

UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN POLITICS

ELECTIONS IN THE US

This lecture focuses our attention on the issue of democratic control of the national government through the electoral process and on the degree to which the public participates in this fundamental activity of the representative democratic practice.

Elections are affected by the different rates of participation of groups in American society. It is also affected by how structural factors such as constitutional rules, unequal access to resources, and cultural ideas help determine why some groups participate more than others. Elections, in their turn, affect the behavior of public officials, those who are elected to govern.

The electoral process is the core prerequisite of any discussion about the democratic quality of any system of government because they are, at least in theory, what makes popular sovereignty possible. Elections in the United States do much to make the system somehow democratic; however they sometimes fall short of their democratic promise, and this is mainly due to present day factors that may undermine them and their *raison d'être*.

The importance of the electoral process can be perceived through different aspects.

Elections May Change the Course of Government Action

Occasionally in American history, a national election is so consequential that it alters the overall direction of government policy and the role of government in the United States. Two examples may illustrate this:

1. In 1861, the election of Abraham Lincoln sparked the secession of southern states, the Civil War, and ultimately led to the abolition of slavery in the entire United States.
2. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress in the 1932 elections was just such a moment. In the first 100 days of his elections, Roosevelt launched the New Deal convincing Congress to pass bills to regulate the banking and securities industries, to bail out failing banks and protect the deposits of the public, to launch public works and relief efforts, and to provide price supports for farmers. This revolution in the role of the federal government was made possible by the 1932 elections, but to fully understand what happened, structural, political linkage, and governmental factors have to be taken into account.

The Unique Nature of American Elections

American elections differ quite dramatically from those of most other democratic countries. The differences are the result of rules found in the Constitution but also in federal statutes and judicial decisions that define offices and tell how elections are to be conducted. Here are the distinguishing features of elections in the United States:

1. **Elections are numerous and frequent.** The American people are regularly and frequently solicited to choose various kinds of representatives, and other political, executive and judicial officers. They not only elect the president and members of Congress (senators and representatives), but also, because of federal nature of the system, Americans also elect governors, state legislators, and – in most states – judges. Additionally, the different state constitutions allow autonomy for their respective counties, cities, and towns, and all of their top officials are elected by the people. All in all, about 500,000 offices are filled through elections. Moreover, the American citizens also elect school boards in most places, and the top positions in special districts (e.g., water or conservation districts). And then there are the many state and local ballot initiatives that add to the length and complexity of the ballot at election time.

No other country holds so many elections, covering so many offices and public policy issues.

2. **Elections are separate and independent from one another.** Not only does the USA have a multitude of elections, but the election to fill each particular office is separate and independent from the others. In parliamentary systems, one votes for a party, and the party that wins a majority gets to appoint a whole range of other officials. The majority party in the British parliament (the legislative branch), for example, chooses the prime minister and cabinet ministers (the executive branch), who run the government. The government, in turn, appoints officials to many posts that are filled by elections here. In the United States, the president and members of Congress are elected independently from one another, as are governors, state legislators, mayors of cities, city councils, and school boards.

Expansion of the franchise: an overview

Until the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments after the Civil War, it was up to each state to determine who within its borders was eligible to vote. In the early years of the United States, many of the states limited the legal right to vote. It is called the franchise. During the 1st half of the 19th century, the majority of people could not vote at all. Slaves, Native Americans, and women were excluded altogether. In most states, white men without property or who had not paid some set level of taxes, were not allowed to vote. In some states early on, white men with certain religious beliefs were also excluded.

One of the most important developments in the political history of the United States, an essential part of the struggle for democracy, has been the expansion of the right to vote. The extension of the franchise has been a lengthy and uneven process, spanning 200 years.

1. **White Male Suffrage.**

The first obstacles to disappear were those concerning property and religion. The demands for more democracy during Thomas Jefferson's presidency (1801-1809) and in the years leading up to the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 were so strong that by 1829, property, tax-paying, and religious requirements had been dropped in all states except North Carolina and Virginia. That left universal suffrage, or the ability to vote, definitely in place for most adult white males in the United States.

2. **Blacks, Women, and Young People.**

The struggle to expand the suffrage to include African Americans, women, and young people proved difficult and painful. In the late 1790s and early 1800s, universal white male suffrage was often accompanied by the withdrawal of voting rights from black freedmen, even in states that did not permit slavery. It took the bloody Civil War to free the slaves and the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1870) to extend the right to vote to all black males, in both North and South. Even so, most blacks were effectively disfranchised (could not vote) in the South by the end of the nineteenth century and remained so until the 1960s civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Women won the right to vote in 1920 in all the states with the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, after a long political battle. Residents of the District of Columbia were allowed to vote in presidential elections after 1961, and 18- to 20-year-olds gained the franchise only in 1971.