggle to define their role in the twenty-first century.

THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM AND MINOR PARTIES

The United States has a two-party system that dates back to the original parties—the Republicans and the Federalists. Several unique features are responsible for this system.

Elections at every level are based on the plurality, winner-take-all method. A plurality system means that the winner is the person who gets the most votes, even if he or she does not get a majority of all votes cast. Some countries require majorities through runoff elections or give legislative seats based on proportional representation. Either of these encourages a multiparty system. The most dramatic example of the winner-take-all principle is the electoral college. In all but two states, Nebraska and Maine, the presidential candidate who wins the most popular votes in a state wins all of that state's electoral votes. Minor parties cannot compete under this system because they are unable to get enough votes to defeat a major party candidate.

Another explanation for the endurance of the two-party system is found in the opinions of the voters. There has always been a rough parity between the two parties, and most voters have been satisfied to let their individual beliefs fall into one of the two broad coalitions that the parties represent. Bitter dissent within parties has been quite common, but only sparingly has such dissent driven voters to a third party.

Though rarely successful at getting candidates elected, minor parties, or third parties, have often come on the American political scene. These tend to fall into one of four categories:

- **Ideological parties** These tend to be at the edges of the political spectrum. Some examples are the Socialist party, the Communist party, the Green party, and the Libertarian party.
- **One-issue parties** Minor parties often address a single issue. Examples include the Prohibition party (to ban alcohol) and the Women's party (to obtain women's voting rights).
- **Economic protest parties** These parties, often regional, protest against depressed economic conditions. Examples include the Populist party, the Reform party (under Ross Perot), and the Greenback party.

- **Factional parties** Splits in the major parties can create a factional party, usually over the identity and philosophy of the major party's presidential candidate. Examples include the "Bull Moose" Progressive party and the States' Rights party.

Through concessions, minor parties often have impact in getting the major parties to address their issues. The minor parties with probably the greatest influence on policy are factional parties. The threat of a factional split is significant to either party, and the major parties often go to great lengths to avoid such a split.

DELEGATES AND VOTERS

When a party nominates a presidential candidate, it must seek an appealing, moderate candidate but must also keep dissidents in the party satisfied by making compromises. Today's delegates are often issue-oriented activists. Democratic delegates are more liberal as a whole than the party's voters; Republican delegates, more conservative. Today's delegates are often issue-oriented activists. While they help create the broad coalition necessary to elect a president, they sometimes can nominate a candidate unacceptable to the party's rank-and-file voters.

This disparity between delegates and voters accounts to some extent for the low number of Democratic presidential candidates elected since 1968, with several liberal candidates lacking appeal to moderate voters. The 1964 candidacy of Barry Goldwater, a staunch conservative, illustrates the same phenomenon at work within the Republican party. On the campaign trail, candidates must limit themselves to issues that most of the party agrees on because of the wide range of beliefs within a party. However, by doing this, the candidate can risk losing the vote of the more ideologically extreme voters.

While the parties have far less impact than they did a century ago, they continue to play a significant role in the voting habits and political activities of Americans.

9

INTEREST GROUPS

The United States is a country of diverse interests. The American constitutional system provides for many points where citizens and groups can access the government, including the president, the courts, and Congress. In addition, political parties have become relatively weak. These factors have made the United States ripe for the emergence of thousands of interest groups.

KEY TERMS

direct mail

environmental movement

feminist movement

grassroots lobbying

institutional interests

interest groups

lobbyist

membership interests

political action committees

social movement

unions

KEY CONCEPTS

- The growth of interest groups in recent decades is a significant change in American politics.
- Several types of interest groups exist in American politics.
- Interest groups engage in many different types of activities.

For a full discussion of interest groups, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 9 / 9th ed., Chapter 9.

THE GROWTH OF INTEREST GROUPS

Interest groups have existed since the country was founded—Independence-era groups such as the Sons of Liberty are early

examples of interest groups. Federalists and Anti-federalists struggling over the ratification of the Constitution could be termed interest groups. The religious associations and antislavery movements of the 1830s and 1840s were also initial forms. By the 1860s, trade unions, farmers' groups, and fraternal organizations were developing. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought business associations and charitable organizations. More modern organizations came in the 1960s in the form of environmental, consumer, and political reform organizations.

