CHAPTER 9 Nominations, Elections, and Campaigns

Parallel Lecture 9.1

I. The Evolution of Campaigning

A. An **election campaign** is an organized effort to persuade voters to choose one candidate over others competing for the same office.

B. Increasingly, election campaigns have evolved from being party-centered to being candidate-centered.

II. In the U.S., candidates campaign for nomination as well as election.

A. Most aspiring candidates for major office are nominated through a **primary election.**

1. In both parties, only about half of the regular party voters bother to vote in any given primary (though this varies greatly by state and contest).

a) Some research has suggested primary voters hold more extreme views than party members who did not vote in the primaries.

b) Other research disputes this view, suggesting that there is little evidence to support the view that primary voters are unrepresentative of the general population.

c) Some studies suggest that primary voters subordinate their views, choosing candidates who are more likely to fare better in the general election.

2. Primary elections may be classified as **closed, open, modified closed** and **modified open,** depending on the severity of requirements for determining party affiliation. Variations in the types of primary a state holds affect the strength of the parties in that state.

3. The important thing to remember is that *our parties choose their candidates through elections*. This practice originated in the U.S. and remains peculiar to this country, resulting in the decentralization of power in the parties.

B. To nominate a presidential candidate, parties employ a complex mix of ways of polling voters, including presidential primaries, local party caucuses, and party conventions.

1. A **presidential primary** is a special primary used to select delegates to attend the party’s national nominating convention.

2. The **caucus/convention** method of delegate selection is a more complex series of meetings.(local caucuses, followed by the county meetings, culminating in a state convention)

3. Nearly all delegates selected in primaries are publicly committed to specific candidates, so that one can easily tell before the parties’ summer nominating conventions who will be their nominees. **Front-loading** (the tendency during the last two decades for states to move their primaries earlier in the calendar to gain attention from the media and the candidates) means that nominees are chosen earlier and earlier.

C. The primary-centered nomination process has several consequences.

1. Because of the complex mix of caucus and primary methods used to select delegates, timing and luck can affect who wins, and even an outside chance of success can attract many candidates if there is no incumbent president running for re-election.

2. Candidates favored by most party identifiers usually win their party’s nomination.

3. Candidates who win the nomination do so largely on their own and owe little or nothing to the national party organization.

III. All seats in the House of Representatives, one-third of the seats in the Senate, and numerous state and local offices are filled in a **general election** held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. The election when the president is chosen (every fourth year) is identified as presidential. The intervening elections are known as congressional, midterm, or off year elections.

A. Voters choose a president indirectly through the **electoral college,** composed of electors pledged to one of the candidates.

1. Each state is accorded one electoral vote for each of its senators and representatives. Every decade, the number of electors a state has may change as a result of Congressional reapportionment done on the basis of the census. (See text Figure 9.2.)

2. The electoral college highlights the fact that the presidential election is a federal, not a national, election: as the 2000 election demonstrated, it is possible for a candidate to win a majority of the popular vote and lose the election in the electoral college.

3. In all the elections from 1888 to 2000, the way the college operates has magnified the presidential victory margin (see text Figure 9.4). The 2000 election highlighted the fact that a candidate winning the popular vote may still lose the presidency. Many argue that this is simply wrong: these reformers favor a majoritarian method for choosing the president.

4. There are three lines of argument that support selecting a president by electoral votes:

a) The federal form of government as embodied in the Constitution weighs small states more in the vote (because all states have two senators).

b) The electoral system encourages presidential candidates to campaign on foot and in rural areas, rather than just via television to the 100 most populous markets.

c) The potential problems of a nationwide recount in a close election (multiplying the problems of Florida 2000 by fifty) may warrant keeping the current system.

B. Congressional elections

1. A voter is said to vote a **straight ticket** when he or she chooses only one party’s candidates for all offices.

2. A voter who switches parties when choosing candidates for different offices is said to vote a **split ticket.**

C. In recent years, elections mostly have resulted in divided government, in which one party controls the presidency and the other party controls the Congress.

D. So-called **first-past-the-post elections,** conducted in single-member districts, award victory to the candidate with the most votes. In congressional elections, this means that the party that wins the most votes tends to win even more seats than projected by its percentage of the vote. The Republican Party has benefited from the mathematics of first-past-the-post elections since 1994.

IV. Election campaigns may be studied by analyzing the political context, the available financial resources, and the strategies and tactics that underlie the dissemination of information about the candidate.

A. Political context

1. An **incumbent,** the current officeholder, usually enjoys an advantage over a **challenger,** who seeks to replace him or her.

