14 CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

THE U.S. CONSTITUTION CALLS for a presidential election every four years and congressional elections every two years. Without skipping a beat, the United States has met this constitutional requirement for more than two centuries. Through a Civil War, two world wars, and several major economic depressions, elections—the hallmark of American democracy—have taken place like clockwork. In designing this representative democracy, the founders intended a system that demanded accountability from elected officials. Elections for president and Congress provide this accountability. Regular and free elections are the linchpin underlying democracy in America. Every year Americans are invited to cast ballots in elections for many local, county, and statewide races, but no election receives more attention than the race for the presidency.

Democratic presidential candidate and former vice president Joe Biden gives a speech on his foreign policy plan on July 11, 2019, in New York City.

Learning Objectives

14-1 American Presidential Elections in Historical Perspective
- Describe the historical development of the presidential selection process.

14-2 The Nomination Campaign
- Distinguish between primaries and caucuses, and explain the purpose of the national conventions.

14-3 The General Election Campaign
- Describe the strategies that candidates use to win elections and critique the Electoral College system.

14-4 Campaign Funding
- Assess the impact of money on presidential campaigns, and describe the laws governing campaign finance.

14-5 Congressional Campaigns and Elections
- Define the power of incumbency, turnout levels, and presidential coattails in congressional elections.
14-1 American Presidential Elections in Historical Perspective

The U.S. Constitution says nothing about the process by which individuals become candidates for the presidency. The founders assumed that electors, chosen by the states (and heavily influenced by the House of Representatives), would identify and evaluate potential candidates, and then the Electoral College would select the chief executive. The selection of president was intended to be the product of a select group of rational, wise men making choices at a lofty level above partisan politics.

Although their intentions for presidential selection were noble, the founders’ expectations about how a president would actually be chosen proved to be quite naive. Political parties have provided the framework for every presidential election since George Washington. Each of the two major parties holds nomination contests in the 50 states to select the party’s candidate in the general election; the party nominees then compete in the general election.

The modern presidential selection process is long and complex. The manner in which the 2020 selection process occurs is not based on some elaborate constitutional design. Rather, this complicated and quirky process is the result of more than 230 years of evolution. Over the years, two distinct phases of the presidential selection process have developed: the nomination phase and the general election phase.

THE NOMINATION PHASE

In the nomination phase, the political parties select specific people to run as the presidential and vice presidential candidates in the general election. This duo is referred to as the party ticket. The Constitution did not account for a nomination phase because the founders did not anticipate that a two-party system would emerge. The first two presidential elections did not even include political parties. Rather, the electors from the states all agreed that George Washington should be president in 1789 and again in 1792. Nevertheless, divisions within the federal government erupted and political alliances began to form during Washington’s administration. These alliances resulted in the first two major political parties, the Federalists and their opponents, who eventually became known as the Democratic-Republicans. In 1796, when Washington decided not to seek a third term, each of these parties sought to win the presidency by recruiting and supporting candidates.

The Federalists in Congress supported John Adams and the Democratic-Republicans threw their support to Thomas Jefferson. Electors, who were largely chosen by state legislatures, followed the cues of their partisan leadership in casting their electoral votes, and Adams, the Federalist-supported candidate, won the general election with 71 electoral votes, whereas Jefferson received 68 electoral votes. The nomination process in 1796 reflected a significant level of party discipline in the casting of ballots among electors. In the elections of 1800, 1804, and 1808, both the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans used informal meetings and discussions to choose a party nominee. Democratic-Republicans dominated electoral politics from 1812 through 1828, as the Federalist Party eventually disappeared.

In 1824, however, a significant split occurred within the Democratic-Republican Party. Andrew Jackson, who had the support of many common people, challenged party favorite John Quincy Adams. Jackson won both the popular vote and a plurality of the electoral vote, but no candidate received a majority of electoral votes. By constitutional provision, the election was sent to the House of Representatives, which voted Adams the victor. Jackson then founded a new party, the Democratic Party, which is, of course, one of the two major parties still in existence today. Jackson and his followers believed in the enfranchisement of all white men, rather than just the propertied class. During what became known as the Jacksonian era, white male suffrage was dramatically expanded throughout the country. Specifically, more and more state political parties adopted open caucuses, in which party members formally met to provide input as to who their party should nominate for elective office.

Electoral reforms during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s opened participation in the nomination process to a greater number of Americans. The direct primary gave voters an opportunity to cast a ballot for delegates, who would in turn be sent to a national convention.
for the purpose of choosing a presidential nominee. The state of Florida was the first to hold a direct primary in a presidential election, in 1900. Although direct primaries allowed greater numbers of people the opportunity to help select delegates, until the 1960s it was still the political elite of a party (governors, mayors, party chairs, and other officials) that selected most of the delegates and thus had the most input in choosing the party's presidential nominee.

The political unrest of the 1960s, spurred by anti–Vietnam War activism, led to further changes that gave voters in primaries even more weight in selecting party nominees. Benefiting from the increased percentage of convention delegates chosen through open primaries, Jimmy Carter, the little-known governor of Georgia, won the Democratic Party's nomination in 1976. A political outsider, Carter appealed directly to average voters. Carter not only won the nomination but also the presidency that year. His victory demonstrated to candidates in both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party that securing sufficient numbers of delegates to win the nomination requires direct appeals to voters, whether through party caucuses or, more likely, through party primary contests. Today this pattern persists: to win a party's nomination, a candidate must win a majority of delegates who are primarily chosen by voters in the state primaries and caucuses.

**THE GENERAL ELECTION PHASE**

The unanticipated emergence of political parties not only established a party nomination process but also forced a change in the founders' design for the Electoral College. The founders intended the state legislatures to pick well-qualified “electors,” who would meet on a specified day in their state to decide who was the best choice to become president. At the end of the day, these electors would then cast votes for president. The states then sent their vote totals to the president of the U.S. Senate (the sitting vice president), who counted the votes before Congress. The candidate with a majority of votes became president and the second-place finisher became vice president. If no one candidate received a majority of the votes, the election was to be decided by the House of Representatives, with each state delegation having one vote to select the new president. The Senate was to select the vice president.

In the 1800 presidential race, nearly all of the Federalists voted for John Adams and Charles Pinckney (65 and 64 votes, respectively), and all of the Democratic-Republicans voted for Jefferson and Aaron Burr, each of whom received 73 votes. Although it was generally agreed that Jefferson was the leader of the Democratic-Republican ticket, Burr challenged Jefferson in the House. (Because the election was a tie, the House state delegations had to choose the new president.) Ultimately, the House decided in favor of Jefferson, who became president, with Burr then becoming vice president. It was clear that the presidential election system needed fixing.

The Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1804, provided for separate balloting for president and vice president by requiring that electors designate one of their two votes for president and the second of their two votes for vice president. This amendment greatly reduced the possibility that future elections would end in a tie.

Several other amendments to the Constitution have altered the presidential selection process. The Twenty-second Amendment, ratified in 1951, limits presidents to two 4-year terms in office (or 10 years if a vice president serves out the term of a president). The Twenty-third Amendment, ratified in 1961, provides the District of Columbia with three electoral votes. Because the District of Columbia is not a state, it previously had no electoral votes.

**14-2 THE NOMINATION CAMPAIGN**

There are three distinct phases to the nomination campaign: the prenomination campaign, the primaries and caucus contests, and the national conventions.

**THE PRENOMINATION CAMPAIGN**

Although the presidential campaign officially begins with the first caucus contest in Iowa (held in early February 2020), the real campaign actually begins much earlier, soon after the previous presidential election has concluded. As part of the prenomination campaign,
behind-the-scenes candidates who are thinking about making a run often begin to “test the waters” by talking to party insiders, shoring up early commitments of support, lining up a campaign staff, beginning a fund-raising operation, traveling around the country making speeches and appearances, setting up “exploratory committees” to assess the feasibility of making a formal declaration of official candidacy, and then making the official announcement. Shortly after the 2016 election, for example, many candidates immediately began to plan for the 2020 Democratic nomination. By May 2019, 23 candidates had already thrown their hat into the ring. Table 14-1 lists the declared Democratic candidates as of October 2019 who had not yet dropped out of the race.

The prenomination campaign also marks the beginning of the “weeding-out” process. Early on, many would-be candidates find insufficient support from party insiders. Others cannot raise sufficient funds to be competitive. Some tire too quickly of the arduous and time-consuming schedule necessary for launching a run for the presidency. These and other obstacles begin the process of narrowing the field of candidates.

The invisible primary is the competition between candidates seeking the party nomination for frontrunner status. A candidate gains frontrunner status by winning broad support from important people within the party, raising more money than others, and

**TABLE 14-1** Candidates for the 2020 Democratic Nomination for President, as of October 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Candidate’s Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael Bennet</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from Colorado (2009–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Biden</td>
<td>Vice President of the United States (2009–2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Senator from Delaware (1973–2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic candidate for President in 1988 and 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cory Booker</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from New Jersey (2013–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mayor of Newark, New Jersey (2006–2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Bullock</td>
<td>Governor of Montana (2013–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Buttigieg</td>
<td>Mayor of South Bend, Indiana (2012–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic nominee for State Treasurer of Indiana in 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mayor of San Antonio, Texas (2009–2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulsi Gabbard</td>
<td>U.S. Representative from HI-02 (2013–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamala Harris</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from California (2017–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Klobuchar</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from Minnesota (2007–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne Messam</td>
<td>Mayor of Miramar, Florida (2015–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beto O’Rourke</td>
<td>U.S. Representative from TX-16 (2013–2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate from Texas in 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie Sanders</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from Vermont (2007–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic candidate for President in 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democratic nominee for U.S. Senate from 2010 and 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Warren</td>
<td>U.S. Senator from Massachusetts (2013–present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Advisor for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (2010–2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marianne Williamson</td>
<td>Author, lecturer, and activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent candidate for U.S. Representative from CA-33 in 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Yang</td>
<td>Entrepreneur, philanthropist, and founder of Venture for America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
achieving the top position in the public polls conducted by leading news organizations. Frontrunners tend to receive more coverage in the news, thus promoting their name recognition and popularity as candidates.

In the campaign for the 2016 election, when there were 17 Republicans competing for the GOP nomination, the performance of the candidates in televised debates was an important part of the invisible primary. For the 2020 race, there will be at least 12 televised debates among the Democrats. The invisible primary may go a long way toward winnowing the field down to a handful of realistic contenders for major-party nominations. Still, contenders for the party nomination must ultimately deliver victories in state primaries and caucuses or risk seeing their financial and volunteer support dry up in a hurry. Given the reduced importance of party conventions in influencing nomination decisions in the modern era, success in the early primaries and caucuses is crucial.

**PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES**

The nomination of a candidate by a political party is the product of state-to-state contests in which delegates are committed to those candidates seeking the party’s nomination. There are two basic methods by which states allocate delegates: presidential primary elections and caucuses. A presidential primary is a statewide election to select delegates who will represent a state at the party’s national convention. In this election, voters choose among delegates who are committed to a particular candidate. The delegates who win go to the national convention and cast their vote for a party nominee to run in the general election. In 2016, 45 states used the presidential primary method of delegate selection. There are two types of primaries held by states. The less common approach is the open primary, in which voters can show up at the voting booth on the primary Election Day and declare whether they want to vote in the Democratic Party primary or the Republican Party primary; they then cast their vote in the primary they have chosen. A closed primary, by contrast, requires voters to declare a party affiliation ahead of time. When the voters show up to vote in the primary, they are eligible to vote only for the party in which they are registered. Many states that use the closed primary have modified their requirements by allowing voters who have previously declared no party affiliation to show up at the polls on Election Day and declare a party and thus vote in that party’s primary.

A handful of states, including Iowa, Nevada, and Maine, do not hold presidential primary elections; instead they use the caucus method to select delegates for the national party convention. In the caucus method, party members are invited to attend local meetings at which they choose delegates who make a commitment to a candidate for the party nomination. These delegates in turn attend more regionalized meetings and select delegates from that group. Depending on the size of the state and the number of regions, this process continues until a slate of delegates attends a statewide convention, or caucus. At this statewide caucus, attendees again vote for a slate of delegates, who are committed to a candidate, to send to the party’s national convention.
The first state contest for delegates, normally the Iowa caucus (scheduled for early February 2020) launches the process by which delegates from the states commit to candidates for the party nomination. One week after the Iowa caucus comes the New Hampshire primary, which has traditionally been the first state primary election in which delegates commit to candidates. Each of the 50 states (along with the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Guam) holds either a caucus or primary election, and in each of these contests delegates commit to candidates. The calendar of state caucuses and primaries, beginning in February and extending into June, is referred to as the nomination campaign. Table 14-2 lists the schedule of primaries and caucuses for the 2020 presidential campaign. Through the nomination campaign, a candidate attempts to win a majority of delegates in the caucus and primary contests to lay claim to be the winner of the party’s nomination.
The Traditional Importance of the Iowa and New Hampshire Contests

Iowa and New Hampshire are small states with relatively few delegates. The Iowa caucus in 2016 had just 28 delegates at stake, and the 2016 New Hampshire primary had a mere 23 delegates at stake. To win the nomination campaign, the successful Republican candidate needed to amass support from at least 2,137 total delegates. In pure delegate count, larger states, such as California with 170 delegates and New York with 95, are, of course, much more important. Why, then, do Iowa and New Hampshire enjoy such disproportionately great influence in the nomination process? The answer is timing: Iowa and New Hampshire have traditionally been the first two contests held. The news media thus focus a tremendous amount of attention on these initial competitions. Winners of the Iowa and New Hampshire contests receive a great amount of attention in the news, whereas losers tend to get written off as “unelectable.”

