PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Variety aside, no U.S. election can compare to the presidential contest. This spectacle, held every four years, brings together all the elements of politics and attracts the most ambitious and energetic politicians to the national stage. Voters in a series of state primary elections and caucuses select delegates who will attend each party's national convention. After the primary elections (or caucuses) held in the spring and the national convention for each party held in the midsummer, there is a final set of fifty separate state elections all held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November to select the president. This lengthy process exhausts candidates and voters alike, but it allows the diversity of the United States to be displayed in ways a shorter, more homogeneous presidential election process could not.

The state party organizations use several types of primary elections or caucuses to elect national convention delegates:

1. *Winner-take-all primary:* Under this system the candidate who wins the most votes in a state secures all of that state's delegates. The Democrats moved away from this mode of delegate selection in 1976 and no longer permit its use because of the arguable unfairness. Republicans generally prefer the way in which this primary enables a GOP candidate to amass a majority of delegates more quickly, especially since California alone has over one-fifth of the delegates needed to nominate.
2. *Proportional representation primary:* Under this system, candidates who secure a threshold percentage of votes are awarded delegates in proportion to the number of popular votes won. Democrats now strongly favor this system and use it in many states' Democratic primaries, where they award delegates to anyone who wins more than 15 percent in any congressional district. Although proportional representation is probably the fairest way of allocating delegates to candidates, its downfall is that it renders majorities of delegates more difficult to accumulate and thus can lengthen the contest for the presidential nomination.
3. *Proportional representation with bonus delegates primary; beauty contest with separate delegate selection; delegate selection with no beauty contest:* Used rarely, the first of these, proportional representation with bonus delegates, awards delegates to candidates in proportion to the popular vote won and then gives one bonus delegate to the winner of each district. The second, a "beauty contest" primary with separate delegate selection, serves as an indication of popular sentiment for the conventions to consider as they choose the actual delegates. Democrats bind delegates to the decision of the party members during the primary, while adding "superdelegates" who do not have that commitment. Republicans do not bind delegates to select the candidate the party members chose during the primary; thus, delegates can vote against the will of the state party. Under the third system, delegate selection with no beauty contest, the primary election chooses delegates to the national conventions who are not linked on the ballot to specific presidential contenders.
4. *Caucus:* Under this system, party members meet in small groups throughout a state to select the party's delegates to the national convention.

Primaries Versus Caucuses

The mix of preconvention contests has changed over the years, with the most pronounced trend being the shift from caucuses to primaries. Only seventeen states held presidential primaries in 1968; the number increased to thirty-eight in 1992, forty-two in 1996, forty-three in 2000, and thirty-six in 2004. Figure 13.1 shows which states use primaries (open and closed) and which use caucuses to select presidential delegates.

The caucus is the oldest, most party-oriented method of choosing delegates to the national conventions. Traditionally, the caucus was a closed meeting of party activists in each state who selected the party's choice for presidential candidate. In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, many people viewed these caucuses as elitist and anti-democratic, and reformers succeeded in replacing them with direct primaries in most states. Although there are still presidential nominating caucuses today (in Iowa, for example), they are now more open and attract a wider range of the party's membership. Indeed, new participatory caucuses more closely resemble primary elections than they do the old, exclusive party caucuses.[9]

Some people support the increase in the number of primaries because they believe that this type of election is more democratic. The primaries are open not only to party activists, but also to anyone, wealthy or poor, urban or rural, northern or southern, who wants to vote. Theoretically, then, representatives of all these groups have a chance of winning the presidency. Related to this idea, advocates argue that presidential primaries are the most representative means by which to nominate presidential candidates. They are a barometer of a candidate's popularity with the party rank and file. While conventional wisdom holds that both primaries and caucuses attract more extreme voters in each party, recent research posits that primaries help nominate more moderate and appealing candidates—those that primary voters believe can win in the general election. One scholar, for instance, describes "sophisticated voting," where primary voters vote for their second or third choice because they believe the candidate will more easily win in November than will their first choice—perhaps because of less extreme policy positions.[10] Finally, the proponents of presidential primaries claim that they constitute a rigorous test for the candidates, a chance to display under pressure some of the skills needed to be a successful president.

Critics of presidential primaries argue that although primaries may attract more participants than do caucuses, this quantity does not substitute for the quality of information held by caucus participants. Compared with the unenlightening minutes spent at the primary polls, caucus attendees spend several hours learning about politics and the party. Caucus attendees do not make their decision about which candidate to select by campaign advertisements or popularity among the media elite. Instead, they listen to speeches by candidates or their representatives and take advice from party leaders and elected officials, then cast a well-informed vote more valuable than any single vote during a primary.

Critics also argue that the unfair scheduling of primaries affects their outcomes. For example, the earliest primary takes place in the small, atypical state of New Hampshire, which is heavily white and conservative, and it receives much more media coverage than it warrants simply because it is first. Such excessive coverage undoubtedly skews voter opinions in more populous states that hold their primaries later. Additionally, critics believe that the qualities tested by the primary system are by no means a complete list of those a president needs to be successful. For instance, skill at playing the media game is by itself no guarantee of an effective presidency. Similarly, the exhausting schedule of the primaries may be a better test of a candidate's stamina than of his or her brain power.

