PHOTO 2.1 Before widespread air travel, candidates relied on whistle-stop tours conducted from a campaign train. Here, Ronald Reagan pays homage to that bygone tradition in a 1984 whistle-stop tour.

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2 ELECTION POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how the presidential selection process has evolved since it first operated in 1789.
2. Define which political and personal backgrounds parties' presidential candidates tend to be drawn from.
3. Identify candidate strategies to fund campaigns that were undertaken to secure delegates to the national convention.
4. Describe ways in which party nominating conventions have changed since first introduced in the 1830s.
5. Explain how party nominees target their general election campaigns on states likely to deliver enough electoral votes in order to win.
6. Summarize how Electoral College balloting in December concludes most presidential elections, confirmed by Congress in January of the following year.

With the president as the focal point of public life for most Americans, it follows that the presidential election is the country's pivotal political event. More citizens participate in this process than in any other aspect of civic life—more than 158 million in 2020—and their choices have enormous significance for the nation and, indeed, for the world. The election is usually a unifying event, a collective celebration of democracy coming at the conclusion of an elaborate pageant replete with familiar rituals, colorful characters, and plot lines that capture attention despite being familiar.

Today's selection process bears little resemblance to what the founders outlined in the Constitution. Most of the changes have been extraconstitutional—resulting from the evolution of political parties, media practices, technology, and citizen expectations rather than constitutional amendments. Almost constant tinkering with the rules governing presidential elections has produced greater democratization—but important remnants of the constitution's original **indirect democracy** persist, including the Electoral College. The 2000 and 2016 elections, when George W. Bush and Donald J. Trump won in the Electoral College but lost the popular vote, renewed the debate about election rules. Bush won all of Florida's electoral votes by winning just 537 popular votes out of the state's nearly six million ballots. It took thirty-six days to settle the contest. Meanwhile, Americans relearned the arcane workings of the Electoral College and discovered the fallibility of Florida's voting methods and counting rules (though Florida is hardly unique in this regard).

Trump won in 2016 by crumbling the "blue wall" (the eighteen states Democrats had won in each presidential election from 1992 to 2012): winning Michigan,

Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania by just 78,000 total votes. Flipping those three states' combined forty-six electoral votes propelled Trump to victory even though he lost the national popular vote by nearly three million (once again triggering questions about the method Americans use to select their national executive). In 2020, Joe Biden won the Electoral College vote by flipping back those three states and narrowly winning two Sunbelt states (Arizona and Georgia). Biden's electoral vote total—306—was nearly the same as Trump's in 2016 (304), but unlike Trump in 2016, he decisively won the national popular vote, 51.3 to 46.8 percent (a spread of over seven million votes). Still, controversy ensued, with Trump and his allies spreading false charges of voter fraud—a postelection campaign that culminated in the January 6, 2020, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

At the conclusion of this chapter, we review recommendations for reform intended to improve system performance and provide for a greater degree of direct democracy. First we first examine the structure of presidential elections and major transformations in the nomination and general election phases of the process.

EVOLUTION OF THE SELECTION PROCESS

In 1789 and 1792, electing a president was straightforward. Each member of the Electoral College cast two votes, one of which had to be for a person outside the elector's state. Both times George Washington won unanimously, with John Adams receiving the second highest number of votes to become vice president.[1] In 1789, the entire election process took only three months: No one campaigned, electors were chosen on the first Wednesday of January, they met in their respective states to vote on the first Wednesday in February, and the votes were counted on April 6. The contrast with today's process could not be sharper: Candidates now launch nomination campaigns two years or more before the general election, collectively spending billions of dollars in pursuit of the office, and everyone expects to know the winner on election night.

Consensus support for George Washington ensured smooth operation of the selection procedure during the first two presidential elections, but concurrence around the individual masked very real policy differences. When those policy differences came to the forefront and consensus on future nominees eroded, political parties emerged. The Constitution did not mention or contemplate political parties. In fact, the Framers had warned of the "mischief of faction." But members of Congress quickly aligned themselves along policy lines. By the early 1790s, those who favored a strong national government and the economic policies of Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton formed the Federalist Party.[2] States' rights advocates who were critical of Hamilton's economic policies formed the rival Democratic-Republican Party, led by Thomas Jefferson.[3] By the mid-1790s, cohesive partisan blocs had solidified in Congress, with congressional candidates labeled by their party affiliation.[4]

Political parties almost immediately impacted the Electoral College, with electors now aligning themselves along party lines. The Constitution contained no provision for distinguishing between presidential and vice presidential ballots in the Electoral College: Each elector simply cast two votes, and whichever candidate finished in second place (assumed by the Framers to be the second most qualified) became vice president. The emergence of political parties exposed the deficiency of that process. First, in 1796, the president (John Adams) and vice president (Thomas Jefferson) were of different parties. Then, in 1800, the Jeffersonian-Republicans decisively won the popular vote, and the party's electors proceeded to cast their votes in lockstep for the two candidates from their party, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. This resulted in a first-place tie between the two. Incumbent President Adams came in third, and his putative vice president Charles Pinckney fourth.

The Constitution called for the House of Representatives to determine the winner in the event of a tie in the Electoral College. This led to the awkward situation of a Federalist-controlled House determining the outcome of an election won by the opposition party. A majority of Federalists in the House wanted to elect Burr (either as a lesser evil or as a slap in the face to their archrival Jefferson), while Jeffersonian-Republicans unanimously supported Jefferson—who had, after all, been intended as their presidential candidate. After thirty-five ballots ended in stalemate, the House finally did the right thing and elected Jefferson president and Burr vice president. That crisis led to the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution in 1804, which stipulates that electors cast distinct votes for president and vice president.[5] That corrected the flaw that allowed a tie in 1800, but has meant that party loyalty, with infrequent exceptions, has prevailed in Electoral College balloting ever since.

The rise of parties also led to the need for a new method to choose nominees. In 1796, Federalist leaders chose their candidate, John Adams, while the Democratic-Republicans relied on their party members in Congress, the **congressional caucus**, to nominate Jefferson. Use of the congressional caucus to nominate presidential candidates prevailed in subsequent elections, and as the Federalist Party shriveled (it did not manage to nominate a presidential candidate in 1816), nomination by the Democratic-Republicans' so-called King Caucus was tantamount to election.

Already assembled in the nation's capital, a congressional caucus could meet easily to select a nominee. Because legislators were familiar with potential presidential candidates from all parts of the new country, they were logical agents for choosing candidates for an office with a nationwide constituency. The caucus also provided peer review of candidates' credentials: Essentially, a group of politicians assessed a fellow politician's skills, abilities, and political appeal. But the congressional caucus violated the constitutional principle of separation of powers by giving members of the legislative body a routine—and dominant—role in choosing the president rather than the emergency role arising only in the event of an Electoral College deadlock. Moreover, the caucus was inherently undemocratic. It could not represent those states and districts not represented by its party in Congress, effectively disenfranchising those areas. At

the same time, the growing number of interested and informed citizens who participated in grassroots party activities, especially campaigns, had no means to participate in congressional caucus deliberations. Even members of Congress complained about the system.

The 1824 election dethroned King Caucus. Only 66 of 261 members of Congress participated, and three-quarters of those who did participate came from only four states. The caucus nominated Secretary of War William Crawford, who had recently suffered a debilitating stroke. Three other candidates refused to follow the decision of the caucus. One of them, Senator Andrew Jackson, was nominated by the state legislature in his home state of Tennessee, which also passed a resolution condemning the caucus system. Among the four major candidates, Jackson won the popular vote and the most electoral votes, but not a majority of either. With no majority in the Electoral College, the election was again thrown to the House of Representatives where John Quincy Adams emerged victorious after he agreed to make House Speaker Henry Clay, one of the four remaining major candidates, his successor as secretary of state in return for his support. This disarray permanently discredited the congressional caucus system. Nomination by state legislature was dismissed as equally undemocratic and too decentralized to become a routine mechanism for selecting a national office. In short, a new device was needed that would represent party elements throughout the country, tap the new participatory fervor of the age, and facilitate the nomination of a candidate.

National Party Conventions

Party nominating conventions provided the answer, an assembly made truly national by including delegates from all the states. Rail transportation made such meetings feasible, and the expanding citizen participation in presidential elections made the change necessary. Influence over selection of the party nominee, therefore, shifted to state and local party leaders, particularly those able to commit large blocs of delegate votes to a candidate.

Two minor parties with no appreciable representation in Congress, the Anti-Masons and the National Republicans, led the way with conventions in 1831.[6] To rally support in 1832, the Democrats, under President Andrew Jackson (elected in 1828), also held a convention. Major political parties have nominated their presidential and vice presidential candidates by holding national conventions ever since, though the pandemic of 2020 required dramatic changes. National committees composed of state party leaders call the presidential nominating conventions into session to choose nominees and to adopt a platform of common policy positions.[7] Delegates are selected by states and allocated primarily on the basis of population.

Although today's conventions in some ways resemble those of the past, the nomination process has undergone drastic revision, especially after 1968, when Democrats introduced reforms that diminished party control over conventions. Just as influence

over selection of the party nominee shifted from Congress to party leaders, it has moved within the party from a small group of political professionals to a broad base of activists and voters. The origins of this shift can be traced to the development of presidential primary elections that began early in the twentieth century. (Florida passed the first primary election law in 1901.)

Under the system that operated from roughly 1850 to 1950, party leaders from the largest states would bargain over presidential nominations. Most influential were those who controlled large blocs of delegates and could throw their support behind a candidate for the right price. These power brokers—hence the term **brokered conventions**—might seek a program commitment in the platform, a position in the president's cabinet, or other forms of federal patronage in return for support. To be successful, candidates had to curry favor with party and elected officials before and during the national convention. An effective campaign manager might tour the country selling the candidate's virtues and securing delegate commitments prior to the convention, but about half the conventions began with no sense of the likely outcome. Protracted bargaining and negotiation among powerful state and local party leaders were often the result. In 1852, future president Franklin Pierce did not receive a single Democratic convention vote until the thirty-fifth ballot, finally winning the party's nod on the forty-ninth. In 1924, the Democrats were so badly divided (largely over the role of the Ku Klux Klan) that 103 ballots were cast over seventeen days to nominate John W. Davis, an effort that must have seemed pointless later when he attracted only 29 percent of the popular vote. Nevertheless, the convention was a *deliberative* body that reached decisions on common policy positions as well as on nominees. Providing a way to accommodate the demands of major elements within the party established the base for a nationwide campaign.

In this respect, modern conventions are quite different. Not since 1952, when the Democrats needed three ballots to nominate Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois for president, has it taken more than one ballot to determine either party's nominee.[8] Raucous floor battles over procedures and delegate credentials have given way to a stream of symbols and speakers whose appearances are carefully choreographed to appeal to a prime-time television audience. Conventions now serve as *ratifying* assemblies for a popular choice made during the preceding primary elections rather than deliberative bodies, and candidates with popular appeal have the advantage over those whose appeal is primarily with party leaders.

Although much of the convention's business is still conducted in backroom meetings, the most important business—choosing the presidential nominee—already has been decided through the grueling process used to select convention delegates who are bound to a specific candidate in advance. Compared with their forerunners, modern conventions conduct business in a routine fashion, adhere to enforceable national party standards for delegate selection and demographic representation, and are more heavily influenced by rank-and-file party supporters than by party leaders.[9] These changes appeared gradually through a process often fraught with conflict that centered on the rules governing delegate selection.

Reform of the Selection Process

The pace of change accelerated when the Democratic Party adopted internal reforms after it lost the presidency in 1968. In addition to the actions already noted, rules adopted by a variety of actors—one hundred state political parties and fifty legislatures, the national political parties, and Congress—reformed the process, and they continue to modify it. Sometimes individuals and states turned to the courts to interpret provisions of these regulations and reconcile conflicts. In addition, the rules were adjusted so drastically and so often that, particularly in the Democratic Party, candidates and their supporters found it difficult to keep up.

Reform has been especially pervasive in the nomination process. The tumultuous Democratic convention in 1968 saw Vietnam War protesters clash with police in the streets of Chicago and the nomination of Vice President Hubert Humphrey who, unlike other leading candidates, had not entered a single presidential primary contest. Responding to disaffected activists, the Democrats appointed a commission to develop a set of guidelines that would reduce the influence of party leaders, encourage participation by rank-and-file Democrats, and expand convention representation of previously underrepresented groups, particularly youth, women, and Blacks. The result of the **McGovern-Fraser Commission** reforms was a pronounced shift of influence within the party from *party professionals* toward *amateurs*, a term encompassing citizens who become engaged in the presidential contest because of a short-term concern, such as an attractive candidate or an especially important issue.