Table 14-2
Schedule of Primaries and Caucuses for 2020

- February 3: Iowa caucus
- February 11: New Hampshire primary
- February 22: Nevada caucus
- February 29: South Carolina primary
- March 3: Super Tuesday (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia primaries; Democrats Abroad preference vote through March 10)
- March 7: Louisiana primary
- March 8: Maine caucus (likely amended to a Tuesday-in-March primary if primary legislation passes)
- March 10: Idaho, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Washington primaries; North Dakota firehouse caucus/primary
- March 17: Arizona, Florida, and Illinois primaries
- To be determined: Wyoming caucus (March, TBD)
- April 4: Alaska and Hawaii primaries
- April 7: Wisconsin primary
- April 28: Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island primaries
- May 2: Kansas primary
- May 5: Indiana primary
- May 12: West Virginia primary
- May 19: Kentucky and Oregon primaries
- June 2: Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, and South Dakota primaries
- June 7: Puerto Rico primary
- June 16: District of Columbia primary

2020 Democratic nomination rivals Julián Castro, Cory Booker, and Elizabeth Warren joke with each other before a debate in 2019.
The importance of the early contests has led to a phenomenon known as frontloading, a trend that has occurred over the past six or seven presidential elections in which states have moved their primary or caucus contests earlier in the year to attract greater attention from the candidates and the media. A state that holds its contest early makes itself more important in the nominee selection process. In 1988, the time between the Iowa caucus and the date by which most states had chosen their convention delegates was more than 20 weeks.

In 2020, most delegates from both parties will be selected within a six-week period, from early February to mid-March.

For the 2016 Democratic Party nomination, Hillary Clinton, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, and three others threw their hats in the ring early on. All but Clinton and Sanders dropped out shortly after the primaries began. Sanders stayed in the race until the last of the primaries but fell short of Clinton by a final tally of 2,807 to 1,894 delegates.

On the GOP side, 17 candidates entered the race. By March 2016, five candidates had survived. Though dismissed by most pundits initially, Donald Trump campaigned furiously against the GOP establishment and appealed to frustrated Republican voters who had elected large majorities to Congress, only to be stymied by the Democratic president. Trump’s message gained steam as the campaign wore on, and by June 2016 he had secured enough delegates to take the nomination.

THE NOMINATING CONVENTIONS

The national conventions for the Democratic and Republican Parties were once used to discuss the party platform and, most important, to choose the candidate who would represent the party in the general election. The images of the smoke-filled back rooms where deals were cut and delegates were lobbied to throw their support behind a particular candidate were very real. For most of our nation’s history, the major parties selected candidates for the presidency in this way. Much of the brokering and deal-making took place by skilled political operators at the national conventions.

The 1968 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago, was characterized by a great deal of divisiveness and discord, much of which was captured on national network television. Vietnam War protesters outside of the convention hall were beaten by Chicago police under the direction of Chicago mayor and “political boss” Richard J. Daley. Tension reigned inside the convention center as well, with antiwar supporters of Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern clashing with the party regulars supporting Hubert Humphrey. Television brought the negative images of the divided Democratic Party into American homes, seriously damaging the Democratic ticket. Four years later, television coverage again captured a disunited Democratic Party at the national convention in Miami, where delegates fought into the wee hours of the morning to nominate a party candidate (George McGovern finally won the nomination). The Democrats were not the only party to suffer discord and division. In 1976, grassroots support for Ronald Reagan spoiled any momentum incumbent president Gerald Ford hoped to generate at the Republican National Convention.

By the mid-1980s, both major political parties, recognizing the influential role that television was playing in election politics, had begun to adjust their agenda for the national conventions. With the frontloading process allowing candidates to capture a majority of delegates prior to the national convention, the parties began to choreograph their conventions and use them as advertisements for the party ticket.
Today’s conventions tend to avoid airing any intraparty differences. Instead, they are “anointing” ceremonies for the party ticket. They feature popular members of the party endorsing the nominees and include prerecorded videos highlighting the nominees’ record of public service and family values.12

Today’s GOP and Democratic nominating conventions provide a week-long forum for the parties and their nominees to introduce themselves to voters and to formally kick off the general election campaign. With a very crowded candidate field on the Democratic side, it is possible that no one candidate will receive a majority of delegates by the end of the primaries. If that is the case, the Democratic Party convention will also be the event when a party nominee is selected through a brokered process.

At (or near) the conventions, the party nominee selects the vice presidential running mate. Significant amounts of thought and fanfare normally go into this selection. Vice presidential candidates are quite visible on the campaign trail and can provide a boost to the ticket. The choice of running mate often attempts to balance the ticket geographically. John Edwards, for example, was from the southern state of North Carolina, a factor deemed important by the 2004 Democratic nominee, John Kerry, who was from Massachusetts. Vice presidential candidates are often chosen on the basis of their ideological leanings. In 1980 Ronald Reagan selected George H. W. Bush as his running mate in part because Reagan was viewed as far to the political right and needed a running mate who was more moderate. By contrast, the more moderate Bob Dole chose the ideologically conservative Jack Kemp as his choice for vice president in 1996 to mobilize conservative Republican voters, as did Donald Trump with his selection of Indiana governor Mike Pence in 2016.

In 2016, Democrat presidential nominee Hillary Clinton selected as her running mate Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia. This choice was at least in part based on Kaine’s reputation as a moderate Democrat (thus appealing to independent voters) and the fact that he was popular in the battleground state of Virginia, where he had once served as governor. Pence’s popularity among social conservatives served as the basis for this choice, along with the fact that Pence had plenty of experience in elective office (something Trump lacked).

**14-3 THE GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

A number of factors provide context for understanding general election campaigns in the American political system. These include whether an incumbent is running, the strategy for achieving a winning coalition of states, the presidential debates, political advertisements, and, finally, the vote in the Electoral College.