Several factors help explain the rise of interest groups:

- **Broad economic development** As the economy evolves, new interests are created and old interests need to be redefined. Farmers have had to change over the centuries from subsistence to commercial farming while adapting to unstable markets. The industrial revolution brought mass production that in turn created the need for labor unions. Stable economic times are less likely to produce interest groups.
- **Government policy** Public policy has often fostered new interest groups. Wars create veterans who demand pensions and benefits and are willing to organize in order to obtain them. New Deal policy nurtured the rise of strong labor unions. Because state governments determine who is qualified to become a doctor or a lawyer, professional associations have emerged.
- **Emergence of strong leaders** Magnetic leaders who are willing to make personal sacrifices draw an organized following that often develops into an interest group. These leaders are frequently young and energetic. The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s are good examples of interest groups that developed because of strong leaders.
- **The expanding role of government** As the scope of government activities continues to swell, more organized groups are monitoring those activities. Interest group proliferation corresponds with the expansion of government activities over the past half century.

KINDS OF INTEREST GROUPS

Broadly defined, an interest group is any organization that seeks to influence public policy. Though they may target any level of government, they rarely run a candidate for office. Most groups fall into one of two categories: institutional interests and membership interests. Institutional interests are individuals or organizations that represent other organizations. Large corporations have representatives in the capital who work full time for the firm's interests. General Motors is a good example. Representatives of the car giant carefully watch for possible legislation affecting the industry and work hard to get the federal government to adopt favorable laws or halt potentially harmful ones. Institutional interests do not always represent business and corporate concerns. They also lobby for public interests such as state governments, foundations, and universities. The other category of interest groups is membership interests. These

groups depend on Americans joining their cause through membership dues and other donations. Such groups span several categories, including social, business, professional, veterans, charitable, and religious.

General reasons individuals give for joining an interest group are political efficacy and civic duty, but there are often specific differences in what individuals hope to gain from their membership. Some people join to feel connected to their community. Interest groups such as the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, Rotary, and the American Legion have all had success by fostering strong local organizations. Other people join an interest group for the material incentives that accompany membership. Farm organizations offer discounted farm supplies to their members only. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) offers incentives from low-cost life insurance and discounted prescription drugs to tax advice and group travel plans. Still others join a group because they believe in the goal or purpose of the organization. Members of such groups—for example, the National Resources Defense Council or the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation—are attracted to the group's ideology or its commitment to benefit society at large. Groups in this category often use lawsuits and publicity to further their agenda.

Social movements—that is, widely shared demands for change in aspects of the social or political order—often give rise to interest groups. The environmental movement has produced several such groups. The Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the National Wildlife Federation are earlier environmental groups, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the Environmental Defense Fund and Environmental Action came in the 1960s and 1970s. The environmental movement illustrates some important points about groups derived from social movements. First, one social movement may spawn several organizations. Second, the more extreme organizations within a movement will be smaller and more activist than the moderate organizations.

One broad social movement can draw members to a variety of interest groups within that movement. Some of these are more moderate than others, and some concentrate on specific aspects of the movement. The feminist movement has large, moderate solidarity groups such as the League of Women Voters. The movement also has groups drawn by material incentives such as the National Federation of Republican Women, which is openly supportive of the Republican party. Yet perhaps the best-known feminist group, the National Organization of Women (NOW), exists for ideological incentives.

Organized labor, in the form of unions, once was a social movement, but now few unions exist for the purpose of altering society. Unions have lost a lot of their clout over the decades. Economic changes have not helped in member recruitment, and the public's approval of unions has declined. Yet the benefits of collective bargaining sustain many unions and preserve them as significant national interest groups.

INTEREST GROUPS IN ACTION

AP Tip

Because interest groups are growing in influence and political parties are weakening, the activities of interest groups are likely to be part of several questions on the AP exam.

Interest groups need money to operate effectively. Those groups that are membership-based rely heavily on membership dues. Foundation grants are responsible for financing many groups, particularly public-interest lobbies. Federal grants are provided to interest groups that are engaged in a project of public interest. Direct mail is used increasingly by most interest groups to raise money. Through the use of computers, a specialized audience can be selected for mailings. Direct mailings are expensive, so sophisticated techniques have been developed to attract the public's attention, such as teasers on the envelope, famous-name endorsements, and personalization of the letter.