States, seeking to conform to the party's new guidelines on participation, adopted the **primary** as the preferred means of selecting convention delegates. Primaries allow a party's registered voters—and, in some states, Independents—to express a presidential preference that is translated into convention delegates. The **party caucus** is another (increasingly rare) way to select delegates. The caucus is a local meeting of registered party voters that often involves speeches and discussion about the various candidates' merits. A caucus is more social, public, and time-consuming (often requiring two hours to complete) than a primary, in which voters make choices in the privacy of the voting booth. The caucus method is also multistage: Delegates from the local caucuses go to a county convention that selects delegates to a state convention that selects the national delegates. In 1968, only seventeen states chose delegates through primaries; the remainder used caucuses dominated by party leaders. In 2016, twelve states used caucuses in both parties, and three states held a primary in one party and a caucus in the other, but by 2020 there were only four states using caucuses.[10]

Because of the shift to primaries, nominations are more apt to reflect the voters' immediate concerns, nominees are unofficially chosen well before the convention, and the influence of party leaders is reduced. These changes mean peer review has little impact—politicians evaluating the capability of fellow politicians—while the media's importance has grown. By operating as the principal source of information about the candidates, by sponsoring debates, and by emphasizing the "horse race"—who

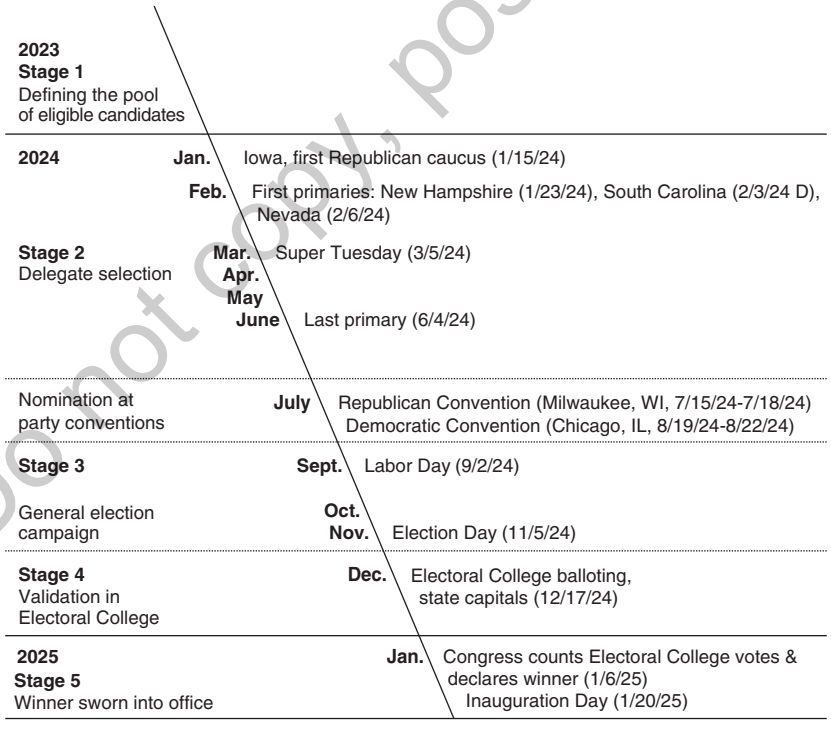
is ahead—the media have become enormously influential during the delegate selection process. For 2020, the Democratic Party downgraded the convention influence of "superdelegates" selected automatically by virtue of their party leadership posts, further eroding peer review, a trend that continued in 2024.

The Contemporary Selection Process

Despite the seemingly perpetual flux that characterizes presidential elections, it is possible to identify four broad stages in the process: (1) defining the pool of eligible candidates; (2) nominating the parties' candidates at the national conventions following delegate selection in the primaries and caucuses; (3) waging the general election campaign, culminating in election day; and (4) validating results through the Electoral College.

No two presidential election cycles are identical, but the customary timeline is relatively predictable (see Figure 2.1). Potential candidates actively maneuver for position during the one or two years preceding the election. Selection of convention delegates begins in January and February of the election year, with summer conventions typically scheduled first for the **out party**, the one seeking the White House.[11] Traditionally,

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The 2024 Presidential Contest Timeline



the general election campaign begins on Labor Day and runs until election day, the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, but modern campaigns really begin once the major parties' nominees become clear, sometimes as early as April. When the nomination contest is heated, we may not know the nominees until June, as happened in 2008 when senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought to the end. In 2020, the parties' convention scheduling was disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, but the nominees were known well before the August nominating conventions. Unlike in 2020, when vote counting continued for days after November 3, voters usually know the general election winner on election night, and the mid-December balloting by electors in their state capitals is practically automatic. Finally, the electors' ballots are officially tabulated the first week in January during a joint session of the U.S. Congress presided over by the incumbent vice president. This ceremony normally attracts little attention, but on January 6, 2021, the nation watched a pro-Trump mob assault the Capitol in support of like-minded Republican legislators seeking to prevent Congress from validating the legitimate winner. The duly elected president is inaugurated on January 20, a date set in the Twentieth Amendment (before 1937, the inauguration date was March 4).

DEFINING THE POOL OF ELIGIBLES

Who is eligible to serve as president? The formal rules relating to qualifications are minimal and have been remarkably stable over time. Individuals need to meet only three requirements set forth in Article II, section 1 of the Constitution. One must be a natural-born citizen, at least thirty-five years of age, and a resident of the United States for fourteen years or longer. Census estimates suggest close to 150 million Americans met these constitutional requirements for 2024. It's fair to say the pool of plausible candidates is far smaller![12]

From time to time, opponents question a presidential candidate's citizenship. Large numbers of Americans erroneously believed that Obama was born in Kenya, not Hawaii as his birth certificate makes clear. George Romney (candidate in 1968), John McCain (nominee in 2008), and Ted Cruz (candidate in 2016) were born to American parents living outside U.S. territory (in Mexico, the Panama Canal Zone, and Canada, respectively). Barry Goldwater (nominee in 1964) was born in Arizona before it became a state. The Supreme Court has never ruled on the meaning of the Constitution's "natural born" requirement, but the Congressional Research Service concluded in 2011 that *natural born* means a person born in the United States and under its jurisdiction or born abroad to U.S. citizen-parents.[13] Two former solicitors general of the United States wrote in the *Harvard Law Review* that both British common law and actions of the first Congress defined "natural born" as someone who does not have to go through the naturalization process to become a citizen.[14]

The informal requirements for the presidency are less easily satisfied. People who entertain presidential ambitions must possess the political experiences and personal characteristics that make them attractive to political activists and to the general voting public. Potential candidates accumulate these credentials through personal and career decisions made long before the election year, but there is no explicit checklist of informal qualifications for the presidency. One method to determine what particular political experiences and personal characteristics put an individual in line for a nomination is to look at past candidates, but the attitudes of political leaders and the public change over time.

Political Experience of Candidates

Who is nominated to run for president? Until 2016, the answer had been people with experience in one of a few civilian elective and appointed political offices or in the military. Nominees' backgrounds had changed very little since the second half of the nineteenth century.[15] Since 1932, with only two exceptions, major-party nominees had been drawn from one of four positions: (1) the presidency, (2) the vice presidency, (3) a state governorship, or (4) the U.S. Senate. (See Appendix B.) Candidates with other backgrounds were unsuccessful. Donald Trump was the first major-party nominee in American history to have no record of public service—elected, appointed, or military—before entering the presidency.

Presidents and Vice Presidents. Since 1932, the party controlling the presidency has turned to the presidency or vice presidency for candidates, and the out party has turned primarily to governors and secondarily to senators. In only three of the twenty-three elections from 1932 to 2020 was the name of an incumbent president or vice president not on the ballot. Sixteen times, the incumbent president was renominated. The incumbent vice president was nominated in four of the seven instances when the incumbent president was either prohibited by the Twenty-Second Amendment from running again (Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1960, Ronald Reagan in 1988, Bill Clinton in 2000, George W. Bush in 2008, Barack Obama in 2016) or declined to do so (Harry S. Truman in 1952 and Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968). The exceptions occurred in 1952, 2008, and 2016. When Truman halted his reelection effort in 1952, Adlai Stevenson became the nominee rather than the vice president, seventy-five-year-old Alben Barkley. In 2008 and 2016, the incumbent party had an open competition for the presidential nomination because Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Joe Biden chose not to pursue the office that year.

There are no guarantees that an incumbent president will be renominated, but it is enormously difficult for the party in power to remove these leaders from the national ticket. Party leaders are reluctant to admit they made a mistake four years earlier, incumbents can favor politically important areas or appoint allies to executive branch positions, and presidents enjoy far greater name recognition and media

exposure than others seeking the nomination. Even unpopular presidents are renominated. The Republicans chose Gerald R. Ford in 1976 despite an energy crisis and a slow economy. Democrats renominated Jimmy Carter in 1980 when both inflation and unemployment were high, Iran held Americans hostage, and Soviet troops occupied Afghanistan. Donald Trump waltzed to renomination in 2020 despite a widespread pandemic and the resulting economic downturn. And Joe Biden announced his reelection bid in April 2023 with no indication of a serious challenge from within his party despite his age (80 at the time of the announcement) and with the lowest Gallup approval ratings of his presidency (37 percent).[16]

Incumbent vice presidents who choose to run for president are more likely to win their party's nomination today than in the past.[17] Modern-day running mates have arguably been more capable than their predecessors in earlier periods of American history, making them more viable prospects for the presidency. Moreover, presidents now assign their vice presidents meaningful responsibilities, including political party activities (especially campaigning in off-year elections), liaison assignments with social groups, and diplomatic missions abroad. As vice presidents' visibility and significance have increased, so have their political chances improved.[18]

If it is an asset in securing the party's nomination, the vice presidency once seemed a liability in winning the general election. George H. W. Bush's victory in 1988 broke a 152-year-old record of losing campaigns. Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and Al Gore lost as incumbent vice presidents in 1960, 1968, and 2000.

Senators and Governors. From 1932 through 2020, the party out of power nominated eleven governors, six senators, three former vice presidents, one Army general, and two businessmen. (See Table 2.1.) Both major parties have looked to governors as promising candidates, except for the period from 1960 to 1972, when Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-1960), Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-1964), Sen. George McGovern (D-1972), and former vice president Nixon (R-1968) won the nomination. Governorships later regained prominence with the nomination of former governors Carter (D-1976), Reagan (R-1980), and Mitt Romney (R-2012); and sitting governors Michael Dukakis (D-1988), Bill Clinton (D-1992), and George W. Bush (R-2000). In the other five elections since 1960, the party out of power turned to former vice presidents (Walter Mondale in 1984 and Joe Biden in 2020), to senators (Robert Dole in 1996, John Kerry in 2004, and Obama in 2008), and of course to businessman/TV personality Trump in 2016.

These patterns may understate the importance of the Senate as a recruiting ground for president. Many senators have sought their parties' presidential nomination since the early 1950s. Senators share the political and media spotlight focused on the Capitol, enjoy the opportunity to address major public problems and develop a record in foreign affairs, and they usually can pursue the presidency without leaving the Senate. Nevertheless, only three times in American history have senators been elected directly to the White House (Warren Harding in 1920, Kennedy in 1960, and Obama in 2008).[19]

TABLE 2.1 ■ Principal Experience of In- and Out-Party Candidates before Gaining Nomination, 1932–2020

Election Year	In Party	Out Party
1932	President (R)	Governor (D)
1936	President (D)	Governor (R)
1940	President (D)	Businessman (R)
1944	President (D)	Governor (R)
1948	President (D)	Governor (R)
1952	Governor (D)	General/educator (R)
1956	President (R)	Governor (former) (D)
1960	Vice president (R)	Senator (D)
1964	President (D)	Senator (R)
1968	Vice president (D)	Vice president (former) (R)
1972	President (R)	Senator (D)
1976	President (R)	Governor (former) (D)
1980	President (D)	Governor (former) (R)
1984	President (R)	Vice president (former) (D)
1988	Vice president (R)	Governor (D)
1992	President (R)	Governor (D)
1996	President (D)	Senator (R)
2000	Vice president (D)	Governor (R)
2004	President (R)	Senator (D)
2008	Senator (R)	Senator (D)
2012	President (D)	Governor (former) (R)
2016	Former senator, former secretary of state (D)	Businessman/TV personality (R)
2020	President (R)	Vice president (former) (D)

Instead of a direct stepping stone to the presidency, the Senate has been a path to the vice presidency, which then gave its occupants the inside track either to assume the presidency through succession or to win nomination on their own. Vice Presidents Truman, Nixon, Johnson, Humphrey, Mondale, Quayle, Gore, Biden, and Harris

served as senators immediately before assuming their executive posts. (Ford, who succeeded to the presidency when Nixon resigned in 1974, had moved into the vice presidency from the House of Representatives; Dick Cheney, elected vice president in 2000 and 2004, had served in the White House and in the House of Representatives before becoming secretary of defense and then a businessman.) Service in the Senate, therefore, has been an important source of experience for presidents since 1932, but almost all have gained seasoning in the vice presidency.