The primary proponents have obviously had the better of the arguments so far, though the debate continues, as do efforts to experiment with the schedule of primaries. From time to time, proposals are made for **regional primaries.** Under this system, the nation would be divided into five or six geographic regions (such as the South or the Midwest). All the states in each region would hold their primary elections on the same day, with perhaps one regional election day per month from February through June of presidential election years. This change would certainly cut down on candidate wear and tear. Moreover, candidates would be inspired to focus more on regional issues. On the other hand, regional primaries would continue to favor wealthy candidates who can afford to advertise on television throughout the large regions, and the system might needlessly amplify the differences and create divisive rifts among the nation's regions.

regional primary
A proposed system in which the country would be divided into five or six geographic areas and all states in each region would hold their presidential primary elections on the same day.

Occasionally, parties adopt a regional plan (although sometimes coming into conflict with states). In 1988, for instance, fourteen southern and border South states joined together to hold simultaneous primaries on "Super Tuesday" (March 8) in order to maximize the South's impact on presidential politics. This was an attempt by conservative Democrats to influence the choice of the party nominee. Their effort failed, however, since the two biggest winners of Super Tuesday were liberals Jesse Jackson (who won six southern states) and Michael Dukakis, who carried the megastates of Texas and Florida. This outcome occurred because, in general, the kinds of citizens who vote in Democratic primaries in the South are not greatly different from those who cast ballots in northern Democratic primaries—most tend to be liberal. This trend was repeated in the 1996 "Yankee Primary," when five of the six New England states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Maine) held their contests on March 5, followed by New York on March 7, and a scaled-down Super Tuesday on March 12.

Photo courtesy: © Kevin Lamarque/Reuters/Corbis

■ Senator John Kerry (D–MA) and former Governor Howard Dean of Vermont shake hands at a joint rally. Governor Dean, the early frontrunner in the 2004 Democratic primaries, later on supported Kerry, who eventually won the nomination.

The primary schedule has also been altered by a process called **front-loading,** the tendency of states to choose an early date on the primary calendar. Seventy percent of all the delegates to both party conventions are now chosen before the end of March. This trend is hardly surprising, given the added press emphasis on the first contests and the voters' desire to cast their ballots before the competition is decided. The focus on early contests (such as the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary), coupled with front-loading, can result in a party's selecting a nominee too quickly, before press scrutiny and voter reflection separate the wheat from the chaff. Front-loading has also had other important effects on the nomination process. First, a front-loaded primary schedule generally benefits the front-runner, since opponents have little time to turn the contest around once they fall behind. Second, front-loading gives an advantage to the candidate who can raise the bulk of the money *before* the nomination season begins, since there will be little opportunity to raise money once the primaries begin and since candidates will need to finance campaign efforts simultaneously in many states. In 2004, Internet fund-raising emerged as a means to soften this advantage; its use will continue and expand in future elections. Finally, front-loading has amplified the importance of the "invisible primary"—the year or so prior to the start of the official nomination season when candidates begin raising money and unofficially campaigning.[11]

front-loading
The tendency of states to choose an early date on the primary calendar.

The Party Conventions

The seemingly endless nomination battle does have a conclusion: the national party convention held in the summer of presidential election years. The out-of-power party traditionally holds its convention first, in late July, followed in mid-August by the party holding the White House. Preempting an hour or more of prime-time network television for four nights and monopolizing the cable networks such as CNN, Fox News, and C-SPAN, these remarkable conclaves are difficult for the public to ignore, giving the civically engaged viewer a chance to learn about the candidate and the apathetic viewer something to complain about.

Yet, the conventions once were much more: they were composed of party members who made actual decisions, where party leaders held sway and deals were sometimes cut in "smoke-filled rooms" to deliver nominations to little-known contenders called "dark horses." This era predated the modern emphasis on reform, primaries, and

proportional representation, all of which have combined to make conventions the place where parties choose one of several nominees who has been preselected through the various primaries and caucuses.[12]

The Anti-Masonic Party held the first national convention in 1831. In 1832, the first Democratic National Convention ratified Andrew Jackson's nomination for reelection. Just four years later, in 1836, Martin Van Buren became the first nonincumbent candidate nominated by a major party convention (the Democrats) to win the presidency.

From the 1830s to the mid-twentieth century, the national conventions remained primarily under the control of the important state and local party leaders, the so-called bosses or kingmakers, who would bargain within a splintered, decentralized party. During these years, state delegations to the convention consisted mostly of *uncommitted delegates* (that is, delegates who had not pledged to support any particular candidate). These delegates were selected by party leaders, a process that enabled the leaders to broker agreements with prominent national candidates. Under this system, a state party leader could exchange delegation support for valuable political plums—for instance, a Cabinet position or even the vice presidency—for an important state political figure.

Today, the convention is fundamentally different from what it was in the past. First, its importance as a party conclave, at which compromises on party leadership and policies can be worked out, has diminished. Second, although the convention still formally selects the presidential ticket, most nominations are settled well in advance. Third, three preconvention factors have lessened the role of the current parties and conventions: delegate selection, national candidates and issues, and the news media.