Interest groups engage in a wide range of activities that include the following:

- **Supplying credible information** Legislators are policy generalists who must vote on a staggering number of complicated issues. Providing information is perhaps the most important tactic available to interest groups. A lobbyist can build a strong relationship and increase access as well as influence by providing detailed and current information. The value of the information is often greatest on a narrow or technical issue that legislators are unable to gather for themselves. Officials also look to lobbyists for an assessment of the values at stake and how those values fit with their own political beliefs.
- **Raising public support** Traditionally interest groups have favored face-to-face contact between lobbyist and politician. A recent trend is grassroots mobilization. Grassroots lobbying is designed to generate public pressure directly on government officials. This strategy works well when an issue affects a large number of people. Radio, fax machines, and the Internet can now get news out almost immediately. Satellite television can link voters in various locations across the country. Toll-free phone numbers and e-mail enable voters to contact the offices of members of Congress without a charge (these are particularly important now that all mail goes through decontamination for possible chemical tampering and may take weeks to reach a member of Congress). These modern communications have allowed interest groups to bring far more attention to their issues and exert far more direct pressure on legislators. These technologies have also allowed the creation of so-called Astroturf lobbying—a series of phone calls from widely dispersed places that look like grassroots

reactions but are really carefully organized lobbying efforts by professionals.

- ❑ **Creating PACs and making campaign contributions** Although giving money is perhaps the least effective way to influence politicians, it is a very common activity among interest groups. The campaign finance reform law of 1973 had two important provisions. It restricted the amounts that could legally be given to candidates, and it made it legal for corporations and unions to create political action committees (PACs)—organizations that finance candidates and may lobby as well—for the purpose of campaign contributions. These contributions are made regularly, but they probably do not lead to vote buying. More money is now available on all sides of the issues. Members of Congress commonly take the money but still decide for themselves how to vote. Incumbents get most of the PAC money, and PACs tend to give money to candidates who already support their position. Labor PACs give almost exclusively to Democrats. Business PACs split their money between Democrats and Republicans. If PAC money influences politics at all, it is most likely in the realm of providing access to members of Congress or influencing committee actions.
- ❑ **Employing former government officials** Hundreds of people have left government jobs to work as lobbyists. This is termed the “revolving door.” Many fear that this potentially leads to corruption. If the promise of a future job influences an official to vote or act in a certain way, then a real conflict of interest exists. Studies have been inconclusive in finding if there is indeed a pattern of impropriety in government officials taking jobs as lobbyists.
- ❑ **Seizing opportunities through protest and disruption** Although protest, picketing, and violence have always been a part of American politics, they have generally been considered more acceptable since the 1960s. Interest groups on both ends of the political spectrum have used public displays and disruption to publicize their causes. On the left, feminists, antinuclear power groups, and the American Indian Movement represent interest groups who have engaged in disruptive practices. On the right, the neo-Nazis, parents opposed to forced busing, and right-to-life groups have used the same techniques. The goals of these groups are generally to disrupt an institution and force negotiations, to enlist the support of others, or to create martyrs to draw public concern and support.
- ❑ **Leading litigation** Interest groups have financed and provided legal representation in many landmark Supreme Court cases, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Interest group activity is a form of political speech and is protected by the First Amendment. Nevertheless, there have been attempts to control interest groups. One, a 1946 law, required groups and individuals seeking to influence legislators to register with Congress and file quarterly financial reports. This accomplished little because

grassroots activity was not restricted and no staff was provided to enforce the law through review of the registrations or reports. A 1995 act provided a broader definition of lobbying and tightened reporting requirements. This more recent act also authorized the Justice Department to undertake investigations into possible violations.

With the trend towards weaker political parties and increased diversity of public interest, interest groups will likely provide an expanded role in linking the American voter and the government.

10

MASS MEDIA

The media in the United States enjoy a degree of freedom greater than that in virtually any other nation. Nowadays, government officials have a love-hate relationship with the media. Politicians need the media to advance their careers, but they fear the media's power to criticize, expose, and destroy.

KEY TERMS

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| adversarial press | national media |
| attack journalism | party press |
| C-SPAN | press secretary |
| feature stories | popular press |
| Federal Communications Commission | routine stories |
| insider stories | sensationalism |
| Internet | sound bite |
| investigative journalism | trial balloon |
| muckrakers | yellow journalism |

KEY CONCEPTS

- The media have evolved as more sophisticated forms of communication have become available, changing the role of media in American politics.
- Government has some control over the media, but the recent trend of deregulation is changing what media are allowed to do.
- The media are the major source of information about the government for the American public, and they have a major impact on how politics are conducted.

- The media are often accused of bias in their reporting of government officials and activities.

For a full discussion of mass media, see *American Government*, 8th ed., Chapter 10 / 9th ed., Chapter 10.