**INCUMBENT RACE VERSUS OPEN ELECTION**

General election campaigns for president are highly visible, very well funded, and among the most noteworthy of events in the American political system. Sometimes the contest is an incumbent race pitting a sitting president against a challenger. That was the case in 2020, as President Trump announced his reelection plans early on. In an incumbent race, the focus of the campaign tends to revolve around the performance of the incumbent over the past four years. In this sense, incumbent races are often viewed as a referendum on the performance of the current occupant of the White House.
In all, there have been 11 incumbents who lost bids for another term. Five of these incumbent losses occurred over the past 100 years: in 1912 Woodrow Wilson defeated President William Howard Taft; in 1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated President Herbert Hoover; in 1976 Jimmy Carter defeated President Gerald R. Ford; in 1980 Ronald Reagan beat President Carter; and in 1992 Bill Clinton defeated President George H. W. Bush.

In *open elections*, neither candidate is an incumbent. In 2016, for example, President Barack Obama was constitutionally prohibited from running for a third term. Former first lady, U.S. senator, and secretary of state Hillary Clinton was the Democratic Party’s nominee, and billionaire businessman Donald Trump was the Republican Party’s candidate in the general election. Clinton took credit for her work in the Obama administration, and Trump criticized Clinton’s association with Obama. However, the focus of the race was more on the personality characteristics (and flaws) of these two candidates with far less discussion of President Obama’s record.

### GATHERING A WINNING COALITION OF STATES

A central feature of any general election campaign is each candidate’s plan to put together a coalition of states sufficient to win a majority of electoral votes. At the outset of the campaign, states may be divided into three categories: reliably Republican states, reliably Democratic states, and the so-called *battleground* (or “swing”) states, those that either candidate has a reasonable chance of winning. The map in Figure 14-1 depicts this categorization of states for the 2020 presidential campaign, based on the narrow margin of victory in 2016. The blue states were safely Democratic and the red were safely Republican; the gold states were close.

#### FIGURE 14-1

**Top Battleground States in 2020**

In the presidential campaign of 2016, the vast majority of states saw relatively little activity in terms of candidate appearances and television advertising. Instead, the candidates for both major parties targeted a few select states for concentrated activity. They spent most of their resources of time and money on these battleground states because, as each candidate knew well ahead of time, these were where the election outcome would be decided.
President Barack Obama famously proclaimed, “Elections have consequences.” Certainly politicians of all stripes pour considerable time, effort, and money into presidential campaigns in hopes that those consequences will be favorable ones. Often the stakes in election outcomes are so high and the will to win so strong that campaigns take a negative tone. Living through a negative campaign can leave voters with the sense that “politics has never been so negative.” However, the reality is that in the history of American presidential elections, campaigns are often quite negative.

**Then**

In 1828, incumbent John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States, was embroiled in an intense rematch against Andrew Jackson, a general and war hero. Jackson had won a plurality of votes in the 1824 race and enjoyed a slight edge over Adams in the Electoral College count as well. Yet, because Jackson did not achieve a majority within the Electoral College, the race was thrown into the House of Representatives, where a questionable behind-the-scenes deal led to Adams winning the presidency. Four years later the stakes were high, as the United States economy was struggling. Debates over tariffs in international trade were especially intense, and the tone of the campaign turned negative. At one point Adams called Jackson’s wife “a convicted adulteress” and his mother “a common prostitute.” Jackson responded by accusing Adams of having premarital sex with his wife and acting as a pimp. Voters in 1828 were left with the feeling that politics could not get much worse. Many involved in that campaign were not around to see the highly negative campaign of 1800 waged between two of America’s founding fathers.

**Now**

We all lived through the 2016 campaign—few of us will soon forget the negative, bitter tone that was reported by the media on a near daily basis. America’s intense ideological divide over “Obamacare,” taxes, immigration, and the war on terrorism fueled this negativity. At one point in the campaign Hillary Clinton referred to Donald Trump supporters as “a basket of deplorables,” adding that they are “sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, islamophobic” people. Trump, for his part, fueled the negativity with claims that “Bill Clinton has actually abused women and Hillary has bullied, attacked, shamed, and intimidated his victims.” To be sure, the 2016 campaign was filled with vitriolic and personal attacks, but it was one of many such negative elections in American history.
In 2020, President Trump and his Democratic challenger set their sights on these 11 battleground states: Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, Maine, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In 2016, Trump won six of them and five went to Clinton. The six that went for Trump were the larger states and so his path to Electoral College victory included the large number of electoral votes in these swing states. Interestingly, in four of the six, Trump’s margin of victory was 1 percent or less.

**THE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES**

The media and the public have come to expect that a presidential campaign will feature debates between the presidential candidates and sometimes between the vice presidential candidates as well. Candidates may not believe it is in their strategic interest to debate their opponents. For example, a candidate who is ahead in the polls might prefer to play it safe and not run the risk of losing a debate and perhaps the lead in the campaign. Still, both major-party candidates usually agree to debate so that they aren’t portrayed as being afraid to do so. The expectation of a set of debates, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon in presidential elections. The first debates that generated a high level of interest and scrutiny were those between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 election campaign. Some political scientists today credit Kennedy’s victory as partly the result of his strong performance in the debates.

The next set of presidential debates occurred in 1976, between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Each presidential campaign since then has included debates between the presidential candidates and sometimes also between the vice presidential candidates. (The presidential debates are discussed in further detail in Chapter 12.) The schedule of debates and the rules governing their conduct are the product of intense negotiation between the campaigns. In 2016, the detailed set of rules for the three presidential debates included instructions that the candidates could not cross over a line on the stage separating them and time limits on answering questions and offering rebuttals.

Despite the large amount of attention both the campaigns and the media pay to the debates, the impact that debates have on the election outcome is unclear. Many researchers have documented that those who tend to watch the debates already have moderate to strong convictions regarding who they want to win, and these convictions often shape how an individual voter evaluates the candidate’s performance in the debates. Although polls sometimes show that the voters tend to identify a debate “winner,” there is far less evidence to show that this has any impact on voter intentions. The first of the debates often gets the most attention, and yet many of the media-dubbed “winners” of first debates, whether Walter Mondale in 1984, Michael Dukakis in 1988, Ross Perot in 1992, or John Kerry in 2004, have ended up on the short side of the electoral vote count on Election Day. More evidence of this pattern emerged in the 2012 race, as Republican challenger Mitt Romney was widely regarded as the winner of the first debate against President Barack Obama. Yet it was Obama who secured the overall victory on Election Day. Some observers of elections indicate that although debates may not have a direct impact on vote intentions, they can change the dynamics of a campaign, which in turn may influence the outcome.