Delegate Selection. The selection of delegates to the conventions is no longer the function of party leaders but of primary elections and grassroots caucuses. Moreover, recent reforms, especially by the Democratic Party, have generally weakened any remaining control by local party leaders over delegates. A prime example of such reform is the Democrats' abolition of the **unit rule,** a traditional party practice under which the majority of a state delegation (say, twenty-six of fifty delegates) could force the minority to vote for its candidate. Another new Democratic Party rule decrees that a state's delegates be chosen in proportion to the votes cast in its primary or caucus (so that, for example, a candidate who receives 30 percent of the vote gains about 30 percent of the convention delegates). This change has had the effect of requiring delegates to indicate their presidential preference at each stage of the selection process. Consequently, the majority of state delegates now come to the convention already committed to a candidate. Again, this diminishes the discretionary role of the convention and the party leaders' capacity to bargain.

unit rule
A traditional party practice under which the majority of a state delegation can force the minority to vote for its candidate.

In sum, the many complex changes in the rules of delegate selection have contributed to the loss of decision-making powers by the convention. Even though the Democratic Party initiated many of these changes, the Republicans were carried along as many Democratic-controlled state legislatures enacted the reforms as state laws. There have been new rules to counteract some of these changes, however. For instance, since 1984, the number of delegate slots reserved for elected Democratic Party officials—called **superdelegates**—has been increased in the hope of adding stability to the Democratic convention. Before 1972, most delegates to a Democratic National Convention were not bound by primary results to support a particular candidate for president. This freedom to maneuver meant that conventions could be exciting and somewhat unpredictable gatherings, where last-minute events and deals could sway wavering delegates. Superdelegates are supposed to be party professionals concerned with winning the general election contest, not simply amateur ideologues concerned mainly with satisfying their policy appetites. All Democratic governors and 80 percent of the congressional Democrats, among others, are now included as voting delegates at the convention.

superdelegate
Delegate slot to the Democratic Party's national convention that is reserved for an elected party official.

Photo courtesy: Matt York/AP/Wide World Photos

■ Democratic presidential candidates are introduced to the audience prior to their October, 2003 debate in Phoenix, Arizona.

Photo courtesy: Gregory Smith/AP/Wide World Photos

■ President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In 2004, Bush faced no national opposition for the Republican Party presidential nomination.

Two recent studies of the role of superdelegates in the Democratic Party offer differing conclusions about the usefulness of those party insiders in the nomination process. One scholar posits that if the superdelegate rule had been relaxed in 1984, as it was in 1992, Walter Mondale, the candidate for nomination overwhelmingly favored by party insiders, may not have won.[13] Using data on the views of both regular and superdelegates to the 1988 Democratic convention, another scholar argues that regular delegates and superdelegates are more similar to each other than previously believed.[14]

National Candidates and Issues. The political perceptions and loyalties of voters are now influenced largely by national candidates and issues, a factor that has undoubtedly served to diminish the power of state and local party leaders at the convention. The national candidates have usurped the autonomy of state party leaders with their preconvention ability to garner delegate support. Issues, increasingly national in scope, are significantly more important to the new, issue-oriented party activists than to the party professionals, who, prior to the late 1960s, had a monopoly on the management of party affairs.

The News Media. The media have helped transform the national conventions into political extravaganzas for the television audience's consumption. They have also helped to preempt the convention, by keeping count of the delegates committed to the candidates; as a result, well before the convention, the delegates and even the candidates have much more information about nomination politics than they did in the past. From the strategies of candidates to the commitments of individual delegates, the media cover it all. Even the bargaining within key party committees, formerly done in secret, is now subject to some public scrutiny, thanks to open meetings.

Television coverage has shaped the business of the convention. Desirous of presenting a unified image to kick off a strong general election campaign, the parties assign important roles to attractive speakers, and most crucial party affairs are saved for prime-time viewing hours. During the 1990s, the networks gradually began to reduce their convention coverage, citing low viewer ratings.

In 2004, the major networks changed their coverage slightly, providing no prime-time coverage on some days, and extending coverage to as much as three hours on the

final day of each convention. While this likely reflects a change in the political culture away from meaningful convention activity overall, the increased final-night coverage indicates a greater interest in the candidates themselves. Fortunately, C-SPAN still gives gavel-to-gavel coverage.

Extensive media coverage of the convention has its pros and cons. On the one hand, such exposure helps the party launch its presidential campaign with fanfare, usually providing a boost to the party's candidate. President George Bush went from a 17-point deficit to a slim lead following the 1988 Republican convention. On the other hand, it can expose rifts within a party, as happened in 1968 at the Democratic convention in Chicago. Dissension was obvious when "hawks," supporting the Vietnam War and President Lyndon B. Johnson, clashed with the anti-war "doves" both on the convention floor and in street demonstrations outside the convention hall. Whatever the case, it is obvious that saturation media coverage of preelection events has led to the public's loss of anticipation and exhilaration about convention events.

Some reformers have spoken of replacing the conventions with national direct primaries, but it is unlikely that the parties would agree to this. Although its role in nominating the presidential ticket has often been reduced to formality, the convention is still valuable. After all, it is the only real arena where the national political parties can command a nearly universal audience while they celebrate past achievements and project their hopes for the future.

Who Are the Delegates? In one sense, party conventions are microcosms of the United States: every state, most localities, and all races and creeds find some representation there. (For some historic "firsts" for women at the conventions, see Table 13.1.) Yet, delegates are an unusual and unrepresentative collection of people in many ways. It is not just their exceptionally keen interest in politics that distinguishes delegates. These activists also are ideologically more to the right or left and financially better off than most Americans.