2. An **open election** lacks an incumbent.

3. Despite the decreased influence of party affiliation on most people’s voting behavior, the party preference of the majority of the electorate remains important; it is easier for a candidate to be elected when his or her party matches the electorate’s preference.

4. Significant political issues⎯such as economic recession, personal scandals, war⎯are also important to a campaign, and can even negate other strong positive factors.

B. Financing

1. Election campaigns have become very expensive, and ample financing is usually critical to success.

2. Campaign financing for federal election today tends to be heavily regulated through the **Federal Election Commission** and most recently through the **Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (BCRA)** changes in 2004**.**

a) Limits have been imposed on amounts that individuals and groups can contribute to federal campaigns: individuals may only contribute $2,000 in hard money (direct donations to individual candidates) to each candidate; organizations (e.g., PACs) may only contribute $5,000 to each candidate.

b) Public funding is available for presidential campaigns, provided the candidates limit their expenditures. Some candidates choose not to accept public funds and so do not have to limit their expenditures.

c) Public funding of presidential candidates has limited election costs, helped equalize the amounts spent by the nominees, and increased the personalization of campaigns. It has also forced candidates to spend a great deal of time seeking relatively small ($2,000) contributions.

3. Public funds are given to the presidential candidate rather than to the party. Access to such funds has generally further isolated the presidential campaign from congressional campaigns.

4. Campaign spending limits were partially avoided by the use of *soft money*, funds that are spent for the entire party ticket for such things as party mailings, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote campaigns. Soft money enhanced the role of both the national and state parties in presidential campaigns until being declared illegal by BCRA and the courts. Loopholes still persist, however, in the form of issue-advocacy 527 committees. BCRA also attempted to curtail the rising occurrence of negative advertisements by making sure candidate-sponsored advertisements carried a statement of endorsement by the candidate.

5. Politicians and scholars are divided about the new reforms and the impact they may have on the political system.

C. Strategies and tactics

1. Using information obtained from pollsters or political consultants, professional campaign managers develop a strategy that mixes party affiliation, issues, and the candidate’s “image” (perceived personal qualities).

2. Campaign messages are disseminated to voters via the media through news coverage, candidate appearances on popular television programs, home pages on the World Wide Web, and advertising.

V. The choices individual voters make can be analyzed as products of both long-term forces, which operate over a series of elections, and short-term forces, which are associated with particular elections.

A. Party identification is the most important long-term factor in voting choice.

1. More than half the electorate decides how to vote before the party conventions, and voters who make early voting decisions generally vote according to their party identification.

2. Typically, the winning candidate for president gains the votes of nearly all of those who identify with his party, takes a sizable share of his opponents’ identifiers, and wins most of the independents.

B. Candidates seek to exploit issues that they think are important to voters.

1. Challengers usually campaign by pointing out problems and promising to solve them.

2. Incumbents try to campaign on their accomplishments.

C. Among short-term forces, candidate attributes are especially important when voters lack information about a candidate’s past behavior and policy stands.

1. Some voters fall back on their firsthand knowledge of religion, gender, and race in making political judgments.

D. Evaluating the Voting Choice

1. According to the idealized conception of democratic theory, voters who choose between candidates on the basis of their policies are voting on the issues.

2. Most studies of presidential elections show that when people cast their ballots, issues are less important than either party identification or the candidate’s image.

3. The relationship between voters’ position on the issues and their party identification is clearer and more consistent today.

 4. In the absence of detailed information about candidate’s position on the issues, party labels are a handy indicator of their position.

E. Campaign effects

1. There are definite limits to the effects of an election campaign on the outcome of elections.

 2. Although candidates seek free coverage on news and entertainment programs, they fight their election campaigns principally through television advertisements.

1. Televised candidate debates have been a regular feature of presidential elections since 1960.

VI. Although the party affiliation of the candidates and the party identification of the voters explain a good deal of electoral behavior, party organizations are not central to U.S. elections.

A. The Republican and Democratic parties fail to meet two of the four principles of responsible party government noted in Chapter 8.

1. Voters do not choose candidates according to the party program.

2. The governing party cannot be held responsible at the next election for executing its program, because there is no *governing party* when the president is of one party and Congress is controlled by the other.

B. Parties in the United States typify the pluralist more than the majoritarian model of democracy.

1. American parties act more like major interest groups than the way that parties act in other countries, seeking to elect their candidates with little regard for issues or ideologies favored by candidates for Congress and statewide office.

2. Stronger parties might be able to play a more important role in coordinating government policies after elections.

3. The decentralized nature of the nominating process and campaigning for election offer many opportunities for organized groups to back candidates who favor their interests.