**THE ADVERTISING**

Television advertisements have become a staple of presidential campaign strategies. They are used to heighten name recognition, communicate core messages to voters,
and offer reasons why one should vote for (or against) a particular candidate. Television advertising uses a variety of different techniques to accomplish these goals. The most controversial of these techniques is the attack or “negative” ads that candidates often use to portray their opponents in a bad light. Television ads can be very effective at convincing voters to support a candidate—particularly voters who are undecided on any particular candidate or who are politically independent rather than identifying themselves as a Democrat or a Republican. Whereas other forms of campaign communication (such as televised debates, political news columns, political talk shows on radio and TV, and news broadcasts) are provided in formats that appeal to voters who are interested in the campaign and have already made up their minds about who they will vote for, televised advertisements may be placed during certain shows or at certain times when independents and undecided voters are tuning in. The unsuspecting audience is captive to the short advertisement, which provides a unique opportunity for a campaign to attract votes.

**THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE VOTE**

Unlike elections for most public offices in the United States, the outcome of the popular vote does not determine who wins the presidential election. The winner of the presidential election is the candidate who receives a majority of the 538 votes in the **Electoral College**. Five times in American history the popular vote winner did not win in the Electoral College, most recently in 2016 when Trump won the electoral vote and Hillary Clinton won the popular vote.

How does the Electoral College work? The Constitution allocates to each state a certain number of electoral votes, based on the sum of the number of senators (2) plus representatives (currently anywhere from 1 to 53) that a state has in the U.S. Congress. The Twenty-third Amendment to the Constitution allocated three electoral votes to the District of Columbia. The number of seats a state has in the House of Representatives may change as a result of the official census conducted every 10 years. Thus, the number of electoral votes that a state has may change as well. The total number of electoral votes remains fixed at 538, and a candidate must receive a majority—270—to win the presidency (see Figure 14-1).

The minimum number of electoral votes allotted to any one state is three because the Constitution guarantees to each state exactly two senators and at least one House member. Vermont, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alaska, Montana, and Delaware all have three votes, California currently has the largest number of electoral votes with 55 (53 members of the House and 2 senators).

Even small states with as few as three electoral votes can influence the outcome of an election. In 2000, George Bush received 271 electoral votes, only one vote more than the 270 majority he needed to win. Had just one of the small states that gave Bush its three electoral votes voted for Gore, Bush would not have won the election.

Over the past 60 years the U.S. population has shifted, with the southern and western states gaining population and most of the northeastern and midwestern states losing population. Consequently, the number of electoral votes in states such as Florida, California, Texas, and Arizona has grown, and the number of votes allocated to states such as New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois has declined. Based on figures from the 2010 U.S. Census, the 2020 electoral vote count in Texas swelled from 34 to 38. Florida gained two electoral votes, and a number of states gained at least one electoral vote: Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah, and Washington. By contrast, each of the following states lost at least one electoral vote: Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Ohio and New York lost two each. As a result of this trend, the southern and southwestern states have become more influential in the presidential selection process. The results of the 2020 Census are likely to continue these trends, though the 2020 Census will not impact the Electoral College until the 2024 presidential election.

Article II of the Constitution gives each state legislature the authority to appoint **electors**, one for each electoral vote that a state has been allocated. During the first few presidential elections, most states used the state legislature to select the individuals who would be the state’s electors. By 1860, however, states gradually shifted to using the popular vote outcome.
in the state to allocate electors, or the so-called unit rule. The unit rule (or “winner-take-all” system) means that the candidate who receives the most votes among the popular votes cast for president in a state will receive all the electoral votes from that state. At present, only two states, Maine and Nebraska, do not use the unit rule. Rather, in those states the popular vote winner in each congressional district receives the electoral vote from that district, and the two votes that derive from the state’s Senate seats are awarded to the statewide popular vote winner.

In practice, the voters in a presidential election vote not for the actual candidate but for the slate of electors who commit to the candidate for whom the voters cast their ballots. Interestingly, the electors who pledge themselves to a candidate are under no legal obligation to actually cast their electoral vote for that candidate. In fact, electors sometimes break their pledge; these are dubbed “faithless electors.” In 8 of the last 16 presidential elections, there was at least one “faithless elector.”

In 2016, there were a record seven faithless electors (five switched from Clinton and two switched from Trump), not surprising given the negativity of the campaigns and the confusion surrounding the unexpected victory of Donald Trump. A movement to find a Republican alternative to Trump was the basis for this large number of faithless electors. The previous election with a faithless elector occurred in 2004, when a Minnesota elector who had initially pledged to vote for John Kerry cast his presidential vote for “John Edwards” [sic] instead. That vote may have been an accident. By contrast, in 2000, Washington, DC, elector Barbara Lett-Simmons, while pledged to vote for Democrats Al Gore and Joe Lieberman, intentionally cast no electoral votes as a protest against the District of Columbia’s lack of statehood. To date, however, these faithless electors have not had an impact on an election outcome.18

The significance of the unit rule is illustrated by the outcome of the 2000 presidential election. In Florida, which had 25 electoral votes, the popular vote distribution between Bush and Gore was very close. For nearly one month after Election Day in 2000, controversies surrounding the vote count and the ballot in Florida left uncertain which candidate won the most popular votes in the state. What loomed in the balance was all of Florida's 25 electoral votes—and the election victory. Without Florida, Gore had 267 electoral votes—just 3 votes shy of victory, whereas Bush had 246. Because the unit rule applied to Florida's 25 votes, all 25 would be allocated on the basis of which candidate received the most popular votes.

The founders’ original intent in creating the Electoral College was to keep the presidential selection process out of the direct hands of the people. They felt that the people were best represented by the House of Representatives, whose members were elected directly by voters. But the founders questioned the ability of the general public to select the chief executive. Rather, they believed that the more knowledgeable, wise, and politically thoughtful members of each state’s legislature should be empowered with the authority to appoint electors who would choose from the best of the best.

But as the meaning of democracy changed and as American politics opened up to greater popular participation, states began to use the popular vote as a means of allocating their electoral votes. Further, public opinion polls strongly endorse presidential selection based on the national popular vote rather than the electoral vote. For example, a Politico Poll conducted in March 2019 favored the popular vote over the electoral vote system by a margin of 50 to 34 percent.

If Americans strongly prefer the selection of a president based on the total national popular vote rather than by the electoral vote, why, then, do we continue to use this rather complicated, indirect system for voters to choose their president? Why not simply use the sum total of the popular vote to choose a winner? The most basic answer is explained by politics, not necessarily logic. The Electoral College system benefits smaller states. For example, Wyoming’s population of approximately 650,000 represents 0.17 percent of the potential popular vote. But its three electoral votes constitute 0.56 percent of the electoral vote total. Because every state starts off with two electoral votes (for its two U.S. senators), smaller states end up with disproportionately more voting power in the Electoral College than in the popular vote. In recent years, the states that benefit from the Electoral College system have tended to be dominated by Republican legislatures. Because changing the Electoral College system requires a constitutional amendment, and because amendment procedures require approval
by three-fourths of the state legislatures, any attempt to change the system is unlikely to win the support of a sufficient number of state legislatures, enough of which are small enough to benefit from the Electoral College. Despite the many proposals that have been offered to reform or eliminate the Electoral College, it seems likely, at least for the foreseeable future, that the Electoral College is here to stay.