Until 2008, governors seemed to have a competitive advantage over senators. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush moved directly into the Oval Office from a governor's mansion. Former governors Carter and Reagan were free to devote themselves full time to the demanding task of winning the nomination, an opportunity not available to the senators who sought the presidency in those years. Governors gain valuable executive experience in managing large-scale public enterprises and thousands of state government employees, in contrast to a senator's legislative duties and direction of a small personal staff. Moreover, once the Cold War with the Soviet Union ended in 1991, the public was concerned with the domestic economy, taxes, the budget, education, and health care, not foreign policy. This shift favored governors Clinton and G. W. Bush.

With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, public concerns once again shifted to national security, which may have boosted senators over governors in the nomination contest. At the outset of 2008, it seemed the war in Iraq would be the dominant issue, again giving senators prominence. Democrat hopefuls included four sitting and two former senators, while there were two sitting and one former Republican senators. But Senate prominence declined in 2012; only one former Republican senator competed with one sitting governor, three former governors, two current and two former House members, and a businessman. Early contenders for the 2024 Republican nomination included only one sitting senator (Tim Scott of South Carolina) in a sea of governors, and Trump and Pence, both of whom are contenders in 2024.

Personal Characteristics of Candidates

Informal criteria winnow the field of presidential candidates. Social conventions on race and gender historically posed the strongest constraints. Until Barack Obama's victory over Hillary Clinton for the nomination in 2008, only males of European heritage had been nominated for president by either of the two major parties, although several women and Blacks had waged national campaigns since 1972. In 2016, Clinton became the first woman nominated by a major party for president. Former representative Geraldine Ferraro of New York had been the Democrats' 1984 nominee for vice president, and Sarah Palin, governor of Alaska, the Republican vice presidential nominee in 2008. Kamala Harris became the Democrats' successful VP nominee in 2020. In 2008, Bill Richardson was the first Latino to seek a major party's presidential nomination; two candidates of Cuban heritage were in the Republican field in 2016, Ted

Cruz and Marco Rubio. The wide-open Democratic field in 2020 was notably diverse, as were the Republican hopefuls in 2024.

Religion also historically winnowed candidates, although that has begun to change.[20] Until 1960, candidates, with a single exception, practiced a Protestant brand of Christianity. The successful candidacy of Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, challenged the traditional preference for Protestants. (Al Smith's loss in 1928 had seemed to signal that Catholic candidates could not win.) By 2004, Kerry's Catholicism was not an issue, and Joe Biden, a Catholic, won in 2020. Republican Senator Barry Goldwater was the first nominee from a partly Jewish background, and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, ran as VP on the Democratic ticket in 2000. Religion as an issue resurfaced in 2008 when critics incorrectly alleged that Obama was a Muslim (he was a member of the United Church of Christ) and again in 2012, when Republican Mitt Romney became the first Mormon to win a party nomination.

Representing an idealized version of home and family life once seemed essential to winning nomination. Nelson Rockefeller's divorce in 1963 from his wife of more than thirty years and his rapid remarriage virtually ensured the failure of his campaigns for the Republican nomination in 1964 and 1968. In 1980, Reagan became the first divorced and remarried president. Trump, in his third marriage, was the second. Public attitudes about other moral and ethical questions can become deciding factors. Gary Hart's widely reported extramarital affair ended his presidential hopes for

PHOTO 2.2 Two dozen Democrats sought the 2020 presidential nomination, so many that they could not all fit on a single stage. Two groups of ten candidates debated during the initial round. The group pictured met on June 27, 2019, and included Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, and Pete Buttigieg, among others.

Drew Angerer/Getty Images

1988, even though he began the campaign as the clear Democratic front-runner. Bill Clinton's alleged extramarital relationships and marijuana use became issues in 1992, but an admission of past alcohol abuse did not damage George W. Bush in 2000, nor did an acknowledged youthful use of recreational marijuana affect Barack Obama's prospects in 2008.

It appears, therefore, that several of the informal qualifications applied to the presidency have evolved with the passage of time, probably because of changes in the nomination process itself as well as broader currents in U.S. society. One observer suggests that the proliferation of presidential primaries "provides a forum in which prejudices can be addressed openly,"[21] and the public is possibly becoming more tolerant overall. By the spring of 2019, 94 percent of Americans told pollsters they were willing to vote for a woman as president, for instance, up from 66 percent in 1971 and 27 percent in 1940.[22]

COMPETING FOR THE NOMINATION

Once the pool of eligible candidates is established, the selection process begins. This phase has two major components: (1) choosing delegates to the two parties' national conventions and (2) selecting the nominees at the conventions. The selection of delegates became the principal focus of party reform efforts after 1968 and continues to undergo change. Prior to the conventions, candidates crisscross the country to win delegates, who then attend the convention to select the party's nominee.

The first primary of 2020 was held in New Hampshire following the Iowa caucuses, both in early February, although the Democratic National Committee (DNC) tried unsuccessfully to place South Carolina first in 2024. Rather than concluding in June 2020, as expected, delegate selection continued into August after states delayed their primaries because of the pandemic. Since so many of the primaries were early, both parties had selected more than half their convention delegates by mid-March. Ultimately, the Republicans selected 2,550 convention delegates, and the Democrats 4,749, but they never assembled. Consistent with post-1968 reforms, most delegates were chosen through primaries and committed in advance to a specific candidate. Voter participation in primaries had been growing steadily (an estimated 57.68 million in 2016) but declined in 2020 as COVID-19 meant voters sometimes could not vote in person and states postponed or even canceled their primaries after nominations were sewed up.[23] Later events were largely moot after Bernie Sanders halted active campaigning on April 8, 2020, effectively conceding to Joe Biden. There was never a contest for the Republican nomination.

In truth, the nomination contest now begins much earlier than January of the election year. Donald Trump announced his 2024 candidacy on November 15, 2022, almost two full years before the election, and Joe Biden announced his candidacy on

April 25, 2023. Other candidates who had already announced their candidacy by the end of May 2023 were Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Ron DeSantis, Vivek Ramaswamy, Larry Elder, and Asa Hutchinson on the Republican side, and Marianne Williamson and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., on the Democratic side (Kennedy subsequently chose to run as an Independent). By starting their campaigns early, candidates seek to amass the financial backing, attract the media attention, and generate the popular support necessary to ensure eventual victory. President Trump formed his 2020 reelection effort the day after he was inaugurated in 2017 (a first for any incumbent), and former Maryland congressman John K. Delaney was the first Democrat to declare—on July 28, 2017, joined before the end of the year by entrepreneur Andrew Yang and Sen. Elizabeth Warren.

The Nomination Campaign

The nomination campaign is a winnowing process in which each of the two major parties eliminates from the pool of potential candidates all but the one who will represent the party in the general election. As political scientist Austin Ranney argued in 1974, the nomination phase of the campaign is more important than the election stage because "the parties' nominating processes eliminate far more presidential possibilities than do the voters' electing processes."[24] In the 1970s, aspirants typically did not know how many opponents they would face or who they would be. The competition took place in weekly stages, with candidates hopscotching the nation in pursuit of votes and contributions. First-time candidates had to organize a nationwide political effort, a chore that dwarfs the campaign required to win a Senate seat or governorship in even the largest states.

This competitive situation has changed. As more states moved their primaries to earlier positions in the schedule—called **front-loading**—the critical events take place during a very brief window near the beginning of the six-month process. Instead of having the luxury of adjusting strategy along the way, candidates need to establish campaign organizations in many states and to raise enormous sums of money early in the process. Many of the traditional uncertainties—for example, new candidates entering the competition—have become less likely, with early contests quickly triggering the departure of weaker candidates instead of creating opportunities for new entrants.[25] In 2008, both parties chose 50 percent of their convention delegates by the end of the day on February 5, and more than three-quarters of all delegates by the first Tuesday in March.[26] But instead of an early nomination victory, the Democrats' contest between Clinton and Obama extended into June. In 2012, both Republicans and Democrats wanted to slow down the process and lengthen it. By contrast, Republicans in 2016 desperately hoped that their rule changes would produce a more compressed process, producing early unity around a nominee, a strategy regretted by many establishment Republicans once Trump's nomination appeared inevitable.

Because the early contests are so important, presidential hopefuls spend considerable time before January of the election year laying the campaign's groundwork. Decades ago, journalist Arthur Hadley called this period the **invisible primary**, a testing ground for the would-be president to determine whether his or her candidacy is viable.[27] Candidates must assemble a staff to help raise money, develop campaign strategy, hone a message, and identify a larger group of people willing to do the advance work necessary to organize states for the primaries and caucuses. Candidates visit party organizations throughout the country, especially in early states (historically Iowa and New Hampshire), to curry favor with activists and solicit endorsements.[28]

Because media coverage provides name recognition and potentially positive publicity, developing a favorable relationship with reporters and commentators has traditionally been crucial. Those hopefuls not regarded by the media as serious contenders find it almost impossible to become viable candidates. Even the suggestion that some candidates are "top tier" and others "second tier," the terms widely used to sort the large fields in recent campaign cycles, could adversely affect a candidacy. As Ranney suggested, most candidates' campaigns are scuttled, if not officially canceled, during the invisible primary stage and thus before any actual voting has occurred.

Financing Nomination Campaigns

Candidates for the nomination must raise funds early to prepare for the competition. Dramatic changes occurred between 1976 and 2016 in campaign funding. After the excesses of Nixon's 1972 campaign, Congress provided federal funds for the 1976 presidential election. Candidates seeking a major party nomination could qualify to receive federal funds by raising individual contributions totaling at least $5,000 in twenty different states. Federal dollars would match individual contributions of $250 or less. The intent was to shift funding away from a few wealthy "fat cats" to a broader base of contributors,[29] to help underdog candidates contest the nomination, and to enable candidates to remain in the race despite poor showings in early contests. By disclosing contributions publicly, reformers hoped to discourage misbehavior like President Nixon's use of large cash contributions to fund a variety of dirty tricks during the 1972 election.

By checking a box on their federal income tax forms, taxpayers authorize the government to set aside $3 of their tax payments for public financing of campaigns. The Federal Election Commission (FEC), a bipartisan body of six members nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, oversees the administration of the public financing provisions. These changes were initially popular, but participation in the system dropped from 28.7 percent of all tax returns in 1980 to 6 percent in 2013 and 4 percent in 2018.[30] Few candidates now use federal funding because of its other requirements. Those who accept public financing must abide by limits on total expenditures and a cap on spending in individual states that is based on population. Most candidates seek to avoid these limits. The 2004 election was the first in which both parties' nominees declined federal matching funds and no leading candidate has accepted them since, making the system's

future bleak.[31] Today, only weak candidates seek matching funds. Four Democratic candidates received such funding in 2008, and Martin O'Malley (D) was the only major party candidate to do so in 2016. None did so in 2020.

Candidates' personal wealth played a role in the shift away from public funds. In 1996, Steve Forbes loaned his campaign $37.5 million. He was ultimately unsuccessful, but Forbes dramatically influenced the Republican nomination process by outspending his rivals in Iowa, New Hampshire, and several other early contests. Even Bob Dole, the fund-raising leader that year, could not match such expenditures because he had to observe the federal limits.[32] Anticipating that Forbes would pursue a similar tactic in 2000, Bush raised a then-record $94 million in private funds so he could avoid the spending limits and Dole's problems.[33]

Despite public funding, candidates' financial resources were still highly unequal, and in most election years, the field's leading fund-raiser won the nomination.[34] The new system favors very wealthy candidates or those who can tap networks of donors during the invisible primary before the Iowa and New Hampshire contests. The calendar of contests and funding system rules favor front-runners, making it difficult for primary voters to give other candidates a second look.[35]

Wealthy donors have also made a comeback. The Supreme Court's 2010 decision in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* opened the doors to a huge influx of often anonymous political money. The decision allowed unions, corporations, and associations to spend unlimited amounts in elections and "paved the way for . . . the creation of **super-PACs** [political action committees], which can accept unlimited contributions from corporations, unions and individuals for the purpose of making independent expenditures," spending intended to influence the outcome of elections but not coordinated with a candidate's campaign.[36] However, Super-PACs are often headed by candidates' political allies, making noncoordination highly questionable. It is clear that super-PACs complicate both the strategic calculations of candidates and the public's ability to follow the campaign's dynamics. During 2016, both Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton found ways to help supportive super-PACs raise funds and to draw on them for campaign assistance. In 2020, more than 2,200 super-PACs spent more than $2 billion, mostly on advertising targeted in key states.[37] A new category of spenders arose in 2016 under a different provision of the tax code: nonprofit social welfare groups. Like a super-PAC, donations to nonprofits are unlimited, but unlike their cousins, the donors need not be disclosed, creating what reformers call **dark money**. This money ostensibly must be spent on projects advancing the public good, in this case, financing ads that support the same issues advanced by a candidate. Money can underwrite a potential candidate's travel, pay for polling, and build volunteer lists. Fears grew that "for the first time in a generation, there will be a clear avenue for America's richest to secretly spend an unchecked sum to choose their party's nominee for the White House."[38]

Two other stories dominated the 2016 nomination stage. Donald J. Trump emerged victorious after loudly proclaiming that he was the only "self-funded" candidate,

thereby turning personal wealth into an asset because it made him beholden to no one. Trump loaned funds to his campaign as needed throughout the primary/caucus stage, even though he also raised substantial funds. By the end of June 2016, Trump had loaned his campaign nearly $50 million and had raised another $37 million.[39] Among Democrats, Bernie Sanders created a large donor base and relied on small donations to raise and spend nearly as much money as the successful nominee, Hillary Clinton. By the end of June 2016, Sanders had spent only $3 million less than Clinton.