In 2004, for example, both parties drew their delegates from an elite group that had income and educational levels far above the average American's; however, the parties also showed their differences. Nearly 40 percent of delegates at the Democratic convention were minorities, and half were also women. Only 17 percent of the delegates to the Republican convention were minorities; however, this actually marks the GOP's concerted effort to increase minority representation at its convention, since only 9 percent of the 2000 delegates were minorities.[2]

The contrast in the two parties' delegations is no accident; it reflects not only the differences in the party constituencies, but also conscious decisions made by party leaders. After

TABLE 13.1 Historic Moments for Women at the Conventions

Since 1980, Democratic Party rules have required that women constitute 50 percent of the delegates to its national convention. The Republican Party has no similar quota. Nevertheless, both parties have tried to increase the role of women at the convention. Some "firsts" and other historic moments for women at the national conventions include:

1876	First woman to address a national convention
1890	First women delegates to conventions of both parties
1940	First woman to nominate a presidential candidate
1951	First woman asked to chair a national party
1972	First woman keynote speaker
1984	First major-party woman nominated for vice president (Democrat Geraldine Ferraro)
1996	Wives of both nominees make major addresses
2000	Daughter of a presidential candidate nominates her father
2004	Both candidates introduced by their daughters

Source: Center for American Women in Politics. Updated by authors.

the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention (which, as noted above, was torn by dissent over the Vietnam War), Democrats formed a commission to examine the condition of the party and to propose changes in its structure. As a direct consequence of the commission's work, the 1972 Democratic convention was the most broadly representative ever of women, African Americans, and young people, because the party required these groups to be included in state delegations in rough proportion to their numbers in the population of each state. (State delegations failing this test were not seated.) This new mandate was very controversial, and it has since been watered down considerably. Nonetheless, women and blacks are still more fully represented at Democratic conventions than at Republican conventions. GOP leaders have placed much less emphasis on proportional representation; instead of procedural reforms, Republicans have concentrated on strengthening their state organizations and fund-raising efforts, a strategy that has clearly paid off at the polls in the elections of 1980, 1984, and 1988, which saw Republicans elected as president. Yet, overall, the representation of women and minorities at the convention is largely symbolic, as delegates no longer have a great deal of power in selecting the nominee.

Photo courtesy: Stephan Savoia/AP/Wide World Photos

Kweisi Mfume, former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, addresses the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. Mfume is also a former U.S. Congressman from Maryland.

The delegates in each party also exemplify the philosophical gulf separating the two parties. Democratic delegates are well to the left of their own party's voters on most issues, and even farther away from the opinions held by the nation's electorate as a whole. Republican delegates are a mirror image of their opponents—considerably to the right of GOP voters and even more so of the entire electorate. Although it is sometimes said that the two major parties do not present U.S. citizens with a "clear choice" of candidates, it is possible to argue the contrary. Our politics are perhaps too polarized, with the great majority of Americans, moderates and pragmatists overwhelmingly, left underrepresented by parties too fond of ideological purity. Political scientists conducted a study of 1980 Iowa caucus and convention delegates for both the Republican and Democratic parties that confirms the above conclusion. Among the Democrats, the delegates to the state convention were the most liberal of the group of voters studied, followed closely by Democratic caucus attendees. Republican delegates, similarly, were the most conservative members of the group studied, followed closely by Republican caucus attendees. While both groups of party decision makers were more ideological than other party members, Republican Party leaders were "closer to their followers in representativeness of opinions than were Democratic leaders and followers,"[15] although the difference was small. The philosophical divergence is usually reflected in the party platforms, even in years such as 1996 and 2004, when both parties attempted to water down their rhetoric and smooth over ideological differences.

The Electoral College: How Presidents Are Elected

Given the enormous amount of energy, money, and time expended to nominate two major-party presidential contenders, it is difficult to believe that the general election could be more arduous than the nominating contests, but it usually is. The actual campaign for the presidency (and other offices) is described in chapter 14, but the object of the exercise is clear: winning a majority of the **Electoral College.** This uniquely American institution consists of representatives of each state who cast the final ballots that actually elect a president. The total number of **electors**—the members of the Electoral College—for each state is equivalent to the number of senators and representatives that state has in the U.S. Congress. And, the District of Columbia is accorded three electoral votes.

Electoral College
Representatives of each state who cast the final ballots that actually elect a president.

elector
Member of the Electoral College chosen by methods determined in each state.

The Living Constitution

No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years.

—Article I, Section 2

No Person shall be a Senator who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty Years.

—Article I, Section 3

neither shall any person be eligible to that Office [of the Presidency] who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty -five Years.

—Article II, Section 1

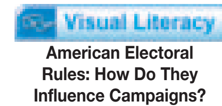
Age Qualifications for National Elected Office

There was little debate among the Framers at the Constitutional Convention that elected officials should have enough experience in life and in politics before being qualified to take on the responsibility of representing the interests of the nation and of their district or state. It is likely that they concurred, as they so often did, with John Locke, who stated in section 118 of his *Second Treatise of Government*, "*a Child is born a Subject of no Country or Government*. He is under his Father's Tuition and Authority, till he come to Age of Discretion." However, a minor, who is not subject to the authority of the state in the same way as a full citizen, also could not possibly be qualified to possess it. The Framers added age requirements higher than the age when one becomes a full citizen as a guarantee that statesmen would be elected. Notice how the age limits scale upward according to the amount of deliberation and decision-making that the position involves. House members only need to be twenty-five, but the president must be at least thirty-five, giving whoever would run for that office plenty of time to acquire the political experience necessary for the central role he or she will play.

