



Photo courtesy: Kirk Condyles

■ Controversy over vote counting in the 2000 presidential election brought people to West Palm Beach, Florida, to protest on behalf of Al Gore and George W. Bush.

## KINDS OF ELECTIONS

SO FAR, WE HAVE REFERRED mainly to presidential elections, but in the U.S. system, elections come in many varieties: primary elections, general elections, initiatives, referenda, and recalls.

### Primary Elections

In **primary elections**, voters decide which of the candidates within a party will represent the party's ticket in the general elections. There are different kinds of primaries. For example, **closed primaries** allow only a party's registered voters to cast a ballot, and **open primaries** allow independents and sometimes members of the other party to participate. (Figure 13.1 shows the states with open and closed primaries for presidential delegate selection.) Closed primaries are considered healthier for the party system because they prevent members of one party from influencing the primaries of the opposition party. On the one hand, studies of open primaries indicate that **crossover voting**—participation in the primary of a party with which the voter is not affiliated—occurs frequently.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the research shows little evidence of much **raiding**—an *organized* attempt by voters of one party to influence the primary results of the other party.<sup>4</sup>

When none of the candidates in the initial primary secures a majority of the votes, most states have a **runoff primary**, a contest between the two candidates with the greatest number of votes. One final type of primary, used in Nebraska and Louisiana (in statewide, nonpresidential primaries), and in hundreds of cities large and small across America, is the **nonpartisan primary**, which is used to select candidates without regard to party affiliation. A nonpartisan primary could produce two final candidates of the same party from a slate of several candidates from many parties.

#### primary election

Election in which voters decide which of the candidates within a party will represent the party in the general election.

#### closed primary

A primary election in which only a party's registered voters are eligible to vote.

#### open primary

A primary in which party members, independents, and sometimes members of the other party are allowed to vote.

#### crossover voting

Participation in the primary of a party with which the voter is not affiliated.

#### raiding

An organized attempt by voters of one party to influence the primary results of the other party.