In 2020, Michael Bloomberg easily eclipsed Trump's earlier self-financing, spending more than $1 billion of his own wealth in a fruitless effort that lasted only about 100 days. On the other end of the spectrum, candidates Bernie Sanders ($211 million) and Elizabeth Warren ($127 million) raised a majority of their funds from small contributions of $200 or less. Joe Biden struggled to raise money early, especially after disappointing finishes in the Iowa and New Hampshire contests. By the end of February, he ranked sixth among Democrats in campaign spending.[40] Ultimately, though, as noted below, Biden would set new fundraising records in 2020.

Dynamics of the Contest

Before front-loading became so pronounced, candidates competed in as many locations as funds allowed. This was especially true for Democrats, whose rules call for proportional allocation of delegates: As long as candidates receive at least 15 percent of the vote, they are awarded a share of delegates proportional to the vote share.[41] Republican candidates also faced proportional rules in some states starting in 2012, when fewer states awarded all delegates to the first-place finisher in a primary. The earliest contests, for many years the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary, attract most of the major contenders because they are the first tests of rank-and-file voter sentiment and because their relatively small electorates reward in-person campaigning by candidates with more modest financial resources.

Since 1988, campaigns have had to contend with a single day when a large number of states held primaries, dubbed **Super Tuesday**. Twenty states selected delegates, sixteen through primaries and four through caucuses in 1988. In 1992, only eleven states participated in Super Tuesday, but the Democratic designers accomplished their goal of boosting the chances of a moderate candidate when Clinton won all six of the southern primaries and two caucuses. The media upgraded Super Tuesday to "Titanic Tuesday" and "Mega Tuesday" in 2000 because the delegate total rose dramatically when New York and California joined the list of states holding primaries that day. In 2008, the list grew to twenty-two contests choosing delegates. Hillary Clinton had hoped to score a knockout that day, when nearly 40 percent of all convention delegates were selected. Fourteen states held events on the first Tuesday in March 2020, including California and Texas. Bloomberg's strategy was to skip the four early contests and focus on Super Tuesday. He failed to win any states. Sanders, likewise, fell well short of expectations; instead, en route to winning the nomination, Biden won ten states to Sanders's four.

Holding primaries early in the nomination process is a reversal from the past when late primaries could be decisive. Until 1996, California scheduled its primary on the final day of delegate selection, giving Golden State voters the chance to determine a party's nominee, as they did with Goldwater in 1964 and McGovern in 1972. After losing the election in 1996, Republicans adopted rules that encouraged states to schedule their primaries later in 2000 by providing them with bonus delegates.[42] But the schedule was only slightly less front-loaded in 2000, and the contests were concluded earlier than ever before—March 9, when both McCain and former Senator Bill Bradley, the number-two candidate in each party, discontinued their campaigns.

The two parties set a "window" for delegate selection, providing special exceptions for Iowa and New Hampshire, a privileged position also extended to Nevada and South Carolina beginning in 2008. In these relatively small states, candidates engage in more "retail" politics, meeting with voters on a more personal basis than is possible in larger states, where candidates must rely on rather more wholesale media advertising. Clinton and Obama were so evenly matched in 2008 that the states scheduled later in the process played an unexpectedly important role. For a while, Democrats wondered whether the nomination campaign would continue until the convention determined the nominee. But **superdelegates**, elected and party officials who attend the convention because of their leadership positions, sided with Obama, whose delegate total exceeded Clinton's after all primaries and caucuses had been concluded. In 2016, superdelegates heavily favored Clinton over Sanders, a source of dismay for progressive supporters who thought the rules were rigged against them. As a result, starting in 2020, Democrats changed the rules to prevent superdelegates from voting during the first round of convention balloting.[43]

State caucuses operate in the shadow of the primaries, although they remain important for candidates able to mobilize an intensely motivated group of supporters who can exert greater influence than in a primary. The Iowa caucuses, long the first-in-the-nation delegate selection contest, have varied over time in importance as a launching pad for presidential contenders. McCain sidestepped Iowa altogether in 2000 to focus on New Hampshire, but Dean's 2004 defeat in Iowa signaled the decline of his candidacy. Obama's 2008 victory in Iowa triggered a surge of favorable media coverage that helped him keep pace with Clinton. Donald Trump, for his part, shrugged off a caucus defeat in 2016 to capture the GOP nomination with a string of plurality primary victories over a crowded field of competitors.

Iowa Democrats experienced long delays and confusion in tabulating caucus votes in 2020; in 2024, Iowa Democrats restructured the caucus system so that Iowans could mail in a card to express their preference instead being required to make their choice in person.[44] South Carolina was instead the decisive contest in 2020 when its large group of Black voters—following the endorsement of Rep. Jim Clyburn—heavily swung their support behind Joe Biden who had finished fourth (Iowa), fifth (New Hampshire), and second (Nevada) in the three preceding contests. Angering New

Hampshire, but pleasing Clyburn, the Democratic National Committee push unsuccessfully to make South Carolina the first Democratic primary in 2024.

Media Influence and Campaign Consultants

"For most of us, the combination of media coverage and media advertising is the campaign; few voters see the candidates in person or involve themselves directly in campaign events," wrote Marjorie Randon Hershey after the 2000 election.[45] Little has changed in two decades. As the nomination process has grown in complexity, the influence of the media also has grown. Candidates who must campaign in a score of states within two weeks, as they have done since 1992, necessarily rely on the media to communicate with large numbers of potential voters. Televised ads, network-sponsored debates, prime-time news coverage, the Internet, and now Twitter and other forms of social media are critical to candidates' efforts. The virtual events necessitated by COVID-19 in 2020 might endure.

The media tend to focus on the game aspects of the pre-election-year maneuvering and the early contests. As candidates begin to emerge, journalists concentrate on the competition for financial contributions, the reputations of professionals enlisted to work on a campaign, and speculation about the candidates' relative chances of success based on polls and nonbinding straw votes in various states. Once the delegate selection contests begin, the media focus on political tactics, strategy, and competitive position more than on the candidates' messages and issue stands, particularly in covering early contests. In general, the media use a winner-take-all principle that gives most attention to the victorious candidate or unexpected results, regardless of how narrow the primary victory or the popular-vote margin. Back in 1968, Eugene McCarthy's insurgent campaign won 42 percent of the New Hampshire vote against incumbent Lyndon Johnson. But the mathematical loss became a political triumph given pundits' widespread shock at Johnson's vulnerability.

As the fate of presidential candidates has passed from a small group of party professionals to rank-and-file voters, media coverage and public opinion polls have grown in importance. Media evaluations help determine candidate viability—designating tiers of candidates and labeling "winners" or "losers." Network-sponsored candidate debates garner widespread attention. Voters and contributors gravitate to the perceived victors and desert the apparent also-rans. Republican hopefuls participated in twenty debates in 2012, too many in the view of party leaders who were intent on reducing that total in 2016, but the crowded field raised problems. With so many candidates, the first prime-time debate included only the top ten hopefuls as measured in the national polls. The other seven candidates (dubbed the "undercard," or the "kids' table") competed in an earlier contest on the same day.

Democrats in 2020 scheduled eleven debates (the last was cancelled), the first two of which were spread over two nights in late June and July. A random drawing assigned

candidates to the first or second night, and to participate, candidates needed to have at least 1 percent support in three national polls or raise at least $65,000 from at least 200 donors in twenty states. Ten candidates participated each night. As the nomination contest progressed, candidates needed to meet more demanding requirements—5, and later 10 percent support in polls, and ultimately 20 percent of allocated delegates, targets that only Biden and Sanders met.[46]

Favorable polls impress reporters, editorial writers, political activists, and many rank-and-file voters, leading to more primary and caucus victories for the poll leaders. This reinforcement process helps ensure that, by the time the delegates gather for their party's national convention, one candidate almost always has enough delegates to receive the nomination.[47]

Donald Trump pursued a novel nomination strategy in 2016. He relied heavily on social media, large-scale public rallies, and aggressive debate tactics to deliver outrageous statements that won extensive free media coverage valued by one source at the equivalent of $1.9 billion.[48] At the same time, he attacked media outlets as purveyors of "fake news." In this way, Trump overcame the weak organization and poorer funding of his campaign relative to his competitors.

THE NATIONAL CONVENTION

No part of the selection process has undergone more dramatic change than the nominating conventions. Long the province of party leaders, today's conventions are largely media extravaganzas choreographed to project images designed to reawaken party loyalty, appeal to contemporary public concerns, and project the most desirable aspects of the newly anointed presidential ticket. This was never clearer than in 2020 when delegates never fully convened, and the public watched four-night infomercials for the two parties and their nominees.

Between 1976 and 2012, the FEC provided funding to the Democratic and Republican Parties to finance their nominating conventions, but that public subsidy ($18.24 million each in 2012) was repealed by Congress in 2014, putting the parties on their own. In 2012, Congress appropriated another $50 million to cover security costs at each convention, and the same funding was provided to state and local law enforcement to help with security in 2016. Both parties spent much more for their conventions, an estimated $100 million each in 2012.[49] Facing the need to raise even more money in 2016, the major political parties received permission from Congress to set up separate political committees for convention fund-raising and raised the limits on convention contributions for individuals and PACs. Seventy-four individuals gave the maximum of $100,200 to the party convention committees.[50]

Host cities raise additional millions. Although Democrats and Republicans conducted only limited party business at their 2020 conventions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,

and Charlotte, North Carolina, those cities raised about $43 million and $38 million, respectively, for the mostly virtual events.[51] The sites for the national conventions in 2024 are Chicago, Illinois for the Democrats and Milwaukee, Wisconsin for the Republicans, highlighting the importance of the Midwest for both parties.

Nominating the Ticket

Today's conventions offer little drama about the choice of the presidential nominee. In the thirty-eight conventions held by the two major parties from 1948 through 2020, only two nominees—Thomas Dewey in 1948 and Adlai Stevenson in 1952—failed to win a majority of the convention votes on the first ballot. In all other cases, victory has gone to the candidate who arrived at the convention with the largest number of pledged delegates. Nevertheless, the state-by-state balloting remains a traditional feature of the process.

Selecting the vice presidential nominee is the convention's final chore and the only chance to create any suspense. Delegates ratify the choice, but it has been a matter of political custom since 1940 to allow presidential nominees to pick their running mates after conferring with leaders whose judgment they trust. Parties traditionally attempt to balance the ticket—that is, to broaden its appeal by selecting a person who differs in politically helpful ways from the presidential nominee.

Balance takes many forms. In 1980, George H. W. Bush's links to the eastern establishment and moderate wing of the Republican Party complemented the conservative, western Reagan. Ferraro balanced the 1984 Democratic ticket geographically and ethnically and became the first woman to serve as a major-party candidate in a national contest. Dan Quayle, more than twenty years younger than George H.W. Bush, brought generational balance to the 1988 ticket. Dick Cheney offset George W. Bush's lack of Washington and White House experience. Massachusetts Senator John Kerry chose North Carolina's John Edwards to bring regional balance to the 2004 ticket. Obama turned to Sen. Joe Biden in 2008, a veteran legislator with extensive Washington experience and ties to Pennsylvania, a hotly contested state. McCain chose Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska in hopes that her youth and gender balance would shake up the election. Trump chose Mike Pence, governor of Indiana and a former member of Congress, to strengthen ties with conservative and evangelical Republicans and provide government as well as Washington experience to the ticket. Senator Kamala Harris of California brought gender and racial balance to the ticket while highlighting Biden's commitment to diversity. 1992 was the exception that proved the rule, with Bill Clinton choosing Tennessee Senator Al Gore precisely to mark the Democratic ticket as a new generation of like-minded southern moderates.