14-4 CAMPAIGN FUNDING

Waging a political campaign, particularly a presidential campaign, is becoming increasingly expensive. Figure 14-2 shows the total fund-raising by presidential candidates over the past 11 elections. In 2016 the Clinton campaign spent $770 million and the Trump team spent $400 million.

Campaign financing, then, is one of the most important functions of a political campaign. Hiring a professional staff to develop and implement a successful campaign, producing and airing TV commercials and radio spots, renting campaign headquarters office space, conducting polls to monitor the course of the campaign, and producing buttons, bumper stickers, and signs all cost money. Good candidates have demonstrated a high capacity for raising money to wage a campaign.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Where do campaigns find financial support? They find money from individual citizens, from interest groups and political action committees, and from political parties. Companies, groups, and individuals all have vested interests in the political system, and each may provide support (including monetary contributions) to promote candidates who advocate their own positions on issues. The U.S. system of politics encourages people and groups to participate in the political process, and this participation includes financial contributions to campaigns. Indeed, giving money to candidates may be seen as a healthy sign that people are engaged in the political process and want to participate in making a difference.

Beginning in the 1970s, parties and candidates turned to political action committees (PACs) to address the new realities of political campaigns, particularly regarding fund-raising and limits on individual contributions. PACs are the arms of interest groups that raise and give

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**FIGURE 14-2**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Fund-Raising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>$171,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>$161,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>$202,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>$324,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>$331,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>$425,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>$528,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>$885,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>$1,748,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>$2,345,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$1,235,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on data from www.opensecrets.org.
The federal campaign finance legislation of the 1970s was the first vigorous attempt to monitor and regulate the money that was raised and spent in political campaigns. These laws applied to the regulation of hard money, which was money raised directly by and spent on behalf of political candidates. They influenced the creation of political action committees (PACs), which raise and spend soft money—funds for political campaigning independent of the political candidates. In 1974, there were only 608 PACs registered with the federal government; by 2002, 4,027 PACs were registered. This figure shows the total amount of receipts and expenditures of all PACs registered with the federal government from the 1975–1976 election cycle to the 2011–2012 election cycle.

In addition to individual and PAC contributions, the political parties play an important role in financing political campaigns. Both major parties have national and statewide committees, which raise money to fund campaigns. In 2000, each of the national party committees collected and spent about $200 million to help fund their candidates. Typically, the parties support House and Senate candidates, particularly those who have a competitive chance of winning.

Another important source of campaign funding comes from the individual candidates’ House and Senate campaigns. Members of Congress who hold safe seats are very effective at raising money for their own campaigns. These campaigns, because they are for safe seats, tend not to need a great deal of funding. So the incumbents use their campaign war chests to help fund the campaigns of their colleagues in more competitive races. Often they do so through the formation of a PAC.

Although not the norm, some federal candidates for office use their own personal wealth to fund their campaigns. In 2016, billionaire Donald Trump spent $66 million of his own money on the campaign. In that same year, GOP senate candidate from Florida, Rick Scott, spent $64 million of his personal wealth in a successful campaign bid.

The federal government and a handful of state governments (including those of Arizona, Connecticut, North Carolina, and Maine) maintain some form of public campaign financing as well. Although candidates cannot be forced to participate in public financing schemes, which restrict their expenditures, the government may entice their participation by offering them significant public funds in return for their agreement to abide by personal campaign spending limits. The federal government’s presidential election financing system allows major-party candidates to draw on funds received when taxpayers check a box on their tax returns agreeing to donate to the fund. In 2004, presidential candidates were eligible to receive approximately $70 million each if they agreed to limit their campaign expenditures. Yet neither of the two major-party candidates in 2004, George W. Bush and John Kerry, elected to participate in the federal financing scheme. By rejecting the use of such public financing, they were able to freely spend throughout the primaries and general election campaign without regard to any federally imposed limits. In 2008, John McCain accepted the $85 million he qualified for in public financing to fund his general election campaign. Barack Obama, however, declined public financing and continued to privately raise funds through the general election—a decision based on his widespread success in raising campaign money during the primaries. The 2012 general election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney marked the first time that both major candidates turned down public financing so they could continue unlimited fund-raising activities after their respective conventions. Similarly in 2016, neither major-party candidate accepted public financing, opting to raise and spend much more than public financing normally provides.

In recent presidential election cycles, candidates have been able to take advantage of the internet as yet another means of fund-raising. In 2000, Bill Bradley raised more than $2 million via the internet for his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. (He ended up losing his bid for the nomination to Al Gore.) Then, in the 2004 race for the Democratic presidential nomination, a little-known former governor from the small state of Vermont, Howard Dean, waged an impressive campaign by tapping into the vast potential of the internet and online fund-raising. His followers, who came to be known as “Deaniacs,” tended to be younger Americans, a group much more inclined to use the internet, to IM (instant message), and to blog. The Dean campaign translated this orientation of his followers into the most successful internet fund-raising campaign that American politics had ever seen before.

Dean raised an unprecedented $40 million in his campaign for the nomination. This amount exceeded that of all his competitors for the nomination, and the vast bulk of his campaign war chest was derived from small, individual donations solicited through the internet. Although Dean’s campaign collapsed after the candidate suffered unexpected losses in Iowa and New Hampshire and although most of his $40 million war chest was depleted by the first primary contest, Dean’s success at internet fund-raising was nonetheless impressive. Then,
in 2008, Barack Obama’s campaign substantially raised the stakes in fund-raising through the internet by raising over $200 million through that medium, and in 2012 the Obama reelection campaign proved groundbreaking in this regard, leveraging micro-donations by raising money online from over 3 million separate donors. His appeal to voters through the internet represents a significant achievement in the use of this technology in campaign politics. Today, political parties as well as individual candidates use the internet as a fund-raising tool. As Americans increasingly come to rely on the internet, it is likely that more and more political candidates will follow Dean’s and Obama’s examples and harness this technology for fund-raising and other campaigning.

REGULATING CAMPAIGN FINANCING

Congress and the states have passed many and varied laws to regulate the conduct of campaign contributions. These laws are not intended to prevent individuals or groups from giving money. Rather, they attempt to prevent a “quid pro quo,” or a donation in return for an elected official voting or acting in a certain way in direct response to accepting the campaign gift.

