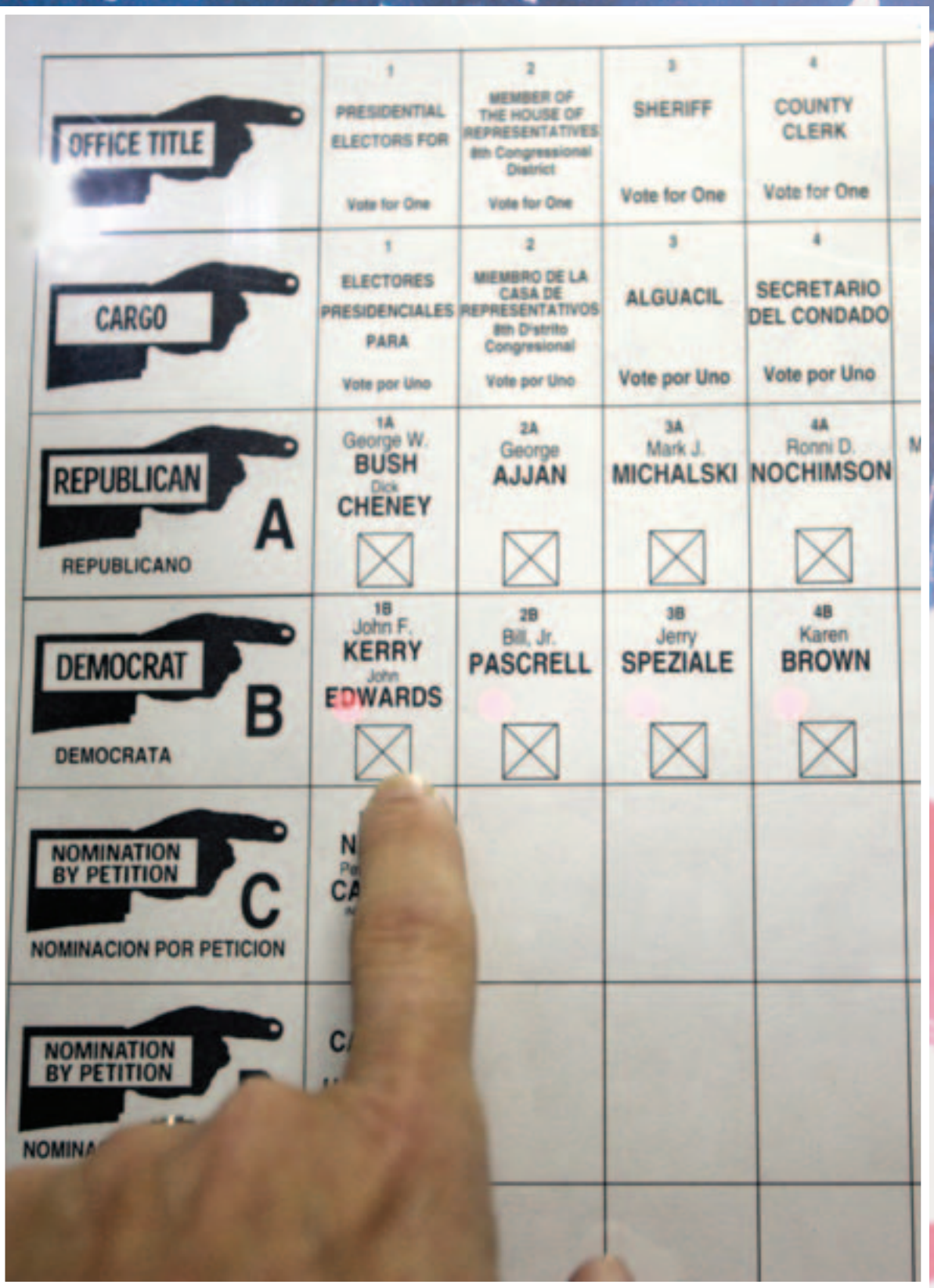

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Voting and Elections

DURING THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO THE 2004 presidential election, no one doubted that the election between Republican President George W. Bush and the Democratic challenger, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, would be close. The question everyone wanted answered was exactly how close it would be. Although the presidential election is national, both candidates focused on specific states that showed either narrow margins or even ties. Many of these so-called "battleground states" were located in the Rust Belt—Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania; however, others were spread across the country, such as Florida, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and even Hawaii.

Of these several battleground states, three stood out as the most valuable because of their razor-thin margins of victory in 2000 and their large number of electoral votes. Pennsylvania, a state the 2000 Democratic Candidate Al Gore had won by 220,000 votes, had twenty-one electoral votes. Florida, with the minuscule and heavily contested 537 vote margin for Bush in 2000, had twenty-seven electoral votes up for grabs. Finally, there was Ohio with twenty electoral votes, a state no Republican candidate has lost and still been able to go on to win the presidency. By Election Day, it was conventional wisdom that a candidate had to win at least two of these three states in order to win the election. By early evening, it was clear that Bush would take Florida by a much wider margin than in 2000, and Kerry would narrowly win Pennsylvania. This left the election up to Ohio, which both candidates had visited more than twenty-five times in 2004. Throughout the night, Bush appeared to hold a 2 percent voter margin over Kerry, leading some networks—Fox News and NBC—to call the state for Bush, while others—such as ABC, CBS, and CNN—left it too close to call. However, fears that Ohio might become the 2004 version of Florida quickly abated when it became clear that Kerry could not rely on the provisional and absentee ballots to overtake Bush's voter lead. By the morning after Election Day, Bush took Ohio.