The final night of the convention is devoted to acceptance speeches. The presidential nominee tries to make peace with former competitors and to reunite party factions that have confronted one another during the long campaign and the usually hectic days of the convention. Party leaders come to the stage and pledge their support. As

in so many ways, 2020 was different. Biden highlighted his party's commitment to pandemic-responsible campaigning by delivering an acceptance speech in a largely empty exhibition center in Wilmington, Delaware. After North Carolina's governor and Jacksonville, Florida's mayor blocked use of convention centers for an indoor, in-person event, President Trump addressed thousands at an outdoor gathering using the White House as a dramatic backdrop, an unprecedented (and controversial) use of the presidential residence.

Conducting Party Business

Parties write and adopt convention platforms, although participants acknowledge that winning presidential candidates may disavow planks with which they disagree. Because delegates, party leaders, and major groups affiliated with the party have strong feelings about some issues, the platform provides an opportunity to resolve differences and fashion politically palatable compromises.[52] Civil rights and the Vietnam War once prompted major disagreements within the Democratic Party; civil rights, foreign policy, and abortion have been important bones of contention among Republicans.

To avoid damage from intra-party differences, almost every presidential candidate decides to provide major rivals and their supporters with concessions in the platform and a prime-time speaking opportunity during the convention. Occasionally, this tactic can backfire. At the 1992 Republican convention, Pat Buchanan's address to a national audience proved so controversial that he was not invited to speak four years later. In 2020, Biden representatives hammered out common ground with Bernie Sanders's representatives, effectively creating a common platform. By contrast, Republicans simply readopted the party's platform from 2016 while emphasizing it would "enthusiastically support the President's" policy positions.[53]

National nominating conventions have become so predictable that network television has dramatically reduced coverage. To obtain the traditional "gavel-to-gavel" coverage that ushered in the television age, viewers must follow proceedings on cable networks, such as CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, CSPAN, or on the Internet. Parties have become so adept at scripting these quadrennial gatherings that their very existence is jeopardized.

THE GENERAL ELECTION

Once the nomination contests become clear, the likely nominees start to campaign, but the general election begins in earnest after the parties select official nominees in late summer. Candidates develop new political appeals for this stage, primarily a contest between the two major parties' standard bearers and, occasionally, an Independent candidate. The campaign's audience increases greatly: More than twice as many people

vote in the general election as participate in the nomination process. Candidates and staff decide how they can win the support of suddenly attentive voters, appeal to segments of the other party, and retain disappointed partisans who backed losing candidates for the nomination. Time is a serious complication because the nationwide phase of the presidential contest is compressed into ten weeks, traditionally running from Labor Day to election day.

Two features of the general election make it fundamentally different from the nomination phase: (1) the Electoral College and (2) the distinctive provisions of the campaign finance laws. Compared with the ever-changing nomination stage, the constitutionally prescribed presidential election process has been remarkably stable over time, while as traced above campaign finance practices have changed significantly since 1972.

The Electoral College

Presidential candidates plan and carry out their general election strategies with one ultimate goal: winning a majority of the Electoral College votes cast by state electors. Early in U.S. history, electoral votes were determined by congressional districts. The winner of a popular-vote plurality in each district would receive the associated electoral vote, with the statewide winner of the popular vote getting the two electoral votes representing senators. But legislatures soon began to adopt the **unit rule** (sometimes called the "general-ticket rule") whereby all the state's electoral votes went to the candidate who received the plurality of the statewide popular vote. This rule benefited the state's largest party and maximized the state's influence in the election by permitting it to throw all its electoral votes to one candidate. By 1836, the unit system had replaced the district plan. Since then, two states have returned to the old plan: Maine in 1969 and Nebraska in 1992.

The final product is a strange method for choosing a chief executive. Although most Americans view the system as a popular election, it is not. Voters' ballots actually determine which slate of electors pledged to support the party's presidential candidate will cast the state's electoral votes. The electors are party loyalists, chosen variously in primaries, at party conventions, or by state party committees. In mid-December, only the electors pledged to the popular vote winner meet in their state capitals to cast ballots. (Thirty-one states and the District of Columbia bind the electors to vote for the winner of the popular vote, and in the 2020 case *Chiafalo v. Washington*, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that such laws are constitutional.[54]) The official electoral vote certificates are transmitted to Washington, D.C., and counted in early January. The presiding officer of the Senate—the incumbent vice president—announces the outcome before a joint session of Congress. If, as usually happens, one candidate receives an absolute majority of the electoral votes, currently 270, the vice president officially declares that candidate the winner. As the presiding officer of the Senate, Vice President Al Gore announced the Electoral College victory of his rival George

Bush in 2001, just as Richard Nixon announced the Electoral College victory of John F. Kennedy in 1961. And despite a mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, to stop the count, Mike Pence announced the victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris over the Trump-Pence team.

Financing the General Election

Mounting a nationwide campaign requires greater financial resources than winning the nomination. For the general election, public financing is available to nominees of the major parties. Any party that won 25 percent or more of the popular vote in the last presidential election is considered a major party. However, the last major party candidate to take this funding was John McCain in 2008. He received $84.1 million. Barack Obama in 2008 and all other major party candidates since then have declined such funding.[55]

Candidates of minor parties, those who won between 5 percent and 25 percent of the vote in the previous election, receive partial public financing, and they can raise private funds up to the major-party limit. Ross Perot spent an estimated $63 million of his own money to mount his 1992 third party campaign. Because of his 19 percent showing that year, he received $29 million in federal funds when Perot ran again in 1996 as candidate for the Reform Party (which he created in 1995). Because of the federal financing, though, he was limited to using only $50,000 of his own money in the 1996 general election. Pat Buchanan, the official Reform Party nominee in 2000, received $12.6 million as a result of Perot's 8.4 percent share of the vote in 1996. But the party was ineligible for public funding in 2004 after Buchanan's poor showing of 0.43 percent of the popular vote. Candidates whose parties are just getting started may receive no help.

Another source of money for campaigns are the super-PACs discussed above–formally, **independent expenditure-only committees** that advocate the defeat or election of a presidential candidate, but which are not made in conjunction with a candidate's campaign. Until 2002, there was no limit on such expenditures. Then, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), first applied to the 2004 campaign, prohibited corporations and labor unions from spending their funds on television ads broadly construed as for or against candidates thirty days before a primary and sixty days before a general election.[56] In 2007, however, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Federal Election Commission v. Wisconsin Right to Life* weakened the BCRA, declaring by a 5-4 vote that Congress could not constitutionally limit "issue ads" (as opposed to "express advocacy ads" that appeal directly for or against a specific candidate). More significantly, the 2010 *Citizens United* decision discussed earlier now allows corporations, unions, and nonprofit organizations to spend as much as they want in support of or in opposition to candidates. Independent expenditures in the 2012 presidential campaign nearly quadrupled to $539 million with a two-to-one advantage for Romney, and in 2016 they grew to $669 million, split almost evenly between the candidates.

Independent expenditures in 2020 totaled just under $900 million, with Biden benefiting by nearly two-to-one.[57]

Party organizations also raise their own funds to support candidates, commonly called **soft money**. Until 1996, this money had largely been used for grassroots activities such as distributing campaign buttons, stickers, and yard signs; registering voters; and transporting voters to the polls. In 2000, however, the national parties spent more soft money for television advertising in the presidential election than did the candidates, particularly in the **battleground states** (those most hotly contested by the major candidates).[58] In Florida, the state key to Bush's victory that year, pro-Bush party expenditures exceeded those for Gore by about $4 million.[59]

The BCRA also aimed to end abuse of soft money.[60] But as Justice John Paul Stevens had written in upholding that law's constitutionality, "Money, like water, will always find an outlet."[61] It did. From a two-party high of $138.5 million in 2004, total party expenditures in 2016 dropped to $7.1 million.[62] Instead, outside groups (including putatively independent committees set up by the parties themselves) and wealthy donors became the new dominant players.

Until 2008, the system of public financing introduced in the 1976 election had been viewed as a success: Major-party candidates no longer depended on wealthy contributors and other private sources to finance their campaigns; expenditures of the two major-party candidates were limited and equalized, an advantage for Democrats who were historically outspent by their opponents.[63] Today, public financing is an irrelevancy even as each presidential election sets new fundraising records: 2008 was the first billion-dollar presidential election, a mark exceeded in the next three. For 2016, contributions to Clinton's campaign and spending from supportive outside groups totaled $770 million. Trump and his allies had combined resources of $408 million. (Trump ended up spending more than $66 million of his own funds; Hillary Clinton spent a little less than $1.5 million of hers.) Candidates reached a new high in 2020: Biden raised just over $1 billion and got an additional $580 million in help from outside groups; Trump raised $774 million and outside groups another $314 million.[64]

With such high spending, today's candidates rely heavily on donors giving the maximum legal contribution to the candidates ($3,300 in 2024), and the era of "fat cats" is back. Billionaire casino-owner Sheldon Adelson and his wife contributed an estimated $92.8 million to multiple committees supporting Trump and other Republican candidates in 2016, and an astounding $218 million in 2020, mostly to outside groups.[65] Campaign spending on presidential elections has clearly outpaced a quarter century of efforts to restrain it.

Targeting the Campaign

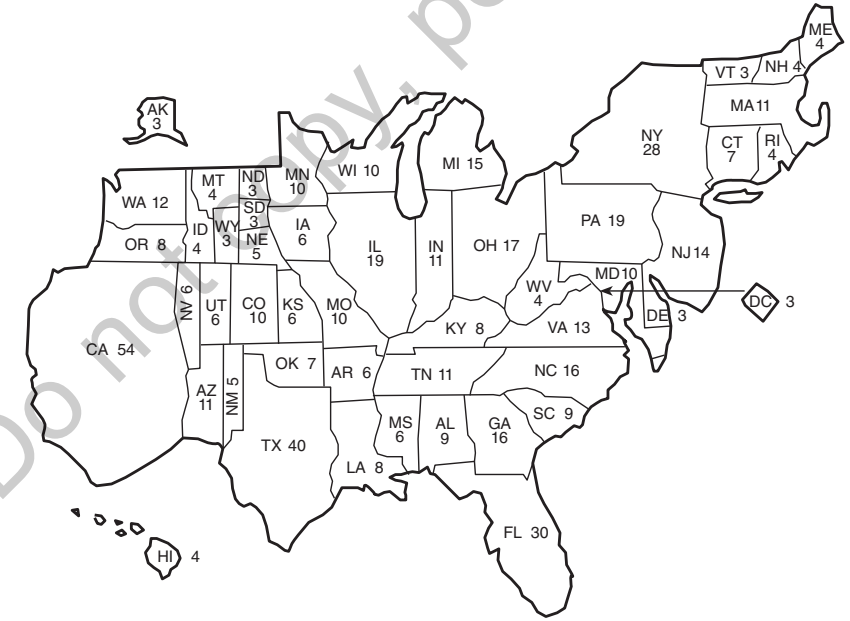
As in the nomination process, candidates must decide which states will be the focus of their efforts in the fall campaign. The most important consideration is the Electoral College: A candidate must win a majority—270—of the 538 electoral votes.[66] This fact places a

premium on carrying the states with the most electoral votes (see Figure 2.2). From 2004 through 2020, the candidate winning the eleven most populous states—California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas—could win the presidency while losing the thirty-nine other states and the District of Columbia (as noted below, because of the 2020 census, candidates winning these eleven states in 2024 will need to win a twelfth—any other state will do). Understandably, candidates from both major parties concentrate their personal visits and spending on states with the most electoral votes, but there are also other considerations.

Competitiveness—the chance of winning a particular state—is another element affecting candidates' decisions on where to campaign. Are the party's candidates generally successful there, or do the results swing back and forth from one election to the next? Distinctly one-party states are likely to be slighted by the major-party candidates as a waste of time and money, while swing states with large populations (think Georgia and Pennsylvania) draw a good deal of attention. Polling also helps identify competitiveness: Where does a candidate have a chance to beat the opponent? In 2008, Obama campaigned in states like Indiana that rarely vote for Democratic presidential candidates.

In formulating campaign strategy, therefore, candidates and their advisers start with the electoral map as modified by calculations of probable success. The Electoral College creates fifty-one separate presidential contests—fifty states plus the District of

FIGURE 2.2 ■ State Size by Number of Electoral Votes, 2024



Sources: For more information on shifting state electoral vote totals over time, see http://uselectionatlas.org/INFORMATION/index.php and www.presidency.ucsb.edu/elections.php; https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral_College_in_the_2024_presidential_election

Columbia—primarily following the winner-take-all principle. The winner in a large state benefits from the unit rule by getting all the state's electoral votes. As we have noted, Bush won Florida in 2000 by a margin of 537 votes of the 5.963 million legitimate ballots cast.[67] But he won all twenty-five of the state's electoral votes, which gave him enough votes to win in the Electoral College, 271.[68] Thus in each state the goal is a popular-vote victory, no matter how small the margin.