THE BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE OF THE MEDIA

Changes in the organization and technology of the media have had great impact on American politics. In general, four periods of journalistic history can be identified:

- **The party press** In the early decades of the new nation, parties created, subsidized, and controlled various newspapers that had relatively small circulation and high subscription rates. These partisan newspapers were typically circulated only among the political and business elites.
- **The popular press** High-speed presses later made self-supporting, mass readership, daily newspapers possible. Telegraphs gave local papers greater access to the news. By 1848, the Associated Press, a wire service, fostered objective reporting and systematic distribution of information. The urbanization of the late nineteenth century provided concentrated populations to support newspapers and their advertisers. These papers were typically partisan, often engaging in yellow journalism (or sensationalism) to increase subscriptions. Their success made a press independent of the government feasible, and they demonstrated that criticizing government policies could create profits.
- **Magazines of opinion** As yellow journalism increased, the middle class sought alternative news and supported progressive periodicals. Individual writers from publications such as *McClure's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* gained a national following initially through investigative journalism. Later, the term "muckraker" would be applied to journalists seeking to expose conduct contrary to the public interest. The readership of these national magazines was indicative of the growing level of education and sophistication among Americans.
- **Broadcast journalism** With the arrival of radio in the 1920s and television in the late 1940s, politicians could address voters directly. The rise of entertainment choices through these two media also meant that people could easily ignore politicians. Fewer politicians could be covered by radio and television than by newspapers. Presidents were routinely covered, but other officials had to be controversial or have a national reputation to receive attention. Nightly news broadcasts started the sound bite, a short video clip of an official boiling down an entire speech into a few catchy phrases. The brevity of sound bites created problems for officials and candidates in clearly conveying their messages. The development of cable and satellite television has brought about narrowcasting—the targeting of a segmented audience by radio and TV stations.

- **The Internet** The recent growth of the Internet may create an entirely new era in media and politics. Methods of campaign finance and facilitation between voters and political activists are two areas already being revolutionized by the Internet.

Competition between two—and sometimes more—major newspapers once characterized the press in most major cities. Now fewer than 4 percent of major American cities have more than one. Radio and television, intensely competitive, are becoming more so. Much of the nation's press has been locally owned and managed, orienting it to local markets, though this is increasingly less common. Concentration of media ownership is one of the major issues in the evolution of the media.

A national media has evolved, one which draws great attention from Washington. The national press includes the following:

- the wire services (AP, UPI)
- national magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*
- televised evening news broadcasts (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS)
- cable News Network
- Fox News Network
- newspapers with national readerships such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*

The national press is significant not only for the attention it gets from politicians but also because national reporters and editors are better paid, tend to come from prestigious universities, have a more liberal outlook (with the exception of Fox News, known for its appeal to conservatives and Republicans), and often do investigative or interpretive stories. The national press traditionally takes on the following roles:

AP Tip

The traditional roles of gatekeeper, scorekeeper, and watchdog are often the subject of questions on the AP exam.

- **Gatekeeper** The national press influences what subjects become national political issues and for how long.
- **Scorekeeper** The national press tracks political reputations and candidacies. It covers elections as though they are horse races rather than choices among policy alternatives. Media momentum during the presidential primary season is crucial.
- **Watchdog** The national press investigates personalities and exposes scandals.

GOVERNMENT INFLUENCE ON THE MEDIA

Newspapers are almost entirely free from government regulation. Upon publication, newspapers can be sued only for libel, obscenity, or incitement to an illegal act. Each of these conditions has been narrowly defined by the courts to enhance the freedom of the press. The Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly that there can be no prior restraint on published materials.

Sometimes the government is eager to coerce reporters to reveal their sources. Reporters are steadfast in maintaining the confidentiality of sources, sometimes to the point of willingness to accept jail time. The Supreme Court allows the government to compel reporters to divulge information in court if it bears on a crime.

Radio and television are licensed and regulated. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issues licenses that must be renewed periodically. In addition, stations must serve "community needs." Recently, strong movements have arisen to deregulate radio and TV, which could prove to revolutionize the media in the United States. Radio has experienced the most deregulation. The 1996 Telecommunications Act allowed one company to own as many as eight radio stations in large markets (five in smaller ones) and as many as it wished nationally. This trend has had two results: first, a few large companies now own most of the big-market radio stations; second, the looser editorial restrictions that accompanied deregulation mean that a greater variety of opinions and shows can be found on radio, resulting in more radio talk shows.