Bush also won the battleground states of New Mexico and Iowa (states Gore carried in 2000), but he lost New Hampshire to Kerry. The remaining

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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battleground states also went to Kerry, but they did not collectively have enough Electoral College votes for him to win. When looking at how the 2004 Electoral College map changed from the 2000 map, one can see that the division of coastal "blue" (Democratic) states and "red" (Republican) states became even more contiguous. Like the Pacific states (except Alaska), New England is now completely Democratic in terms of Electoral College votes, while the South from Florida to Arizona is solidly Republican. Because of these geographical differences, many students of politics raise questions about whether blue-state and red-state Americans see America the same way, or if America is actually two nations fighting a culture war within the midwest battlegrounds, a question the 2008 presidential elections may help to answer.

EVERY FOUR YEARS, on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November, a plurality of voters, simply by casting ballots peacefully across a continent-sized nation, reelects or replaces politicians at all levels of government—from the president of the United States, to members of the U.S. Congress, to state legislators. A number of other countries do not have the luxury of a peaceful transition of political power. We tend to take this process for granted, but in truth it is a marvel. American political institutions have succeeded in maintaining peaceful elections, even when they are as closely contested as the high-stakes 2000 presidential election. Fortunately, most Americans, though not enough, understand why and how elections serve their interests. Elections take the pulse of average people and gauge their hopes and fears; the study of elections permits us to trace the course of the American Revolution over 200 years of voting.

Today, the United States of America is a democratic paradise in many respects, because it probably conducts more elections for more offices more frequently than any other nation on earth. Moreover, in recent times, the U.S. electorate (those citizens eligible to vote) has been the most inclusive in the country's history; no longer can one's race or sex or creed prevent participation at the ballot box. But, challenges still remain. After all the blood spilled and energy expended to expand the suffrage (as the right to vote is called), little more than half the potentially eligible voters bother to go to the polls.

This chapter focuses on the purposes served by elections, the various kinds of elections held in the United States, and patterns of voting over time. We concentrate in particular on presidential and congressional contests, both of which have rich histories that tell us a great deal about the American people and their changing hopes and needs. We conclude by returning to contemporary presidential elections and addressing some topics of electoral reform.

- First, we will examine *the purposes of elections,* pointing out that they confer a legitimacy on regimes better than any other method of change.
- Second, we will analyze different *kinds of elections,* including the many different types of elections held at the presidential and congressional levels.
- Third, we will take a closer look at the elements of *presidential elections,* including primaries, conventions, and delegates.
- Fourth, we will explore how *congressional elections,* although they share similarities with presidential elections, are really quite different.
- Fifth, we will discuss *voting behavior,* focusing on distinct patterns in voter turnout and vote choice.
- Finally, we will present arguments for *reforming the electoral process* for the most powerful official in the world, the president of the United States.

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THE PURPOSES OF ELECTIONS

BOTH THE BALLOT and the bullet are methods of governmental change around the world, and surely the former is preferable to the latter. Although the United States has not escaped the bullet's awful effects, the election process is responsible for most leadership change in this country. Regular free elections guarantee mass political action and enable citizens to influence the actions of their government. Election campaigns may often seem unruly, unending, harsh, and even vicious, but imagine the stark alternatives: violence and social disruption. Societies that cannot vote their leaders out of office are left with little choice other than to force them out by means of strikes, riots, or coups d'état.

Popular election confers on a government the legitimacy that it can achieve no other way. Even many authoritarian systems around the globe, including Singapore, Syria, and China, recognize this. From time to time, they hold "referenda" to endorse their regimes or one-party elections, even though these so-called elections offer no real choice that would ratify their rule. The symbolism of elections as mechanisms to legitimize change, then, is important, but so is their practical value. After all, elections are the means to fill public offices and staff the government. The voters' choice of candidates and parties helps to organize government as well. Because candidates advocate certain policies, elections also involve a choice of platforms and point the society in certain directions on a wide range of issues, from abortion to civil rights to national defense to the environment.

Regular elections also ensure that government is accountable to the people it serves. At fixed intervals the **electorate,** citizens eligible to vote, is called on to judge those in power. If the judgment is favorable, and the incumbents are reelected, the office holders may continue their policies with renewed resolve. Should the incumbents be defeated and their challengers elected, however, a change in policies will likely result. Either way, the winners will claim a **mandate** (literally, a command) from the people to carry out their platform.

electorate
Citizens eligible to vote.

mandate
A command, indicated by an electorate's votes, for the elected officials to carry out their platforms.