Electoral votes are reapportioned after each census to reflect the reallocation of seats in the House of Representatives. Thus, votes were reapportioned for the 2024 presidential election to reflect the 2020 census (just as votes were reapportioned for the 2012 election to reflect the 2010 census). Since 2000, states in the North, East, and Midwest have lost seats, while those in the South and West have gained.[69] Following the 2020 census, Texas will gain two more votes while Colorado, Florida, Montana, North Carolina and Oregon will gain one vote each. California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia will lose one vote each (this is why winning the eleven most populous states in 2024 will no longer secure an Electoral College victory).

Democratic candidates have confronted a difficult strategic problem arising from the historic realignment of the South in presidential politics. Southern voters solidly supported Democrats for many decades following the Civil War but then shifted party allegiance. Until 1992, no Democrat had ever won the White House without carrying a majority of southern states. Southern support evaporated even for Jimmy Carter in 1980, when only Georgia supported its favorite son. No southern state voted for the Democratic ticket in 1984 or 1988, although Bill Clinton won Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee in 1992.[70]

George W. Bush won the entire South in 2000, including Democratic nominee Gore's home state of Tennessee. Eleven states switched columns from 1996, including Florida, New Hampshire, and West Virginia, a traditional Democratic stronghold. Nevertheless, Gore could have won the election with either New Hampshire's four votes or Florida's twenty-five; many Gore voters believed that liberal Democrats supporting Ralph Nader in both states prevented victory. Bush also lost enough votes to Pat Buchanan in New Mexico and Wisconsin to cost him their sixteen electoral votes.[71]

In 2008, Obama made inroads in the South, winning Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina. But like Bush in 2000, Trump in 2016 swept the deep South and an Electoral College majority (304–227), even as he lost the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million. As noted earlier, the key to Trump's success was winning three "blue wall" states that Democrats had assumed were sure to go to them. Yet Hillary Clinton lost Michigan by just 10,704 votes, Pennsylvania by 44,292 votes, and Wisconsin by 22,748. Seventy-eight thousand voters in three states—fewer than could fit into any one of those states' Big 10 stadiums—combined to deliver forty-six electoral votes to Trump and to prevent a Clinton victory. If the votes for the left-leaning Green candidate had gone to Clinton, she would have won in each of these three states.

Biden's victory in 2020 rested heavily on the same three critical states returning to the Democrats' camp. He won Michigan by 154,188 votes, Pennsylvania by 80,818, and Wisconsin by 20,510. In addition, Arizona, Georgia, and one vote in Nebraska

moved to the Democrats, giving Biden a 306–232 victory, identical to the 2016 result (if all electors had remained faithful—see below). His popular-vote margin of more than seven million gave him a clear majority of the most voters ever to participate in a U.S. presidential election. Population growth and increased turnout combined to give Biden and Trump the most votes that a candidate from their respective party had ever won. Turnout has risen dramatically in recent years—from a modern low of 51.7% of the voting-eligible population in 1996 to 67% in 2020. The 2020 figure was the highest since the early 20th century, when a far smaller share of the U.S. population was legally eligible to vote.[72]

Appealing for Public Support

Presidential campaigns spend millions of dollars and untold hours pursuing two goals: motivating people to cast a ballot and persuading them to support a particular candidate. Several factors other than campaign appeals determine who votes and how they vote. Voters' choices depend on their long-term political predispositions, such as party loyalties and social group affiliations, and their reactions to short-term forces, such as the candidates and issues involved in specific elections. Candidates and their campaign professionals try to design appeals that activate these influences, attract support, and counter perceived weaknesses.

Because the audience is larger and the time is shorter during the general election period than during the nomination period, candidates use their resources primarily for mass-media appeals. Advertising expenditures have risen accordingly, with campaigns spending half their funding on radio and television messages. Since 1952, television was the chief source of campaign information for most Americans. That is changing. A 2021 poll from the Pew Research Center found that eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) get news on digital devices, which is higher than the portion who get news from television. Nonetheless, 68 percent still get news from television, and 40 percent do so often.[73] Precisely where Americans get their news varies by age and political party.[74]

Rather than being national in scope, campaign advertising is targeted to selected markets in crucial Electoral College states, a pattern especially apparent since 2000 when major-party campaigns have focused on a defined list of battleground states. In 2016, the campaigns focused on a dozen states with the greatest attention on Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In 2020, Michigan, Wisconsin, and especially Pennsylvania were the principal targets, but Democrats also pursued Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina, and Texas. In 2024, six states have been identified as the "mother of all battlegrounds": Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (the site of the Republican National Convention).[75]

Students of elections have categorized influences on voter decisions as either long term or short term. Long-term influences include partisanship and group membership, whereas candidate image, issues, and campaign incidents are short term.

Long-Term Influences. Partisan loyalty, although still important for a large part of the public, has become less significant as a determinant of election outcomes. Conditions have changed considerably since the 1950s when political scientists concluded that the single most important determinant of voting was the voter's **party identification**, shaped in part by family and social groups.[76] About 45 percent of Americans in 1952 and 1956 said they thought of themselves as Democrats, and about 28 percent viewed themselves as Republicans, for a combined total of nearly three-fourths of the electorate. Independents in 1952 and 1956 averaged about 23 percent of the electorate.

In the mid- to late-1960s, however, partisan affiliation in the United States began to change (see Table 2.2). Beginning with the 1968 election, the number of Independents started to rise, primarily at the expense of the Democrats; by 1972, Independents constituted one-third of the electorate. Even voters who stayed with the Democrats were more inclined than formerly to say they were weak, rather than strong, party members. By 1988, some polls found that Independents outnumbered Democrats. Voters who entered the electorate in 1964 or later were much more likely to see themselves as political Independents than were voters of earlier political generations, a development linked initially to the influence of Vietnam and Watergate and later to declining confidence in government. With primary elections now a prominent part of the campaign process, candidates need to both activate traditional party loyalties and lure Independents by blurring traditional themes, a tightrope act that can confuse the general public.

The rise in voter "independence" can be overstated, though. Despite having lower opinions of both political parties, voters still appear to rely heavily on partisanship in making their voting decisions. The 2020 American National Election Study identified just 11.8 percent of voters as "independent independents," while 66.2 percent identified with one of the two major parties and another 22 percent leaned toward a party even though they called themselves independent. Relatively few party "leaners" defected from their party preference. Indeed, 96 percent of Democrats, including leaners, voted for Joe Biden, while fewer than 11 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners did.[77]

That party loyalty, even if latent, helps amplify another striking change over the past two decades: the rise of **negative partisanship**.[78] Voters "largely align *against*" a party and its nominee "instead of affiliating *with*" a party.[79] In 2016, for example, neither party's voters were enthusiastic about their own nominee (Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton), but "large majorities of Democrats and Republicans truly despised the opposing party's nominee," and those negative feelings extended to the opposition party, as well.[80] This means partisanship is not only negative but "affective"—that is, it has emotional roots of a kind familiar to any sports fan whose loyalty to their hometown club denigrates their opponents' fans as not just misguided but evil. In 2016, catchphrases such as "Lock her up!" or "basket of deplorables" suggest the higher stakes the phenomenon has in the political world.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Party Identification, 1952–2020 (Percentage)

Party	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
Strong Democratic	22	21	20	27	20	15	15	18	17	17	18	15	18	19	19	17	17	19	20	21	23
Weak Democratic	25	23	25	25	25	26	25	23	20	18	18	19	19	18	15	17	16	15	15	14	12
Total	47	44	45	52	45	41	40	41	37	35	36	34	37	37	34	34	33	34	35	35	35
Strong Republican	14	15	16	11	10	10	9	9	12	14	11	16	12	10	12	14	16	13	15	16	21
Weak Republican	14	14	14	14	15	13	14	14	15	14	14	15	15	16	12	16	12	13	12	12	11
Total	28	29	30	25	25	23	23	23	27	28	25	31	27	26	24	30	28	26	27	28	32
Independent	23	23	23	23	30	34	37	34	34	36	38	35	35	36	40	36	39	40	38	37	34

Sources: Data drawn from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, and the *ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior*, Table 2A.1, https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide/top-tables/?id=21; https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/anes-guide.html?chart=party_identification_7_pt.

Note: Responses to this question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" Independents include voters labeled as "Independent Democrats" and "Independent Republicans," sometimes referred to as "leaners."

Many factors help explain this development: the widespread use of negative campaign tactics; the proliferation of more ideological media and Internet outlets, the salience of emotionally polarizing issues such as abortion and gay right, rising racial resentment as nonwhite voters moved disproportionately toward the Democratic party, and the ability of voters to select sources of information and friends that reinforce their opinions.[81]

Political conflict has also become more intense as group support for the parties has itself polarized. Parties try to tap social group membership to win votes, and patterns of group support established during the New Deal persisted during succeeding decades, although with decreasing vibrancy. In the 1930s and 1940s, Democrats' support came from an odd alliance of southerners (white and Black), union members, Catholics, and people with limited education, lower incomes, and a working-class background. Over time, that coalition fractured, especially along racial and gender and then educational lines. The "solid South" went Republican, and by 1988, only one in three white votes went to Democrat Michael Dukakis—only 26 percent of white males supported him.[82] On the other hand, voters of color increasingly supported Democrats after 1964, support that reached near-historic levels in 2008.[83] By 2012, nonwhites represented 45 percent of the Democratic vote.[84] Union members, long a foundation of Democratic support, voted strongly for Nixon, Reagan, and Trump, even as the percentage of unionized workers declined precipitously.

Obama's victorious coalition in 2008 rested on strong support among women (56 percent of that vote), Blacks (95 percent), Hispanics (67 percent), and young voters. Exit polls showed Obama winning 69 percent of support from first-time voters and a similar percentage among the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old voters (66 percent).[85] Obama lost among white voters (55 percent to 43 percent), those sixty and older (51 percent to 47 percent), Protestants (54 percent to 45 percent), and rural voters (53 percent to 45 percent). He garnered the votes of just 31 percent of southern whites, but his advantage in other categories was so great that the popular-vote outcome—53 percent to 46 percent in his favor—was not in question.

In 2016, Clinton hoped to reassemble the Obama coalition, and Trump worked to erode it. Ironically, the first woman to head a major-party ticket won less of the women's vote than the campaign had expected (54 percent to 42 percent), a smaller margin than Obama enjoyed in 2008. Trump carried men 53 percent to 41 percent. Black voters again voted overwhelmingly for the Democrat (88 percent to 8 percent) and whites for the Republican (58 percent to 37 percent). Younger voters went for Clinton while older voters supported Trump. Clinton's support rose with education: Trump had a huge lead among whites without a college degree, 67 percent to 28 percent. Trump's decisive advantage among rural voters (62 percent to 34 percent) helped explain his victories in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where he won rural counties by large margins, offsetting Clinton's advantage in urban areas. Most partisans went back home to support their own party's nominee, and Independents chose Trump 48 percent to 42 percent.

Exit polls showed that Biden's victorious coalition in 2020 included a higher percentage of women than Clinton received (57 percent), nearly the same percentage of Blacks (87 percent), more white votes (41 percent), and more of the youngest voters (65 percent). Rural voters still went strongly for Trump, but Biden was able to shrink that margin by five points compared to 2016 by gaining critical support in large counties outside major metropolitan areas. Biden enjoyed significant improvement among Independents, where he defeated Trump 54 to 41 percent, a major reversal of Clinton's performance. College graduates preferred Biden over Trump by 55 percent to 43 percent, while Trump barely won among voters without a college degree, 50 percent to 48 percent. That figure reflected huge racial disparities: Trump won white voters in that category by a 65–33 margin.[86]

The two parties' base coalitions remained largely unchanged in 2020 and 2024. "The Democrats are the party of nonwhites, women, city dwellers, the young, and 'highbrow' culture. The Republican electorate consists disproportionately of older White males, evangelicals, southerners, and people more interested in Nascar than the NBA."[87]

The rise of negative partisanship combined with social groups' party preferences means that America increasingly looks like a society at war with itself. Most of the traditional party loyalties from the New Deal era and later have disappeared. Organized labor occasionally divided its vote in the past but is now very fragmented. Democrats have the advantage among three of the four new groups that emerged over the past half-century—women, young voters, and Hispanics. The fourth group—evangelical Christians—is strongly Republican. Because many American voters view parties in a negative light, short-term influences—candidates, issues, and events—as well as presidential performance are now more important than ever.

Short-Term Influences. During presidential campaigns, the public focuses a great deal of attention on the candidates' personality and character traits. Each campaign organization strives to create a composite image of its candidate's most attractive features. To do this sometimes means transforming liabilities into assets: Age becomes mature judgment (Biden); youth and inexperience become vigor (Kennedy). Alternatively, a candidate can direct attention to the opponent's personal liabilities, a risky move because some voters see such an effort as dirty campaigning.