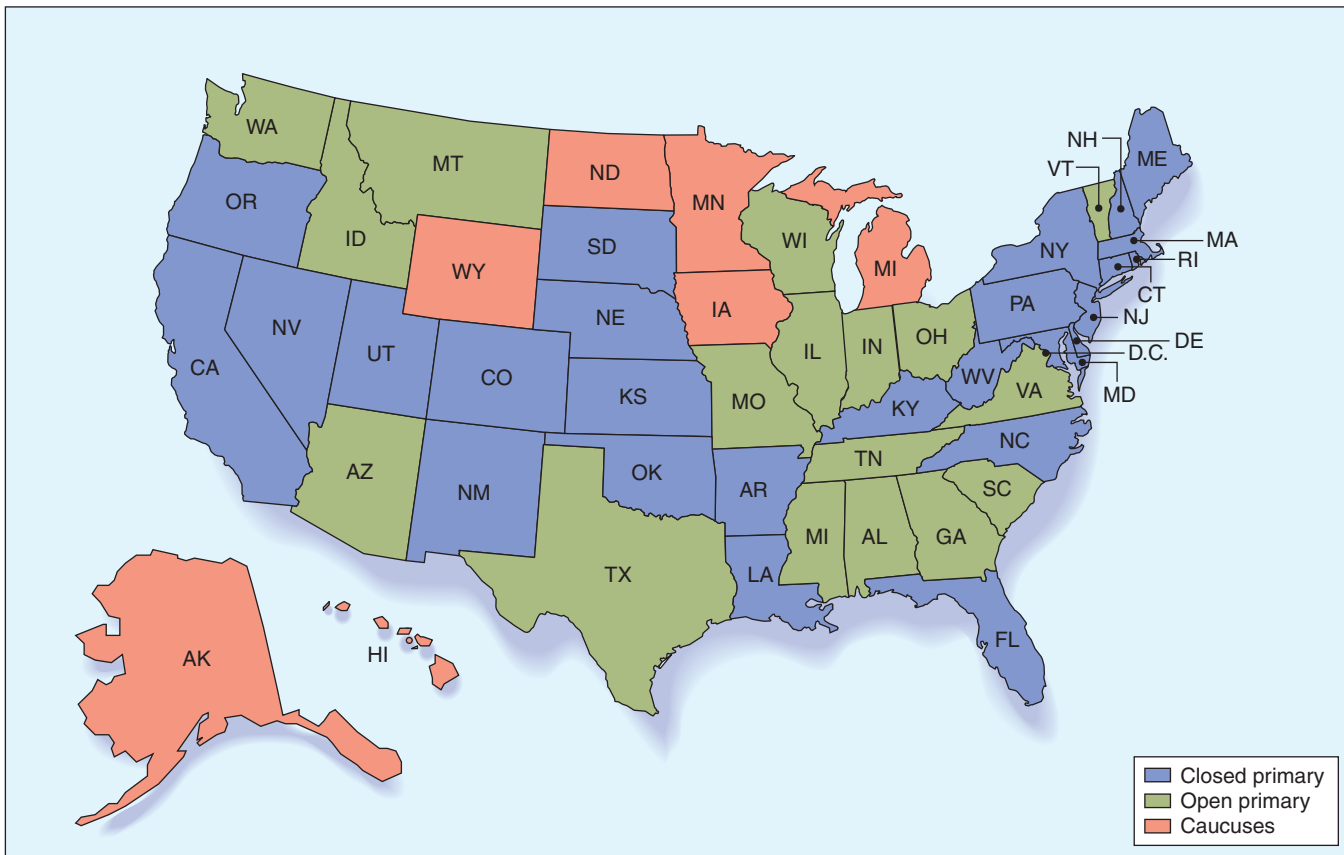
#### runoff primary

A second primary election between the two candidates receiving the greatest number of votes in the first primary.

#### nonpartisan primary

A primary used to select candidates regardless of party affiliation.

FIGURE 13.1 Methods of Selecting Presidential Delegates. ■



Note: Methods of selection current as of December 2002.

## General Elections

### general election

Election in which voters decide which candidates will actually fill elective public offices.

Once party members vote for their party candidates for various offices, each state holds its general election. In the **general election**, voters decide which candidates will actually fill the nation's elective public offices. These elections are held at many levels, including municipal, county, state, and national. Whereas primaries are contests between the candidates within each party, general elections are contests between the candidates of opposing parties.

In sizing up presidential candidates, voters look for leadership and character, and they base their judgments partly on foreign policy and defense issues that do not arise in state and local elections. Leadership qualities are vital for gubernatorial and mayoral candidates, as are the nuts-and-bolts issues (such as taxes, schools, and roads) that dominate the concerns of state and local governments. Citizens often choose their congressional representatives very differently from the way they select presidents. Knowing much less about the candidates, people will sometimes base a vote on simple name identification, visibility, or party identification. This way of deciding one's vote obviously helps incumbents and therefore to some degree explains the high reelection rates of incumbent U.S. representatives. Since World War II, 92 percent of all U.S. House members seeking another term have won; in several recent election years, the proportion has been above 95 percent. In 2004, fully 98 percent of the lawmakers who sought reelection

tion won. However, greater name recognition is probably not the most important factor driving the incumbency advantage. More important is that incumbents are typically able to cultivate more favorable public images than are challengers.<sup>5</sup>

## Initiative, Referendum, and Recall

Three other types of elections are the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. Used in twenty-four states and the District of Columbia, initiatives involve voting on issues (as opposed to voting for candidates). An **initiative** is a process that allows citizens to propose legislation and submit it to the state electorate for popular vote, as long as they get a certain number of signatures on petitions supporting the proposal. Ballot initiatives have been the subject of growing controversy in the past decades. Critics charge that the initiative—which was intended to give citizens more direct control over policy making—is now unduly influenced by interest groups and “the initiative industry”—“law firms that draft legislation, petition management firms that guarantee ballot access, direct-mail firms, and campaign consultants who specialize in initiative contests.”<sup>6</sup> Colorado’s Amendment 36, one of the more publicized and controversial initiatives, failed to receive a majority of votes in 2004. This proposed amendment to the state constitution would have changed Colorado’s election law so that the state’s nine electoral votes would be awarded proportionally, according to the popular vote.

A **referendum** is an election whereby the state legislature submits proposed legislation to the state’s voters for approval. Although both the referendum and the initiative provide for more direct democracy, they are not problem free. In the 1990 elections, for instance, California had so many referenda and initiatives on its ballot that the state printed a lengthy two-volume guide to explain them all to voters. In addition, the wording of the question can have an enormous impact on the outcome. In some cases, a “yes” vote will bring about a policy change; in other cases, a “no” vote will cause a change.<sup>7</sup>

There are additional problems with initiatives and referenda. Among other things, referenda are imperfect representations of the public will because only a small, self-selected portion of the voting public chooses to participate in the referenda voting process. Those who decide to study and form an opinion on the numerous questions are generally of higher socio-economic class, and therefore the votes of the lower classes are underrepresented. Also, the expense of first getting thousands of signatures to place a question on the ballot, and then waging a political campaign for it, dissuades private citizens from taking part. Thus, referenda are not the voice of the people, but rather the voice of well-funded special interest groups who can afford the cost and time commitment of a major campaign.<sup>8</sup>

The third type of election (or “delection”) found in many states is the recall, in which voters can remove an incumbent from office by popular vote. Recall elections are very rare, and sometimes they are thwarted by the official’s resignation or impeachment prior to the vote. In 2003, under intense national media attention, Californians recalled Governor Grey Davis (a Democrat) and replaced him with action star (and Republican) Arnold Schwarzenegger. Davis, who had won reelection against a weak Republican candidate, Bill Simon, faced intense criticism for his handling of the state’s slumping economy and looming energy crisis. Preceding the recall election were sideshows, such as TV star Gary Coleman declaring his candidacy and columnist Arianna Huffington attacking Schwarzenegger during a debate for his alleged mistreatment of women. Immediately following the recall, commentators feared that voters in California had set a precedent for the people of a state to recall governors whenever things are not going well. Their fears appeared to be justified when Nevada resident Tony Dane tried to petition the recall of Nevada Governor Kenny Guinn, a Republican. However, after Dane submitted his petition with only three verified signatures, it appeared that there would be no wave of governor recalls.