State governments usually employ similar requirements. For instance, Virginia requires that candidates for the state's House of Delegates and Senate be at least twenty-one years old, while candidates for the state's three most powerful executive positions—governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general—must be at least thirty years old. South Dakota, however, sets the minimum age limit for its most important executive officers—governor and lieutenant governor—at twenty-one.

Amazingly, the Framers did not impose an age limit on Supreme Court justices, not even the chief justice. Perhaps the Framers thought that the president was not likely to appoint minors to the bench, or at least that they would not be approved by the Senate. Looking at the nine justices today, it is obvious that the Framers were right not to worry.

The Electoral College was the result of a compromise between Framers such as Roger Sherman and Elbridge Gerry, who argued for selection of the president by the Congress, and those such as James Madison, James Wilson, and Gouverneur Morris, who favored selection by direct popular election. The Electoral College compromise, although not a perfect solution, had practical benefits. Since there were no mass media in those days, common citizens, even reasonably informed ones, were unlikely to know much about a candidate from another state. On the one hand, this situation could have left voters with no choice but to vote for someone from their own state, thus making it improbable that any candidate would secure a national majority. On the other hand, the electors would be men of character with a solid knowledge of national politics who were able to identify, agree on, and select prominent national statesmen. There are three essentials to understanding the Framers' design of the Electoral College. The system was constructed (1) to work without political parties; (2) to cover both the nominating and electing phases of presidential selection; and, (3) to produce a nonpartisan president.



American Electoral Rules: How Do They Influence Campaigns?

The Electoral College machinery was somewhat complex. Each state designated electors (through appointment or popular vote) equal in number to the sum of its representation in the House and Senate. (Figure 13.2 shows a map of the United States drawn in proportion to each state's 2004 Electoral College votes.) The electors met in

FIGURE 13.2 The States Drawn in Proportion to Their Electoral College Votes

This map visually represents the respective electoral weights of the fifty states in the 2004 presidential election. For each state, the gain or loss of Electoral College votes based on the 2000 Census is indicated in parentheses.

Electoral Votes Per State for 2000 Election
(+ / –) = Gain or loss for 2004 election

Bush
Kerry

Note: Total electoral votes 538.
Source: Ben Werschkul, *New York Times* 2004 Election Guide, http://www.nytimes.com/packages/htmlpolitics/2004_ELECTIONGUIDE_GRAPHIC/.

their respective states. Each elector had two votes to cast in the Electoral College's selection for the president and vice president, although electors could not vote for more than one candidate from their state. The rules of the college stipulated that each elector was allowed to cast only one vote for any single candidate, and by extension obliged each elector to use his second vote for another candidate. There was no way to designate votes for president or vice president; instead, the candidate with the most votes (provided he also received votes from a majority of the electors) won the presidency and the runner-up won the vice presidency. If two candidates received the same number of votes and both had a majority of electors, the election was decided in the House of Representatives, with each state delegation acting as a unit and casting one vote. If no candidate secured a majority, the election would also be decided in the House, with each state delegation casting one vote for any of the top five electoral vote-getters. In both these scenarios, the candidate needed a majority of the total number of states for victory.

This system seems almost insanely unpredictable, complex, and unwieldy until one remembers that the Framers devised it specifically for the type of political system that existed when they framed the Constitution and that they (erroneously) foresaw for America in perpetuity: a nonpartisan (one-party), consensus-based, indirectly representative, multicandidate system. In such a system, the Electoral College would function admirably. In practice, the Framers hoped that electors with a common basic political understanding would arrive at a consensus preference for president, and most, if not all, would plan to cast one of their votes for that candidate, thereby virtually guaranteeing one clear winner, who would become president; a tie was an unlikely and unhappy outcome. Each would then plan to cast his remaining vote for another candidate, the one whom the elector implicitly preferred for vice president. Consensus on the vice presidency would presumably be less clear than for the more important position of president, so there might be a closer spread among the runners-up; but, in any case, the eventual president and vice president—indeed, all the candidates—would still have been members of the same one party.

The Framers' idea of nonpartisan presidential elections, however, lasted barely a decade, ending for the most part after George Washington's two terms. In 1796, their arrangement for presidential selection produced a president and vice president with markedly different political philosophies, a circumstance much less likely in modern times.

The Electoral College in the Nineteenth Century

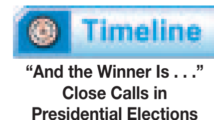
The republic's fourth presidential election revealed a flaw in the Framers' Electoral College plan. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were, respectively, the presidential and vice presidential candidates advanced by the Democratic-Republican Party, and supporters of the Democratic-Republican Party controlled a majority of the Electoral College. Accordingly, each Democratic-Republican elector in the states cast one of his two votes for Jefferson and the other one for Burr, a situation that resulted in a tie for the presidency between Jefferson and Burr, since there was no way under the constitutional arrangements for electors to earmark their votes separately for president and vice president. Even though most understood Jefferson to be the actual choice for president, the Constitution mandated that a tie be decided by the House of Representatives. It was, of course, and in Jefferson's favor, but only after much energy was expended to persuade lame-duck Federalists not to give Burr the presidency.