The first significant piece of federal legislation aimed at regulating campaign financing was the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), passed in 1971 and amended in 1974. The law required that all federal candidates accurately disclose campaign contributions and document all campaign expenditures. Subsequent amendments to FECA imposed legal limits on campaign contributions by individuals ($1,000 to each candidate per election cycle, $5,000 to PACs per year, and $20,000 to national party committees per year). Additionally, FECA imposed an outright ban on certain campaign contributions by corporations, unions, national banks, and foreign nationals, among others.

All of these provisions targeted so-called hard money, contributions that go directly to candidates and their campaign committees. Although the Supreme Court in 2014 struck down attempts to limit the total amount an individual can contribute to federal candidates as a whole in a two-year cycle, the federal government still imposes limits on how much an individual can contribute to a single candidate in primaries and general elections. Meanwhile, FECA did little to stem the influx of soft money funds to political parties and political advocacy groups that are not contributed directly to candidate campaigns and that do not expressly advocate the election of a particular candidate. In the four decades following FECA, the two major political parties have strategically spent soft money on administrative and party-building activities, as well as on issue ads that do not specifically promote an individual candidate but that nevertheless attempt to affect the election outcome.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) was established in 1974 to enforce all campaign financing rules and regulations, including limits on campaign contributions. Today, the FEC is the federal agency in charge of enforcing election laws. Provisions for public funding of presidential campaigns were subsequently passed in 1976 and 1979.

Critics have voiced a number of complaints about the system of campaign finance regulations. For one thing, the original limits on individual contributions—fixed by legislation in the 1970s—were never indexed to inflation. This oversight was addressed in legislation in 2002 mandating that limits be indexed for inflation every two years. For example, in 2005–2006 individuals were able to give up to $2,100 to candidates and up to $26,700 to national party committees.

Another complaint concerns the failure of the system to adapt to modern campaign...
independent campaign expenditures Political donations that PACs or individuals spend to support campaigns but do not directly contribute to the campaigns.

Buckley v. Valeo (1976) The 1976 Supreme Court opinion that held that spending money to influence elections is protected First Amendment speech and that prohibited limitations on independent expenditures or personal money spent by candidates on their own campaigns.

Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 Also called the McCain-Feingold Act, the federal legislation that (1) restricted soft money spent by political parties, (2) regulated expenditures on ads that refer to specific candidates immediately before an election, and (3) increased limits on hard money donated directly to candidates and their campaigns.

Citizens United v. FEC (2010) The 2010 Supreme Court opinion that held that government restrictions on independent political spending by corporations, unions, and other associations violate the First Amendment. Critics of the decision predicted the ruling would bring about a new era of corporate influence in politics. In fact, the bulk of large expenditures has come from so-called super PACs dominated by a small group of billionaires: this development more than anything else has shifted significant power away from the political parties and toward the donors themselves.

midterm congressional elections Congressional elections held midway between successive presidential elections.

dynamics. As a result of frontloading, presidential primary elections are now bunched up earlier and earlier in the general election campaign; yet the strict limits on expenditures imposed on those who accept public financing do not really account for these new campaign realities, which compel candidates to spend a considerable amount of their money during a relatively short period of time.

In recent years, advocates of campaign finance reform have focused their greatest criticism on soft money in the form of independent campaign expenditures. These are monies that PACs or individuals spend to support political campaigns but that do not directly contribute to them. FECA banned the unlimited use of independent expenditures to directly support the election of one candidate or the defeat of another candidate, but those funds could still be used to build the party as a whole. For example, a PAC can produce and support a political advertisement that endorses a party’s position on an issue and pay for the airtime to broadcast that ad on television. The money for the ad is not donated to a campaign per se but instead is spent on services that support the campaign; thus, the money spent is considered an “independent” expenditure. The U.S. Supreme Court in Buckley v. Valeo (1976) ruled that Congress could limit campaign contributions consistent with the First Amendment, but that it could not limit independent campaign expenditures or personal money spent by candidates on behalf of their own campaigns. Nearly 30 years later, in McConnell v. FEC (2003), the Court extended that ruling to apply to spending by political parties as well. Thus, political parties themselves often sponsor television ads that talk more generally about issues facing the country without mentioning any individual candidate or race. Of course, most political experts acknowledge that these ads may have a significant impact on individual campaigns.

The most recent reform attempts have focused on soft money and independent campaign expenditures. Loopholes in campaign financing have allowed soft money to go unregulated by the FEC. Legislation designed to better regulate the way campaigns are financed and how the money is spent was passed by Congress in 2002. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 prohibited national parties and candidates for federal office from accepting soft money (i.e., that which is not subject to regulation by the FEC). The BCRA also raised limits on contributions to a particular candidate for federal office from $1,000 to $2,000. The U.S. Supreme Court, in the highly controversial decision of Citizens United v. FEC (2010), struck down as unconstitutional several other provisions of the BCRA, including certain limits on corporate and union funding of broadcast ads right before an election.

14-5 CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS

Although presidential elections typically receive the most attention from the media and the public, many other elections also occur regularly, including those that send members to the two houses of Congress. In each presidential election year, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are contested, as are one-third of the seats in the Senate. Midway between successive presidential elections are the midterm congressional elections, in which all 435 House seats are contested again and another one-third of the Senate seats are voted on (senators serve six-year terms, and the 100 Senate elections are staggered so that about one-third of the seats are contested every two years).

Midterm elections for Congress differ from presidential-year elections in important ways. First, voter turnout tends to be lower in the midterm contests. Without the large-scale attention the presidential race receives, voter interest and engagement in the midterm elections are lower, and thus turnout tends to suffer. Even in the highly charged midterm elections of 2018, voter turnout was just 47 percent, almost 13 percentage points below voter turnout figures for the preceding presidential election.

Second, midterm elections fail to offer congressional candidates what has come to be known as the coattail effect. In a presidential election year, the names of candidates for Congress typically are listed below the name of their party’s candidate for president on the ballot. Thus, voters’ selection of congressional candidates may be influenced by their choice for president. The congressional candidates, in effect, ride the coattails of the presidential candidate. For the coattail effect to be apparent, the outcome of the presidential race typically
needs to be a landslide victory for the winner, such as in 1984 when President Ronald Reagan soundly defeated Democrat Walter Mondale. For the first time in decades, the 1984 elections ushered in a Republican majority to the U.S. Senate. By contrast, George W. Bush’s narrow victory in 2004 did not appear to produce a coattail effect.