Voters look for many qualities in a president. Honesty, trustworthiness, the ability to bring about change, empathy toward people like themselves, and having a vision for the future are often mentioned. In 2008, after two terms of George W. Bush, candidates for the nomination focused on experience versus change: Who would bring the necessary experience to the job and be able to hit the ground running on "day one," as Hillary Clinton put it during her quest for the Democratic nomination, versus who would be an agent for change? Change emerged as a more powerful appeal than experience, with Barack Obama winning the nomination instead. His Republican rival, John McCain, also had a great deal of experience, given more than 25 years in Congress, but Obama's appeal for "change you can believe in" proved to be compelling, and he won the election.

Although the public knew both 2016 candidates quite well, neither was viewed favorably. In fact, polls showed that Trump and Clinton had the lowest favorability ratings of any candidates since the question became a polling standard in 1980. Trump's unfavorable ratings exceeded his favorable ratings by an average of 24 percent during the campaign's final three months, and Clinton's averaged 16 percent. The difference was that among voters who disliked *both* candidates, Trump led by 22 percent of the vote; many of the late deciders, nearly one in every eight voters, overwhelmingly disliked both candidates. Clinton had an enormous advantage among voters in experience (90 percent to 8 percent) and judgment (66 percent to 26 percent), but Trump was viewed as far more likely to bring about change (83 percent to 14 percent). Twenty percent of Trump voters did not believe he had the temperament to be effective in office, just as 20 percent of Clinton's voters doubted that she was honest and trustworthy, probably the lingering doubts about her missing emails and Trump's repeated attacks on "Crooked Hillary."[88]

Once again, both candidates in 2020 had higher unfavorable ratings than favorable, though Trump's were worse. Biden had notable advantages over Trump as more likable, honest, and "cares about the needs of people like you," while Trump's sole advantage was in being a strong/decisive leader. Biden's advantage—keyed to national divisiveness and, not unrelatedly, to the ongoing pandemic—was among those voters who believed he could unite the country and exercise good judgment.[89]

Issues are another major short-term influence on voting behavior. University of Michigan researchers in the 1950s suggested that issues influence a voter's choice only if three conditions are present: (1) The voter is aware that an issue or several issues exist, (2) issues are of some personal concern to the voter, and (3) the voter perceives that one party represents his or her position better than the other party does.[90] Relatively few U.S. voters in the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections met these criteria—at most one-quarter to one-third. Another one-third of the respondents were unaware of *any* of the sixteen principal issues about which they were questioned. Even the two-thirds who were aware of one or more issues frequently had no personal concern about them. Many of those who were aware and concerned about issues were unable to perceive differences between the two parties' positions. The analysts concluded that issues *potentially* determined the choice of, at most, only one-third of the electorate. (The proportion who *actually* voted as they did because of issues was probably even less.)

Studies of political attitudes in the 1960s and 1970s found that the number and types of issues of which voters were aware had increased.[91] Voters in the 1950s exhibited some interest in traditional domestic matters, such as welfare and labor-management relationships, and in a few foreign policy issues, such as the threat of communism and the danger of the atomic bomb. Beginning with the 1964 election, however, voters' interests broadened to include concerns such as civil rights and the Vietnam War. The war, in particular, remained an important consideration in the 1968 and 1972 contests and was joined by new matters—crime, disorder, and juvenile delinquency, which, along with race problems, were known as social issues. Salient issues vary from election

to election. Fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq became a defining issue in 2004, the economy dominated voter concerns in 2008 and 2012, immigration became a central issue in 2016, and the COVID-19 pandemic upended the 2020 campaign. The 2024 race brought issues like inflation, abortion, LGBT rights, and gun violence to the fore.

Incumbency. Incumbency may be viewed as a candidate characteristic that also involves issues. Service in the job provides experience no one else can claim. Incumbency provides concrete advantages: An incumbent already has national campaign experience (true for all incumbents except Ford, who had been appointed to the vice presidency), can obtain media coverage more easily, and has considerable discretion in allocating federal benefits.

Four of the eight incumbent presidents who ran for reelection between 1976 and 2020 won (Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama), while only one of the past four incumbent vice presidents who sought the presidency was successful (George H. W. Bush). The failure of Ford, Carter, G. H. W. Bush, and Trump to gain a second term demonstrates the potential *disadvantages* of incumbency, particularly if service in the presidency coincides with negative economic conditions, such as a recession, high inflation, an unresolved foreign crisis, or a pandemic for which a president is blamed. Experience in the job, then, is not a political plus if a sitting president's record is considered weak or national conditions seem to have deteriorated under the incumbent's stewardship. The president may be held accountable by voters who cast their ballots *retrospectively* rather than *prospectively*; in other words, these voters evaluate an administration's past performance rather than try to predict future performance.

Retrospective voting helps to explain Carter's defeat in 1980 and Reagan's reelection in 1984. Carter's failure to resolve the hostage crisis in Iran and continued "stagflation" seemed to demonstrate national weakness; in contrast, Reagan embraced pride in America as a major campaign theme. Both elections found citizens voting retrospectively, first providing a negative and then (with "morning in America") a positive verdict. In 1996, Clinton benefited from the peace and prosperity of his first term. When Gore in 2000 distanced himself from Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, he also moved away from the administration's achievements.[92] Personal incumbency was not a factor in 2008 and 2016, but party incumbency was. For the first and second times since 1952, neither party's nominee was an incumbent president or vice president. Democrats actively linked Bush's record to the Republican nominee in 2008, even though the president made no campaign appearances with McCain. In stark contrast, Hillary Clinton in 2016 featured Barack and Michelle Obama during rally after rally, particularly during the final month of the campaign. But, as we have seen, the Obama coalition did not reassemble for Clinton, at least not with the same enthusiasm.

After four tumultuous years, Trump expected his reelection campaign in 2020 to focus on favorable economic conditions, but the pandemic triggered widespread economic disruption—leading to a net loss of jobs over his four-year term—and

highlighted the administration's clumsy public health response. As an incumbent, Trump could also have expected to raise more campaign funds and target government initiatives to his advantage. Surprisingly, Biden outraised Trump in the fall and enjoyed a large financial advantage. Although President Trump announced several foreign policy successes (for example, recognition of Israel by several Gulf states), his overall record in office failed to convince a majority of voters to renew his incumbency less than it might have.[93]

Presidential Debates. Voters have the opportunity to assess the issue positions and personal characteristics of presidential and vice presidential contenders during nationally televised debates. Such debates, first staged in 1960 and held each election year since 1976, are the most widely watched campaign events. An estimated 73 million viewers watched the first Biden–Trump debate in 2020.

Candidates hope to avoid making a mistake on live television, a particular danger for incumbents. Ford misspoke in 1976 by saying that the countries of Eastern Europe were not under Soviet domination; Reagan appeared confused and out of touch during his first debate with Mondale in 1984 before rallying in their second encounter. Challengers try to demonstrate their knowledge of issues and their presidential bearing to a nationwide audience. Kennedy in 1960, Reagan in 1980, and George W. Bush in 2000 exceeded expectations and dispelled negative impressions while debating a more experienced opponent. Candidates usually prepare carefully prior to the meeting and repeat themes already prominent in the campaign, producing nonspontaneous exchanges. Trailing candidates hope the debates will reverse their fortunes, but Kerry in 2004, McCain in 2008, and Romney in 2012 were disappointed.

Donald Trump pointedly approached the 2016 debates in a confident, relaxed manner, refusing to sequester himself for days of preparation as most candidates have done. Even so postdebate polls showed that he lost all three 2016 encounters, the first of which was the most watched presidential debate in history, with 84 million television viewers. Trump's unrehearsed style contrasted with Clinton's careful, lawyer-like approach.[94] The second debate came on the heels of the release of a taped conversation which contained Trump's frank discussion of sexual assault ("when you're a star, they let you do it") and triggered pressure on him to withdraw from the race.[95] Trump instead dismissed the dialogue as fanciful "locker room talk" and assembled women who had charged Bill Clinton with unwanted sexual advances, giving them prime seats in the debate audience.

During the first debate of 2020, Trump interrupted Biden and the moderator so often that it was nearly incoherent, far from an exercise in civic education. Trump refused to participate in the second debate after organizers insisted it be held virtually following the president's recent bout with COVID-19. The toned-down third debate was more civil than the first, with the moderator given the ability to shut off the candidates' microphones to prevent interruptions.

Vice presidential candidates have debated since 1976 without much impact on the election outcomes. The largest audience tuned in to see the 2008 encounter between longtime Senator Joe Biden and national neophyte Sarah Palin, whose folksy style contrasted sharply with Biden's occasional lapse into Washington speak. An even greater mismatch pitted Dan Quayle against the much older and far more experienced Lloyd Bentsen in 1988. Responding to what he would do if forced to assume the duties of president, Quayle compared himself to former president John F. Kennedy. Bentsen pounced with withering directness: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Quayle never recovered.[96]

Televised debates enable even the least engaged citizen to develop an impression of the major-party contenders. Candidates are schooled in stagecraft, and the public may now expect more than just a polite exchange of policy views as candidates try to display assertiveness, empathy, humor, or character.

Election Day

One irony of the presidential elections since 1960 is that although more citizens had acquired the right to vote, a shrinking proportion had exercised that right until recently. As Table 2.3 indicates, the estimated number of people of voting age has more than

TABLE 2.3 ■ Participation of General Public in Presidential Elections, 1932–2020

Year	Estimated Population of Voting Age (in millions)	Number of Votes Cast (in millions)	Turnout as Percentage of Population of Voting Age	Turnout as Percentage of Voting-Eligible Population
1932	75.8	39.7	52.4	56.9
1936	80.2	45.6	56.0	61.0
1940	84.7	49.9	58.9	62.4
1944	85.7	48.0	56.0	55.9
1948	95.6	48.8	51.1	52.2
1952	99.9	61.6	61.6	62.3
1956	104.5	62.0	59.3	60.2
1960	109.7	68.8	62.8	63.8
1964	114.1	70.6	61.9	62.8
1968	120.3	73.2	60.9	62.5
1972[a]	140.8	77.6	55.1	56.2

Year	Estimated Population of Voting Age (in millions)	Number of Votes Cast (in millions)	Turnout as Percentage of Population of Voting Age	Turnout as Percentage of Voting-Eligible Population
1976	152.3	81.6	53.6	54.8
1980	164.6	86.5	52.6	54.2
1984	174.5	92.7	53.1	55.2
1988	182.8	91.6	50.1	52.8
1992	189.0	104.4	55.2	58.1
1996	196.5	96.5	49.1	51.7
2000	205.8	105.4	51.2	54.2
2004	221.3	122.3	55.3	60.1
2008	230.8	131.3	56.9	61.6
2012	240.9	130.3	53.6	58.6
2016	250.1	136.7	54.7	60.1
2020	257.6	159.7	61.99	66.6

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P–25, No. 1085 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994); 1996, 2000, and 2004 data from Federal Election Commission (FEC) website, www.fec.gov; and U.S. Census Bureau website, www.census.gov. Data for 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 from United States Elections Project, www.electproject.org/2008g, www.electproject.org/2012g, www.electproject.org/2016g, and www.electproject.org/2020g, respectively. Voting eligible population rates from United States Elections Project, "National Turnout Rates 1789-present," https://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present

[a] Beginning in 1972, persons eighteen to twenty years old were eligible to vote in all states.

doubled since 1932. After reaching a peak in 1960, however, the percentage of people who voted declined in the next twenty years before modest increases in 1984 and 1992, when 55.2 percent voted.[97] Only 49.1 percent showed up in 1996, the lowest turnout since 1924. There was a modest uptick in 2000, to 51.2 percent, and a startling increase in 2004, variously set at 55.3 percent of the *voting-age population* (all those eighteen and older) or 60.7 percent using the more accurate measure of the *voting-eligible population,* which excludes noncitizens and felons. In 2008, turnout rose to 56.9 percent for the voting-age population (including noneligible residents, immigrants, and prison inmates) and to 63 percent of the voting-eligible population. These levels declined in 2012 but rose again in 2016 to 54.7 percent (voting age) and 60.2 percent (voting eligible). With both campaigns actively mobilizing their own voters in 2020 and the widespread use of early voting, turnout jumped to 62 percent (voting age) and 67 percent (voting eligible). The latter figure suggested the highest turnout since 1900.[98]

PHOTO 2.3 The debates between Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy and Republican Vice President Richard Nixon in 1960 were the first to be televised. Kennedy benefited from his strong performance in the debates against his more politically experienced opponent. Today, candidates use this forum to challenge opponents' ideas and portray themselves as presidential and likeable.