The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804 and still the constitutional foundation for presidential elections, was an attempt to remedy the confusion between the selection of vice presidents and presidents that beset the election of 1800. The amendment provided for separate elections for each office, with each elector having only one vote to cast for each. In the event of a tie or when no candidate received a majority of the total number of electors, the election still went to the House of Representatives; now, however, each state delegation would have one vote to cast for one of the three candidates who had received the greatest number of electoral votes.

The Electoral College modified by the Twelfth Amendment has fared better than the college as originally designed, but it has not been problem free. For example, in the 1824 election between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, neither presidential candidate secured a majority of electoral votes, once again throwing the election into the House. Although Jackson had more electoral and popular votes than Adams, the House voted for the latter as president. On two other occasions in the nineteenth century, the presidential candidate with fewer popular votes than his opponent won the presidency. In the 1876 contest between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, no candidate received a majority of electoral votes; the House decided in Hayes's favor even though he had only one more (disputed) electoral vote and 250,000 fewer popular votes than Tilden. In the election of 1888, President Grover Cleveland secured about 100,000 more popular votes than did Benjamin Harrison, yet Harrison won a majority of the Electoral College vote, and with it the presidency.

The Electoral College Today

Several near crises pertaining to the Electoral College occurred in the twentieth century. The election of 1976 was almost a repeat of those nineteenth-century contests in which the candidate with fewer popular votes won the presidency: Even though Democrat Jimmy Carter received about 1.7 million more popular votes than Republican Gerald Ford, a switch of some 8,000 popular votes in Ohio and Hawaii would have secured for Ford enough votes to win the Electoral College, and hence the presidency. Had Ross Perot stayed in the 1992 presidential contest, he could have thrown the election into the House of Representatives. His support had registered from 30 percent to 36 percent in the polls in early 1992. When he reentered the race, some of that backing had evaporated, and he finished with 19 percent of the vote and carried no states. However, Perot drained a substantial number of Republican votes from George Bush, thus splitting the GOP base and enabling Clinton to win many normally GOP-leaning states.

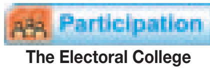


"And the Winner Is . . ." Close Calls in Presidential Elections

Throughout the 2000 presidential campaign, many analysts foresaw that the election would likely be the closest since the 1960 race between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Few realized, however, that the election would be so close that the winner would not be officially declared for more than five weeks after Election Day, and that a mere 500 votes in Florida would effectively decide the presidency of the United States. With the margin of the Electoral College results so small (271 for Bush, 267 for Gore), a Gore victory in any number of closely contested states, including Arkansas, Tennessee, West Virginia, or New Hampshire, could have given him a majority in the Electoral College.

Keep in mind that the representation of states in the Electoral College is altered every ten years to reflect population shifts. The number of congressional seats has been fixed at 435 since 1910 (with a temporary increase to 437 in 1959 to accommodate the entrance of Hawaii and Alaska to the union). Since that time, the average size of congressional districts has tripled in population, from 211,000 following the 1910 Census to 647,000 in the 2000 Census. Following the 2000 Census, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, and Texas each gained two congressional districts, and therefore two additional seats in the House of Representatives and two additional votes in the Electoral College. California, Colorado, Nevada, and North Carolina each picked up one seat and one vote. Two states, New York and Pennsylvania, each lost two seats and two votes, while eight states each lost a single seat and electoral vote: Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. The Census figures show a sizable population shift from the Northeast to the South and West. (Figure 13.2 shows the gains and losses in Electoral College votes per state.)

Recent reapportionment has favored the Republicans. With the exception of California, George W. Bush carried all of the states that gained seats in 2000. Had Bush won the same states in 2004 that he won in 2000, and if Kerry had won all of the Gore



The Electoral College

states from 2000, Bush would have had 278 electoral votes rather than the 271 he officially received in 2000, and Kerry would have received 267 (instead of 260).

Given the periodically recurring dissatisfaction expressed by the public, especially in the wake of the 2000 election, reformers have seized the opportunity to suggest several proposals for improving the American Electoral College system. Three major reform ideas have developed; each is described below.

Abolition. This reform would abolish the Electoral College entirely and have the president selected by popular vote. George W. Bush's election in 2000 marked the fourth time in U.S. history that a president was elected without the majority of the popular vote. Many critics believe that the Electoral College is archaic and that the only way to have a true democracy in the United States is to have the president elected directly by a popular vote. This reform is by far the most unlikely to succeed, given that the Constitution of the United States would have to be amended to change the Electoral College. Even assuming that the House of Representatives could muster the two-third majority necessary to pass an amendment, the proposal would almost certainly never pass the Senate. Small states have the same representation in the Senate as populous ones, and the Senate thus serves as a bastion of equal representation for all states, regardless of population—a principle generally reinforced by the existing configuration of the Electoral College, which ensures a minimum of electoral influence for even the smallest states. In addition, the likelihood of engaging a national recount in the event of a close election would wreak havoc on our electoral system.

Congressional District Plan. Under this plan, each candidate would receive one electoral vote for each congressional district that he or she wins in a state, and the winner of the overall popular vote in each state would receive two bonus votes (one for each senator) for that state. Take for example Virginia, which has eleven representatives and two senators for a total of thirteen electoral votes. If the Democratic candidate wins five congressional districts, and the Republican candidate wins the other six districts and also the statewide majority, the Democrat wins five electoral votes and the Republican wins a total of eight. This reform could be adopted without a constitutional amendment. This electoral system currently exists only in Maine and Nebraska; neither state has had to split its votes. Any state can adopt this system on its own because the Constitution gives states the right to determine the place and manner by which it selects its electors.