Third, midterm elections show a discernible trend—although often not very strong—that favors congressional candidates in the party opposite the president’s party. When a president wins, especially by a large margin, the coattail effect distorts what would normally occur in any given congressional race. Yet in midterm elections, without the president’s name at the top of the ballot, the absence of the coattail gives the advantage to the opposing party. In the modern era, the party in opposition to the president has managed to regain control of Congress only in the midterm elections when the president’s popularity is waning. Thus, in 1946 and then in 1994, the Republicans wrested both houses of Congress back from the Democrats at midterm elections during the presidencies of Democrats Harry Truman and Bill Clinton, respectively.

True to form, the 2010 midterm elections once again offered a rebuke to the political party holding the White House. Running on a platform that opposed Democratic spending initiatives and promised to rein in the size of government, Republican House candidates transformed a 178-seat minority into a 240-seat majority. By taking more than 60 seats away from the Democrats, Republicans enjoyed a level of midterm election success not seen by either party in decades. Similarly, the 2018 midterms rebuked Trump and the GOP by shifting more than 30 House seats to the Democrats and giving them majority control of that chamber.

More important than presidential coattails or any other factor in congressional elections, however, is the power of incumbency. Incumbent members of Congress, particularly those in the House, are returned to office by voters at amazingly high rates. In a normal year of House races, an incumbent who is running for reelection stands a better than 90 percent chance of being returned to office. What accounts for such a high return rate? First, name

FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Getting Involved in Political Campaigns

Politics is very much on the minds of college-age Americans today. In 2008, a record 35.6 percent of first-year college students said that they had frequently discussed politics in the past year. (The previous high was 33.6 percent in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War.) In the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns, college students were more interested and more active than ever before. Students who work on election campaigns may find themselves performing such simple tasks as stuffing envelopes or walking door to door to distribute leaflets. Those who are technologically savvy may assist campaigns in other ways—for example, by helping to create Facebook profiles or fan pages on the internet. About 11 percent of first-year college students in 2008 said they were active in election campaigns. (This figure was up by about 3 percentage points from 2004.) More first-year college students also report that they are likely to engage in a political protest (6.1 percent in 2008, as compared to 4.9 percent in 1966).

For Critical Thinking and Discussion

1. Why do you think your peers were so energized about the recent presidential elections? What do you think about youth energy for future elections—will the trend toward greater interest in politics continue to rise?
2. Do you think college students’ participation made a difference in the election outcome in 2016 and 2020?
recognition of the candidate is a significant factor in lower-profile congressional races, and incumbents, because they have been in office, tend to have higher name recognition than do challengers. Second, the vast majority of congressional districts—and thus the vast majority of seats in Congress—are dominated by either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. Congressional seats from districts that include either a high percentage of Democratic voters or a high percentage of Republican voters are dominated by their respective majority party and are referred to, as noted earlier, as safe seats. A far smaller number of districts tend to have similar numbers of Democratic and Republican voters and are known as marginal seats. In the redistricting of congressional districts that periodically takes place, the political parties try to configure districts to their own partisan advantage. This maneuvering tends to create a large number of safe seats and often very few marginal seats.

Finally, incumbent members of Congress enjoy financial advantages, such as the franking privilege, which allows members to mail materials to their constituents without paying postage.

Elections and campaigns are central features of the republican form of government in the United States. The number of elections is many; the cost of campaigns is high; and the process for selecting the nation’s chief office-holder, the president of the United States, is long and complex. U.S. presidential elections evoke a great deal of passion, engage the interest of millions of voters, persuade vast numbers of citizens and groups to contribute large amounts of money, and focus attention on the great issues of the day. Thus, campaigns and elections duly serve their purpose in providing an important connection between Americans and their government.

**Summary**

14-1 *American Presidential Elections in Historical Perspective*

- From 1796 up through the 1830s, the presidential nomination process was dominated by officials of the two major parties who chose party nominees based on informal discussions; by the twentieth century, electoral reforms such as the direct primary gave voters in many states a formal opportunity to cast a ballot for delegates, who would in turn choose their party’s nominees at a national convention. For the general election, the Electoral College began as a mechanism for the political elite to select the chief executive and has evolved into a complex system where voters select the president.

14-2 *The Nomination Campaign*

- Nomination campaigns focus on attaining victories in presidential primaries and caucuses. The Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary have traditionally come at the beginning of the nomination calendar, and so they tend to disproportionately influence final outcomes. In recent elections, many states have attempted to move their primaries and caucuses up on the calendar in a process known as frontloading.

- National party conventions used to play an important role in helping choose party nominees; today they are mostly made-for-television affairs, anointing the party ticket with speeches offering testimonials to the nominees.

14-3 *The General Election Campaign*

- General election races may be either incumbent races (pitting a sitting president against a challenger) or open elections (with no incumbent in the race). In the former, the election often amounts to a referendum on the performance of the president over the previous four years.

- Presidential candidates choose their running mates (the vice presidential candidates) strategically to address specific weaknesses of the presidential candidate or to boost the ticket’s prospects in certain geographical areas.

- To win the presidency, a candidate must put together a coalition of states sufficient to win a majority of the 538 Electoral College votes, which are allocated to each state based on the sum of the number of their senators and their representatives. The candidate who does well in battleground states will normally win the 270 votes necessary to secure a majority.
14-4 Campaign Funding
- Campaign funding is critical to the success of individual candidates. Election laws since 1974 have limited the amount individuals or organizations can give to candidates (hard money). The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 went a step further, restricting expenditures to political parties or advocacy groups that are theoretically independent of specific candidates or campaigns (soft money). The Federal Election Commission enforces all such limitations that have been upheld as constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

14-5 Congressional Campaigns and Elections
- In congressional elections, the power of incumbency is more important than any other factor. Unlike midterm elections, congressional elections that coincide with presidential elections tend to garner greater voter turnout, and members of the successful presidential candidate’s party sometimes benefit from the coattail effect.

Key Terms
- battleground states (p. 301)
- Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 (p. 310)
- Buckley v. Valeo (1976) (p. 310)
- caucus (p. 296)
- closed primary (p. 296)
- coattail effect (p. 310)
- Electoral College (p. 304)
- electors (p. 304)
- Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) (p. 309)
- Federal Election Commission (FEC) (p. 309)
- franking privilege (p. 312)
- frontloading (p. 299)
- hard money (p. 309)
- incumbent race (p. 300)
- independent campaign expenditures (p. 310)
- invisible primary (p. 295)
- marginal seat (p. 312)
- midterm congressional elections (p. 310)
- nomination campaign (p. 297)
- open election (p. 301)
- open primary (p. 296)
- power of incumbency (p. 311)
- prenomination campaign (p. 294)
- presidential primary (p. 296)
- safe seat (p. 312)
- soft money (p. 309)
- unit rule (p. 305)