AP Photo/File

Optimists believe that the long-term decline in voter participation has been halted. Indeed, the trend ran counter to most theories of why people do not vote. Throughout the 1990s, most states had eased registration and voting laws, removing hurdles that prevent citizens from going to the polls. Federal laws made it far easier for a person to register and to vote for president in 1996, the low point in the trend, than in 1960. A person's lack of education is often put forward as a reason for not voting, but the level of education of U.S. citizens rose even as participation declined. Lack of political information is yet another frequently cited explanation, but more Americans than ever are aware of the candidates and their views on public issues, thanks to media coverage and the debates. Finally, close political races are supposed to stimulate people to get out and vote because they think their ballot will make a difference in the outcome. Recent increases could prove temporary.

Why did voting decline after 1960, and then surge, decline, and surge in subsequent elections? Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde link the long-term decline to the erosion in political party identification and to lower **political efficacy**—the belief that citizens can influence what government does.[99] But these authors note that neither party identification nor political efficacy changed significantly in 1992 and 1996 to explain the rising numbers. Subsequent gains and losses seem unique to particular contests. For example, Ross Perot's presence on the ballot probably contributed to the 1992 turnout increase; 14 percent of Perot voters (nearly three million votes) indicated in exit polls that without Perot on the ballot, they would not have voted. The negative and affective elements of twenty-first century partisan polarization may also have boosted turnout in recent elections, including midterm contests that have traditionally had far less participation. After all, if voting is not just about issues but about one's very identity, it is harder to justify staying home.

After the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder* to strike down key requirements of the 1964 Voting Rights Act, numerous states adopted more stringent requirements ostensibly to combat *voter fraud* even though the number of documented voter fraud cases remains quite low. Advocates of greater participation saw these efforts as *voter suppression* because most had disproportionate impacts on minorities. In response to the pandemic, many states in 2020 expanded *early voting*, a period of four to forty-five days prior to election day when votes could be cast either in person or through mailed ballots.[100] About 100 million citizens voted before November 3. More Republicans cast ballots on election day while more Democrats voted early. President Trump vigorously criticized expanded use of mail-in ballots (65 million) as encouraging fraud. Despite Trump's claim that the election had been stolen, more than five dozen court cases demonstrated that there were few instances of individual let alone systematic fraud in 2020. The convenience of in-home voting might remain a fixture in many states, but the partisan differences in voting preferences triggered another round of arguments about "election fraud" versus "voter suppression."

VALIDATION

Translating popular votes into the official outcome is the final stage of the selection process, in which the Electoral College produces the true winner. Until 2000, it had been more than a century since the constitutionally prescribed process failed to do so or produced a winner who was not also the "people's choice," although we had been dangerously close to such an Electoral College misfire on several occasions. Then it happened again in 2016.

Despite the separation of the presidential and the vice presidential balloting in 1804, there remain three possible ways for a misfire to occur. First, the Electoral College does not ensure that the candidate who receives the most popular votes wins the presidency: John Quincy Adams in 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, and

Benjamin Harrison in 1888 became president even though they finished second in total popular vote to their respective political opponents.[101] The same thing happened in 2000, when Gore won a national plurality of 543,895 votes but lost in the Electoral College, and again in 2016 when Clinton won nearly 2.9 million more popular votes than Trump but finished second in the Electoral College.[102]

Second, candidates in 1800, 1824, and 1876 failed to win an Electoral College majority, leaving Congress to resolve the contest. In the first two cases, the House of Representatives, voting by states, decided the winner. In 1876, Congress created an Electoral Commission to resolve disputes over competing slates of electors in three states, thereby producing a winner (though not without controversy).

The 2016 election illustrated a third danger of the Electoral College system: An elector need not cast his or her ballot for the candidate who wins the plurality of votes in the elector's state. This problem of the **faithless elector** occurred eight times in the twentieth century, with a record number of faithless electors in 2016—four in Washington state, two in Texas, and one in Hawaii. (This total surpassed the six in 1808.) Several who switched their vote—and others who tried to—voiced support for the defeated Bernie Sanders but others were intentionally trying to block Trump's election.[103] It is not particularly dangerous when isolated electors make an error or refuse to follow the result of their states' popular votes, but widespread desertion would be another matter.

The Electoral College as it operates today violates some major tenets of political equality that are central to our contemporary understanding of democracy. Each person's vote does not count equally: Your influence on the outcome depends on where you live. The Electoral College imperfectly reflects relative state populations, weighting any given voter in Wyoming more heavily than one in California. And if you support a losing candidate in a noncompetitive state of whatever size, your possible impact on the outcome is quite small. Citizens who live in populous, politically competitive states have a premium placed on their votes because they affect how large blocs of electoral votes are cast.[104] Supporters of third-party candidates have virtually no impact, except perhaps as a spoiler. Perot received 19,741,048 votes, 18.9 percent of the total cast nationally in 1992, but he won no electoral votes because he did not finish first in any state or in any of the House districts in Maine and Nebraska.

Proposals to reform the Electoral College system seek to avoid system misfires and uphold a more modern understanding of democracy. They range from the rather modest suggestion of prohibiting faithless electors—votes would be cast automatically—to scrapping the present system and moving to a direct popular election. Intermediate suggestions would nationalize the congressional district plan used in Maine and Nebraska, divide electoral votes proportionally between (or among) the contenders, or provide the popular-vote winner with bonus votes, enough to ensure his or her victory in the Electoral College. No proposal is foolproof, and all must develop safeguards against new problems. For instance, the gerrymandering of congressional districts means that

a district plan may be even less representative of the population than a statewide unit rule for awarding a state's electoral votes—and dividing electoral votes proportionally might lead to many more elections being decided by the House of Representatives.

Is the Electoral College a constitutional anachronism that should no longer be preserved? Numerous proposals to amend the Constitution came forward in the aftermath of the 2000 election, just the latest in a long line. In fact, "there have been more proposals for Constitutional amendments on changing the Electoral College than on any other subject," more than seven hundred throughout U.S. history.[105] The passage of a constitutional amendment is problematic because national legislators will calculate how the new system will affect their states' influence on the outcome (or their chances to pursue the office) and vote accordingly.

A new reform proposal seeks to sidestep the difficulty of passing a constitutional amendment. States entering into the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPVIC) agree to award all of their electoral votes to the winner of the *national* popular vote, even if that person did not finish first in the state's balloting. Maryland was the first state to adopt such legislation and join the compact in 2007, although the change will not go into effect until enough other states have adopted similar legislation to total 270 electoral votes.[106] As of May 2023, sixteen states (Maryland, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, Vermont, Washington, Massachusetts, California, Rhode Island, New York, Connecticut, Oregon, New Mexico, Colorado, Delaware, Minnesota) and the District of Columbia, totaling 205 electoral votes, had adopted the reform legislation, and other states had passed the bill in one house of the legislature. Advocates point out that general elections focus candidates' travel and television advertising on a handful of battleground states, especially Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. To avoid relegating most of the nation to spectator status, supporters argue, adopting their reform would force candidates to wage a truly national contest.[107]

Defenders of the Electoral College note that the most serious misfires occurred during periods of intense political divisiveness (for example, 1824 and 1876), when alternative selection systems would have been just as severely tested. Several of the close calls in the twentieth century, such as those in 1948 and 1968, occurred when political parties were suffering serious internal divisions. Only 1888, 2000, and 2016 offer clear examples of a popular-vote winner who lost the general election.[108] If popular-vote rules had been in place in 2000, the chaos would have been even more widespread because the results would have been challenged in many states with close outcomes, not just in Florida. A national recount would have been far more complex than state-by-state challenges. (We saw something like this in 2020 when President Trump challenged results in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.) Democrats sought reform after 2000. Disappointed Republicans considered adopting either proportional or district-based systems of allocating electoral votes in key battleground states won by Obama in 2012, hoping to provide support for the Republican

presidential candidate in 2016. Changing the rules *can* change the outcome, but in 2016, Trump won five of those six battleground states under the unaltered rules.[109]

Defenders also argue that the present system has been remarkably successful in producing peaceful resolutions even in tumultuous years. Its virtues include the requirement that candidates not only receive significant popular support but also win support distributed geographically, enabling the winner to govern. George W. Bush, for example, won thirty states in 2000, including eleven that had voted for Clinton in 1996. Ethnic minority groups, it is often argued, receive special leverage under the present system because they are concentrated in states with large electoral vote totals and receive attention because their support might make the difference between winning all the electoral votes or none. In 2020, we saw the impact of Black voters in Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Finally, some observers fear a threat to two-party stability because direct election might produce many candidates. The plurality winner would fall far short of a majority unless there was also a runoff requirement, via a ranked-choice mechanism or yet another national election.

Partisans differ in responses to these proposals. By 2022, 63 percent of all Americans supported amending the Constitution so that the winner of the most votes nationwide wins the presidency. Eighty percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaners supported the change but only 42 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaners.[110]

Analysts differ over the wisdom of retaining the present electoral system. Maintaining government legitimacy is a shared concern. Historically, successful candidates unable to secure a popular-vote majority at least gained legitimacy by enjoying an Electoral College majority. Defenders of the Electoral College also believe legitimacy is achieved through continuity with the past, but reformers believe it is achieved through enhancing popular control and avoiding controversy like that surrounding Bush's 2000 victory and Trump's in 2016. Legitimacy may also suffer if a losing candidate refuses to concede defeat, as we saw in 2020.

CONCLUSION: TRANSITIONS TO GOVERNING

For the individual and election team that prevail in the long and grueling presidential selection process, victory requires a sudden change in focus. Winning is the means to an end, not an end in itself. During the weeks between election and inauguration, the president-elect must put together a team of political executives to staff the new administration and establish a plan for how to launch the program and policy priorities discussed during the campaign. Legislation approved in 1963 and amended thereafter created a formal transition process that funds the incoming administration, provides temporary office space for the newcomers, and allows outgoing and incoming officials to confer and share information. Harry Truman, who had been caught unawares and

unprepared when he suddenly assumed the presidency from FDR, pioneered much of this process in 1952 when he prepared for the first inter-party transition conducted after the inauguration date was moved from March 4 to January 20.[111]

Four days after election day in 2020, final vote counts in Pennsylvania led major print and broadcast media to declare Joseph R. Biden the *president-elect*, that is, the likely winner of upcoming electoral college balloting. At that point, Biden had seventy-four days to prepare to face a health pandemic, its resulting economic dislocations, widespread demands for racial justice, and ongoing environmental dangers. But in the face of these pressing problems, the head of the General Services Administration delayed officially starting the transition process for seventeen days, reflecting President Trump's insistence that he had not lost the election.

For the first time in the modern era, rather than facilitating the time-honored peaceful transfer of power that lies at the heart of a democratic political system, President Trump sought to reverse the November 3 balloting.[112] Trump denounced election officials in critical swing states, personally lobbied local and state officials to reject vote counts, alleged conspiracies to deny him victory, pursued aggressive legal and public relations strategies that questioned the election outcome, and encouraged supporters to take illegal actions to "stop the steal." Judge after judge rejected unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud and election irregularities: Trump lost more than sixty lawsuits filed in federal and state courts by his campaign and political allies. Nonetheless, sympathetic Republicans and associated media outlets convinced many Republicans that Biden's victory was illegitimate.[113] During this time, Trump solicited roughly $250 million from grassroots supporters to fund his court challenges and his post-presidential political ambitions.[114]

In a last, desperate gasp, Trump worked with allies to encourage die-hard supporters to descend on Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, the day Congress counted Electoral College ballots. That afternoon, he delivered incendiary comments to the crowd, and watched on television as rioters attacked the Capitol in hopes of preventing Congress from certifying Joe Biden's victory. Washington was awash with rumors of other desperate actions that the president might take, including reports of White House advisers encouraging him to declare martial law.[115] Trump would later be impeached for his role in the events of January 6, and questions about his legal culpability would dog his attempts to regain the presidency in 2024.[116]

The president's refusal to concede defeat made it difficult for President Biden to "hit the ground running" and get his new administration off to a good start. Before exploring how a president's personal beliefs, abilities, and personality may influence performance in office, we examine the chief executive's relationship with the public between elections, a link that has increased in importance in modern times as presidents attempt to sustain the support that brought them to the office in the first place.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

On the arcane workings of the Electoral College, see www.archives.gov/electoral-college?_ga=2.31305087.1364476467.1606243847-1173108847.1606243847.

For an extensive collection of data on the presidency, including information about recent elections, see the American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.

For a vast array of voter survey data starting in the 1950s, see the American National Election Studies project at electionstudies.org/

For thorough analysis of voter turnout, see the United States Elections Project, www.electproject.org. Also see America Goes to the Polls 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020, www.nonprofitvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/america-goes-polls-2020-7.pdf.

National Popular Vote reform effort, www.nationalpopularvote.com.

For a rich collection of presidential election maps, see www.uselectionatlas.org/.