The congressional district plan has some unintended consequences. First, the winner of the overall election might change in some circumstances. Under a congressional district plan, Richard M. Nixon would have won the 1960 election instead of John F. Kennedy. George W. Bush would have likely won by a wider margin if the entire nation used this system in 2000. Second, this reform would further politicize the redistricting process that takes place every ten years according to U.S. Census results. Fair and objective redistricting already suffers at the hands of many political interests; if electoral votes were at stake, it would suffer further as the parties made nationwide efforts to maximize the number of safe electoral districts for their presidential nominee while minimizing the number of competitive districts. The third consequence of state-by-state adoption is that the nation would quickly come to resemble a patchwork of different electoral methods, with some states being awarded by congressional districts and some states awarded solely by popular vote.

Finally, candidates would quickly learn to focus their campaigning on competitive districts while ignoring secure districts, since secure districts would contribute electoral votes only through the senatorial/statewide-majority component. In the end, the United States and its democracy might be better served by preserving the more uniform system that currently prevails, despite its other shortcomings.

Keep the College, Abolish the Electors. This proposal calls for the preservation of the college as a statistical electoral device but would remove all voting power from actual human electors and their legislative appointers. It would eliminate the threat of so-called faithless electors—that is, electors who are appointed by state legislators to vote for the candidate who won that state's vote, but who then choose, for whatever reason, to vote for the other candidate. Most Americans are comfortable with making this change, although—perhaps even because—the problem of faithless electors is only a secondary and little-realized liability of the Electoral College.

While the fate of these three reform proposals has yet to be determined, any change in the existing system would inevitably have a profound impact on the way that candidates go about the business of seeking votes for the U.S. presidency.

Patterns of Presidential Elections

The Electoral College results reveal more over time than simply who won the presidency. They show which party and which regions are coming to dominance and how voters may be changing party allegiances in response to new issues and generational changes.

Party Realignments. Usually such movements are gradual, but occasionally the political equivalent of a major earthquake swiftly and dramatically alters the landscape. During these rare events, called **party realignments,**[16] existing party affiliations are subject to upheaval: many voters may change parties, and the youngest age group of voters may permanently adopt the label of the newly dominant party. The existing party cleavage fades over time, allowing new issues to emerge. Until recent times, at least, party realignments occurred about thirty-six years apart in the U.S. experience.

party realignment
A shifting of party coalition groupings in the electorate that remains in place for several elections.

Preceding a major realignment are one or more **critical elections,** which may polarize voters around new issues and personalities in reaction to crucial developments, such as a war or an economic depression. In Britain, for example, the first postwar election held in 1945 was critical, since it ushered the Labour Party into power for the first time and introduced to Britain a new interventionist agenda in the fields of economic and social welfare policies.

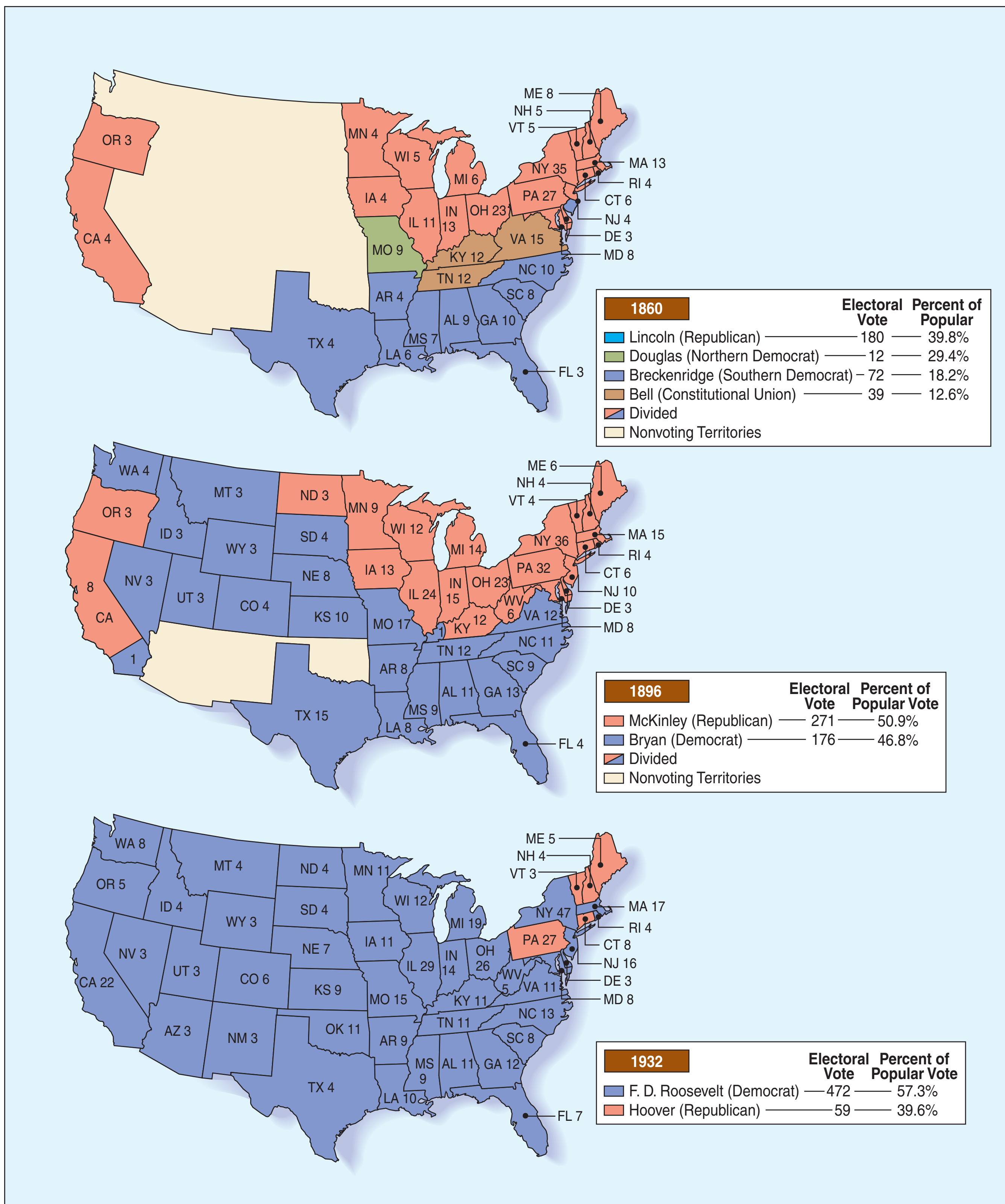
critical election
An election that signals a party realignment through voter polarization around new issues.

