AP Government Chapter 10

Elections and Voting Behavior

“We call an election an expression of the popular will. But is it? Have we expressed our thoughts on the public policy of the US?

Why is it difficult for elections to be a faith mechanism for expressing the public’s desires concerning what government should do? Only ¼ of the eligible electorate participates.

Elections provide regular access to political power so that leaders can be replaced without being overthrown.

How American Elections Work

Three general kinds of elections: primary in which voters select party nominees, general elections that are contest between party nominees and elections of specific policy questions where the voters ratify legislation. There are two methods for getting policy items on the ballot: the referendum where voters are given an opportunity to approve or disapprove some legislative act, bond issue or constitutional amendment proposed by the legislature and the initiative petition which requires gaining signatures on a proposed law equal to 10 percent of the number of voters in the previous election.

Initiatives are often portrayed as law making from the ground up with the people taking charge of the political agenda. In this way citizens can force a decision on an issue upon which state legislatures have failed to act. Examples of initiatives

California 1978 Proposition 13 limits property tax increase
California 1996 Proposition 109 ends affirmative action programs in this state
Florida 2002 set maximum class size to 18 in earliest grades to 25 in high school
North Dakota 2002 No $10,000 to college grades who live in No. Dakota 5 years
Oklahoma 2002 banned cock fighting in the state

Ordinary individuals can change the course of public policy.

A tale of three elections 1800 – Presidents did not campaign, no primaries, no conventions, nomination by party, state and local organizations promote cause. Newspapers were rabidly partisan, and insulting toward the opponent. 1896 – Nearly 80% of the electorate voted. Bryan campaigns travelling and making speeches to 26 states, there is a clear distinction between parties. Republicans supported manufacturers and Democrats were supported by white southerners, western silver producing states and rural debtors, 2004 – Republicans dominate both the legislative and the executive branch. The US Supreme Court was needed to settle a dispute, candidate legislative record is publicized.

Voters face two key choices 1) whether to vote and how to vote?
Whether to Vote

1800 only property owning white males over 21 were allowed to vote

Now every citizen over 18 has a right to vote, exceptions non-citizens and convicted felons.

In 2004 only 55% of adult population voted. Voting costs time. Voters need to decide if the policies of one candidate will bring more advantages then the policies of another. People who see policy differences are more likely to vote.

Political efficacy – is the belief that ordinary people can influence the government.

Civic Duty – doing your part to maintain democracy.

Americans are asked to vote more often and for more candidates than are citizens in other democratic nations.

Registering to Vote

Registering to vote prevents stuffing ballot boxes. Registration requirements differ from state to state.

Motor Voter Act – allow citizens to register by checking a box on their Driving license application.

Who votes: the educated, white, older, female, married, union members?

How Americans vote – explaining the citizens decisions

People vote because they agree more with the policy views of candidate A then with those of candidate B

Many journalist and politicians say that the election winner has a mandate from the people to carry out the promised policies. This is known as the mandate theory of elections.

Three major elements of voters’ decisions: Voters party identification, voters’ evaluation of the candidates and the match between voter’s policy positions and those of the candidates and parties.

Party identification – provides a regular perspective through which voters can view the political world. People choose to identify with a party with which they generally agree.

Republican – conservative evangelical Christians or upper income voters

Democrats – African Americans, Jews and Hispanic Americans

Party affiliation is the best single predictor of a voter’s decision. Voting along party lines is less common particularly in elections for those House of Representatives.

Candidate Evaluations: How Americans see the candidates
Campaign consultants can manipulate the image of a candidate to affect voter’s choices. The three most important dimensions of a candidate image are integrity, reliability and competence.

Dependability and decisiveness = reliability

Voters rely on their assessments of the candidates personalities to predict how they will perform in office.

True policy voting takes place when four conditions are met: voters must have a clear view of their own policy, voters must know where the candidates stand on the policy, voters must see differences between the candidates on the issues and they must cast a vote for the candidate whose policy positions coincide with their own

Some candidates cloud their position on the policy with rhetoric. Candidates have to be clear in primaries to get the party’s vote. Party voting, candidate evaluation and policy voting all play a role in elections their impact is not equal from one election to another.

The last Battle: The Electoral College.

The Electoral College cast the determining votes for present and vice president. The Electoral College was created by the US Constitution. The founders wanted the President to be elected by the nation’s elite, not directly by the people.

Tradition – the Electors vote for the candidate who won their states popular vote. Each state receives a number of Electors equal to its members in the Senate and the House of Representatives members. State parties select slates of electors – a position they use as a reward for faithful service to the party.

In most states its winner takes all. Electors meet in December vote and mail their votes to the Vice President who announces the results. Understanding elections and voting behavior help accomplish two tasks: select the policy makers help shape public policy

Democracy and elections

The greater the policy differences between candidates, the more likely voters will be able to steer government policies by their choices. Candidates did not always help clarify the issues, learning to side step controversial questions and hedge answers is indeed part of the becoming a professional politician. When individual candidates offer a plain choice to voters, voters are better able to guide government policy and direction. Retrospective voting - Those who feel better off as a result of certain policies are likely to support candidates who pledge to continue those policies, whereas those who feel worse off are invited to support opposition candidates. In Presidential elections, people unhappy with the state of the economy tend to blame the incumbent. The only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power.

Elections and the scope of government
When people have the power to dole out electoral reward and punishment, they are more likely to see government as their servant, instead of their master. Democratic elections help to persuade citizen that expansion of the states powers represents an increase in the states capacity to serve them. As democracy has spread government has come to do more and more that the scope of government has grown.