Sometimes the claim of a mandate is suspect because voters are not so much endorsing one candidate and his or her beliefs as rejecting his or her opponent. Frequently, this occurs because the electorate is exercising retrospective judgment; that is, voters are rendering judgment on the performance of the party in power. This judgment makes sense because voters can evaluate the record of office holders much better than they can predict the future actions of the out-of-power challengers.

retrospective judgment
A voter's evaluation of the performance of the party in power.

At other times, voters might use **prospective judgment;** that is, they vote based on what a candidate pledges to do about an issue if elected. This forward-looking approach to choosing candidates voters believe will best serve their interests requires that the electorate examine the views that the rival candidates have on the issues of the day and then cast a ballot for the person they believe will best handle these matters. Unfortunately, prospective voting requires lots of information about issues and candidates. Voters who cast a vote prospectively must seek out information and learn about issues and how each candidate stands on them. Three requirements exist in order for voters to engage in prospective voting: (1) voters must have an opinion on an issue; (2) voters must have an idea of what action, if any, the government is taking on the issue; and, (3) voters must see a difference between the two parties on the issue.[1] Only a small minority of voters could meet these requirements, although scholars studying more recent elections have found voters better equipped to engage in prospective voting than they had thought.[2] Consider for a moment how voters retrospectively and prospectively judged recent presidential administrations in reaching their ballot decisions:

prospective judgment
A voter's evaluation of a candidate based on what he or she pledges to do about an issue if elected.

- *1980:* Burdened by difficult economic times and the Iranian hostage crisis (one year before Election Day, Iranian militants had seized fifty-three Americans, whom they held until January 20, 1981, Inauguration Day), Carter became a one-term president as the electorate rejected the Democrat's perceived weak leadership. Many voters did not view Ronald Reagan, at age sixty-nine, as the ideal replacement, nor

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did a majority agree with some of his conservative principles. But, the retrospective judgment on Carter was so harsh, and the prospective outlook of four more years under his stewardship so glum, that an imperfect alternative was considered preferable to another term of the Democrat.

- *1984:* A strong economic recovery from a midterm recession and an image of strength derived from a defense buildup and a successful military venture in Grenada combined to produce a satisfied electorate whose retrospective judgment granted Ronald Reagan four more years. A forty-nine-state landslide reelected Reagan over Jimmy Carter's vice president, Walter Mondale.
- *1988:* Continued satisfaction with Reagan, a product of strong economic expansion and superpower summitry, produced an electoral endorsement of Reagan's vice president, George Bush. Bush was seen as Reagan's understudy and natural successor; the Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis, offered too few convincing reasons to alter the voters' retrospective judgment.
- *1992:* A prolonged recession, weak job growth, and Ross Perot's candidacy—which split the Republican base—denied a second term to George Bush, despite many significant foreign policy triumphs. In the end, voters decided to vote retrospectively and gamble on little-known Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton.
- *1996:* Similar to 1984, only with the party labels reversed, a healthy economy prompted Americans to retrospectively support President Bill Clinton in his quest for reelection over Bob Dole. Voters also looked prospectively at the two candidates and again registered their support for President Clinton and his vision for the country's future.
- *2000:* Eight years of peace and record economic prosperity should have worked in favor of Vice President Al Gore. While he received more votes than any Democratic candidate in U.S. history, Gore's Clinton-era baggage and credibility questions helped to nullify any advantage over Texas Governor George W. Bush, an opponent with an undistinguished record but no significant liabilities. Given the unusual circumstances of the actual election, it is difficult to say more precisely to what extent the outcome represents a retrospective or prospective political opinion.
- *2004:* Ordinarily, incumbent reelections become a referendum on the incumbent's performance, making Americans likely to think retrospectively. However, President George W. Bush, the incumbent, managed to make the election not merely about his own economic performance but also former President Clinton's, by blaming the recession on Clinton's last year in office Bush credits the beginning of a recession, and on the 9/11 attacks, which shook consumer confidence. Finally, Bush encouraged retrospective opinion on his opponent, John Kerry, claiming his Senate voting record showed tax increases that hindered economic progress.

Whether we agree or disagree with these election results, there is a rough justice at work. When parties and presidents please the electorate, they are rewarded; when they preside over hard times, they are punished. Presidents usually are not responsible for all the good or bad developments that occur on their watch, but the voters nonetheless hold them accountable, not an unreasonable way for citizens to behave in a democracy.

On rare occasions, off-year congressional elections can produce mandates. In 1994, backlash against Clinton's decision to push liberal policies like national health care and a large government stimulus package helped Representative Newt Gingrich (R–GA) lead Republicans to gain control of the House of Representatives and claim a mandate for limiting government. Voters in 2002 expressed their strongly positive feelings toward President George W. Bush's performance as president by electing enough senators for Republicans to reclaim both houses of Congress, giving Bush the go-ahead to propose his program, and bucking the trend for voters to elect more candidates from the opposing party in federal off-year elections.

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