In the entire history of the United States, there have been six party realignments. Three tumultuous eras in particular have produced significant elections (see Figure 13.3). First, during the period leading up to the Civil War, the Whig Party gradually dissolved and the Republican Party developed and won the presidency in 1860. Second, the populist radicalization of the Democratic Party in the 1890s enabled the Republicans to greatly strengthen their majority status and make lasting gains in voter attachments. Third, the Great Depression of the 1930s propelled the Democrats to power, causing large numbers of voters to repudiate the GOP and embrace the Democratic Party. Each of these cases resulted in fundamental and enduring alterations in the party equation.

The last confirmed major realignment, then, happened in the 1928–1936 period, as Republican Herbert Hoover's presidency was held to one term because of voter anger about the Depression. In 1932, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt swept to power as the electorate decisively rejected Hoover and the Republicans. This dramatic vote of "no confidence" was followed by substantial changes in policy by the new president, who demonstrated in fact or at least in appearance that his policies were effective. The people responded to his success, accepted his vision of society, and ratified their choice of the new president's party in subsequent presidential and congressional elections.

With the aid of timely circumstances, realignments take place in two main ways.[17] Some voters are converted from one party to the other by the issues and candidates of the time. New voters may also be mobilized into action: immigrants, young voters, and

FIGURE 13.3 Electoral College Results for Three Realigning Presidential Contests
This figure shows the electoral votes in three crucial U.S. elections.



previous nonvoters may become motivated and then absorbed into a new governing majority, especially if they have been excluded previously. However vibrant and potent party coalitions may be at first, as they age, tensions increase and grievances accumulate. The majority's original reason for existing fades, and new generations neither remember the traumatic events that originally brought about the realignment nor possess the stalwart party identifications of their ancestors. New issues arise, producing conflicts that can be resolved only by a breakup of old alignments and a reshuffling of individual and group party loyalties. Viewed from historical perspective, party realignments ensure stability by adapting to changes in American politics.

A critical realigning era is not the only occasion when changes in partisan affiliation are accommodated. In truth, every election produces realignment to some degree, since some individuals are undoubtedly pushed to change parties by events and by their reactions to the candidates. Research suggests that partisanship is much more responsive to current issues and personalities than had been believed earlier, and that major realignments are just extreme cases of the kind of changes in party loyalty registered every year.[18]

Secular Realignment. Although the term *realignment* is usually applied only if momentous events such as war or economic depression produce enduring and substantial alterations in the party coalitions, political scientists have long recognized that a more gradual rearrangement of party coalitions could can occur.[19] Called **secular realignment,** this piecemeal process depends not on convulsive shocks to the political system, but on slow, almost barely discernible demographic shifts—the shrinking of one party's base of support and the enlargement of the other's, for example—or simple generational replacement (that is, the dying off of the older generation and the maturing of the younger generation). According to one version of this theory, termed "rolling realignment,"[20] in an era of weaker party attachments (such as we currently are experiencing), a dramatic, full-scale realignment may not be possible. Still, a critical mass of voters may be attracted for years to one party's banner in waves or streams, if that party's leadership and performance are consistently exemplary.

secular realignment
The gradual rearrangement of party coalitions, based more on demographic shifts than on shocks to the political system.

The decline of party affiliation has in essence left the electorate dealigned and incapable of being realigned as long as party ties remain tenuous for so many voters.[21] Voters shift with greater ease between the parties during dealignment, but little permanence or intensity exists in identifications made and held so lightly. If nothing else, the calendar may indicate the error in realignment theory; if major realignments occur roughly every thirty-six years, then we are long overdue. The last major realignment took place between 1928 and 1936, thus the next one might have been expected in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As the trends toward ticket-splitting, partisan independence, and voter volatility suggest, there is little question that we have been moving through an unstable and somewhat "dealigned" period at least since the 1970s. The foremost political question today is whether dealignment will continue (and in what form) or whether a major realignment is in the offing. Each previous dealignment has been a precursor of realignment,[22] but realignment need not succeed dealignment, especially under modern conditions.