Several rules still exist for radio and television in regard to campaigns:

- Equal access must be provided for all candidates.
- Rates must be no higher than the cheapest commercial rate.
- Debates at one time had to include all candidates, but recent debates have been sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates and can be among only the major candidates. Fairness regarding debates remains a hotly contested topic, particularly inflaming third-party candidates and negotiators for candidates from the two major parties.

EFFECTS OF THE MEDIA ON POLITICS

Although studies of the impact of the media on elections have been inconclusive, there is no doubt that the media have a major effect on how politics is conducted, how candidates are perceived, and how policy is formulated. National conventions have been changed to fit the needs of television broadcasts. Some candidates have won their party's nomination for senator or governor with media advertising campaigns that bypass parties. Interest groups (particularly environmental and consumer groups) have used the media effectively to get a variety of issues on the national agenda. Studies indicate that television news stories affect the popularity of presidents and that political commentary has a large effect. Politicians also use the media

to float “trial balloons”—statements intentionally leaked by unnamed sources to test the public’s reaction to a controversial issue.

Today’s media focus far more on the president than any other public official. Theodore Roosevelt was the first to court the press heavily. He favored reporters who wrote friendly stories over those who did not, and he was the first to give reporters space in the White House that was near the oval office. Franklin Roosevelt made the press secretary a major job, one that would carefully cultivate and manage the press. Modern press secretaries head large staffs, meet regularly with reporters, brief the president on questions he is likely to be asked, and attempt to control the flow of news coming from the White House.

Congress receives less coverage than the president. The House of Representatives has a history of being quite restrictive; it allowed no cameras on the floor until 1978. With the introduction of cable TV’s C-SPAN in 1979, gavel-to-gavel coverage of House proceedings became available. The Senate has a history of being more open; Senate hearings have been broadcast on television since 1950. Senate sessions have been available on C-SPAN since 1986.

INTERPRETING POLITICAL NEWS

Though the percentage of people who think the media are biased is increasing, most people still believe that the press is objective. This is especially true of television, because it allows us to judge not only words but also images. Members of the press generally think of themselves as unbiased, but polls indicate that journalists are much more liberal than the public at large, and those in the national media are the most liberal of all. Having liberal views does not mean that stories will inevitably be biased, however. Conservative talk radio and the increasingly popular Fox News Network offer views that some use to counter claims of a liberal bias in the media. Many factors influence how a story is written, among them urgent deadlines, a desire to attract an audience, a professional obligation to be fair, and the need to develop sources. The type of story also affects whether a reporter or editor will tend towards bias. Stories can be classified as:

- **Routine stories** Regularly covered stories such as public events are typically simple and easily described. All media tend to report these similarly, and the opinions of journalists have little effect. For example, a presidential trip, a bill passing in Congress, or a Supreme Court ruling would typically be reported without much bias.
- **Feature stories** Stories not routinely covered are called feature stories, and these require reporter initiative. Selection of topics for these stories involves a reporter’s or editor’s perception of what is important. Liberal and conservative papers often do different feature stories.
- **Insider stories** Stories that involve investigative reporting or political leaks are called insider stories. These stories require a reporter to select which facts to use, so the ideology of the reporter or editor may surface. The motive of the person who leaks the story might also be a source for bias.

Leaks to the press are becoming more frequent. One reason is that the separation of powers creates competition among government officials who give secrets to the press as a weapon. It is not illegal to print most secrets in the United States. Another reason is that, since Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran-contra affair, the press has often had an adversarial relationship with the government. The press and politicians tend to mistrust each other. The cynicism of the past few decades has created an era of attack journalism. Journalists hounding politicians have had a negative impact on the press, however, because people often do not like this kind of news. Attack journalism is partially responsible for the growing cynicism among the public towards the media.

Intense competition among the media means that each has a smaller share of the audience. The press relies increasingly on sensational news stories that often include sex, violence, and intrigue among politicians. Sensationalism draws an audience and is cheaper than investigative reporting, but it is often drawn from unreliable sources. The result is less substantive news and often even greater cynicism towards the press. Fewer and bigger players in this intense competition mean that the stakes are even higher and the pressures to win audience are greater.

Politicians fight bias and sensationalism in a number of ways. The number of press secretaries in both executive and legislative branches has increased dramatically. They work full time to control and manipulate unwanted stories. Press releases, which are often uncontroversial and sterile, are another way to fight bias. Presidents are often known to reward and punish reporters based on their stories.

As communication technology evolves, the role of the press in politics will continue to increase. Mass media will maintain a central role in linking average citizens to the government.