### initiative

An election that allows citizens to propose legislation and submit it to the state electorate for popular vote.

### referendum

An election whereby the state legislature submits proposed legislation to the state’s voters for approval.





## NATIONAL ELECTIONS 2004

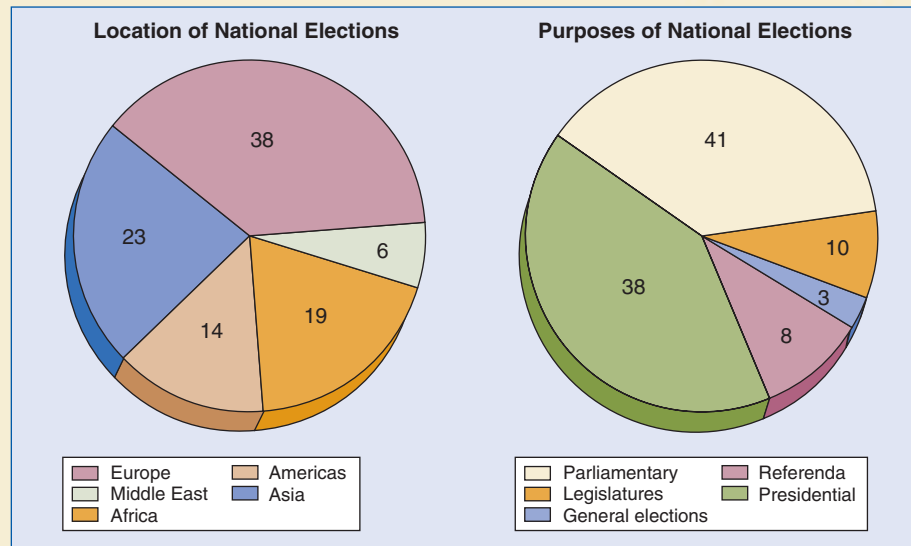
In 2004 Americans voted in two national elections. Both were held the same day, November 2. One election was for president. In the other, voters elected members to Congress. These were only two of one hundred national elections scheduled to take place in 2004 around the world. This number is up only slightly from previous years.

There were ninety-seven national elections held in 2003 and ninety-three in 2002. A look at where these elections were held shows that they were fairly evenly distributed around the world. The U.S. held two of fourteen elections held in the Americas. The largest number of elections was held in Europe (including Russia and the other countries that became independent when the Soviet Union collapsed), and the fewest elections were held in the Middle East. By far the two most frequent purposes of elections were to elect parliaments (forty-one) and presidents (thirty-eight). There were also eight national referenda, something that does not happen in the United States.

Referenda generally address three different issues. One is constitutional reform, such as amending an election system. A second set of issues deals with allowing provinces to have more autonomy or joining a federation or international organization such as the European Union. The third set of issues involves moral questions such as permitting divorce or legalizing abortion.

These one hundred elections were not held in one hundred different countries. In some countries, no national elections were held; in others, citizens went to the polls for more than one. In the 2002–2004 time period, Americans voted in three national elections. They were the presidential and congressional elections in 2004 and the 2002 congressional election. Voters in Portugal, Venezuela, and Egypt did not vote in national elections. Voters in Cuba (legislative election, 2003) and Iraq (referendum, 2002) went to the polls in national elections once.

Voters in France went to the polls the most often in any single year. They voted four times in 2002. This is because of the way in which their national elections are set up. In both presidential and National Assembly elections, a candidate must get an absolute majority (over 50 percent) in order to be declared the winner. Failing that, a second election is held in which the candidate with the most votes wins. The presidential run-off election is between the two leading vote-getters in the first round. For the National Assembly run-off



election, only those candidates who got more than 12.5 percent of the vote in the first round may compete. Voters in Serbia, a country that emerged out of the break-up of Yugoslavia, went to the polls most frequently between 2002–2004. They voted in the following:

- First-round presidential election in September 2002.
- Second-round presidential election in October 2002.
- Presidential rerun election in December 2002.
- First-round presidential election in early November 2003.
- Second-round presidential election in late November 2003.
- Parliamentary elections in December 2003.
- Presidential election in June 2004.

What is not clear is whether these frequent elections signal that democracy is strong in Serbia or if they are a sign that not all is well and that democracy is in danger because political institutions are weak. Concerns have been raised as well about the use of referenda. Are they ways for the public to express its voice, or do referenda short circuit the process of government by taking power away from elected representatives?

### Questions

1. How often should elections be held? Can they be held too frequently?
2. Should the United States make use of national referenda?

Source: <http://www.ifes.org/eguide>.