

Main Idea

The Constitution creates a system in which citizens elect representatives to public office. Each citizen has the responsibility to help make this system work. Citizens can affect the electoral process in many ways, but the most powerful is by voting on election day.

Reading Focus

1. How is a political campaign organized and financed?
2. How are candidates chosen for an election?
3. What are four factors that may influence voting and voter behavior?
4. What is the difference between a general election and a special election?
5. Do political campaigns serve the public good?

Key Terms

hard money
 soft money
 write-in candidates
 caucus
 direct primary
 closed primary
 open primary
 plurality
 absentee ballot

Organizing and Financing Campaigns (p. 268)

Political campaigns are expensive in both time and money. People take on the job of running for office for a number of reasons. Holding office is an honor, and most candidates want to contribute to society. Some people also want the power of office.

Political Campaigns All candidates must spend hours attending functions and meeting voters. They rely heavily on the media, especially television, to spread their message. Today they also use the Internet for campaign communications.

Money and Campaigns Candidates must raise a lot of money. Sources of campaign funds include political action committees (PACs), the candidate's party, private individuals, the candidate's personal funds, and, in some cases, public funds.

Money donated to an individual campaign is known as **hard money**. State and federal laws limit how much money individuals and organizations can give to candidates. Candidates must file reports with state or federal officials, listing how much hard money that they have received and spent.

Contributions called soft money are a way to get around the limits on hard money contributions. **Soft money** is money given to a party, rather than to a specific candidate.

Reading Check Summarizing Where do candidates get the funds to pay for their campaigns?

Choosing Candidates (pp. 268–270)

Nomination is the first step in the electoral process. Political parties nominate their candidates. The process varies from state to state, but it usually involves one or more of the following methods.

Self-announcement The first step to running for office is to announce that you are a candidate, either for a party or as an independent. Self-announcement usually involves registration, such as paying a fee or circulating a petition. Nomination by petition, in which voters from the candidate’s election district sign a petition, is usually used at the local level.

A candidate can run as a write-in candidate and avoid the petition process.

Write-in candidates announce they are running for an office, usually as an independent candidate or as a challenger to the party’s preferred candidate, and ask voters to write in their name on the ballot. Write-in candidates almost always lose, because of lack of support.

Caucuses In some states candidates are chosen by caucus. A **caucus** is a meeting of party members who select the candidates to run for election. The caucus system began in the early 1800s, before today’s election process existed. State party leaders met in caucuses and chose all of the party’s candidates. When the national nominating convention system began in the 1830s, state party leaders still chose the delegates to the convention and controlled how they voted. Reforms in the 1890s took this power from party leaders and gave it to party members.

Caucuses are still used in a few states, such as Iowa. The system is leveled—precinct caucuses endorse, or express support for, candidates, and then choose delegates for the next level of caucus, such as the county. Delegates are selected based

on each delegate’s stated preference for a particular candidate.

Conventions As in caucuses, only party members participate in conventions to nominate candidates. Conventions, however, are open to the public. Delegates to a convention represent party members who are not there. Local conventions choose local candidates and delegates to state conventions. State conventions choose statewide candidates and delegates to national nominating conventions in presidential election years.

Primary Elections Primary elections are held when more than one candidate from the same party is running for the same position. In a **direct primary**, the party’s candidate for office is chosen directly by voters. There are two types of direct primaries. In a **closed primary**, only voters registered as party members can vote in selecting that party’s candidates. In an **open primary**, any registered voter may vote in either party’s primary election, but only in one of them.

Most states hold presidential primaries to choose the parties’ presidential candidates and also delegates to the parties’ national nominating conventions. The outcome of these primaries determines who the presidential candidates will be. States tend to try to hold their primaries as early as possible in order to influence the nomination process.

Reading Check Summarizing Why are primary elections an important part of the electoral process?

Voting and Voter Behavior (p. 270)

Voting is a right, and to many people, a duty in our democracy. In recent presidential elections, however, less than two-thirds of eligible voters voted. Turnout is even lower in state and local elections. People offer a number of reasons for not voting, including difficulty in registering to vote.

Voting Requirements To qualify to vote, a person must be a U.S. citizen at least 18 years of age and a resident of the state in which he or she wishes to vote. In every state but North Dakota, you must be registered to vote. Some experts believe that the registration process keeps people from voting. In recent years, some states have passed new laws making the process easier.

Voter Behavior Four main factors influence why people vote the way they do. Party identification is very important to voters. They respond to and rely on which party the candidate belongs to. Voters' views on issues important to them also affect their choices of candidates. A candidate's background, including his or her personality and record, affects a voter's choice. Finally, the voter's own background—age, gender, race, family beliefs, education, and income—all affect how he or she chooses candidates.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What factors affect voter behavior?

More About Elections (pp. 270–272)

Primaries are one type of election. Two other types of elections are general elections and special elections.

General Elections General elections are those in which the candidate is elected to office. In most states, only a plurality is required for election. A candidate wins by a **plurality** if he or she has more votes than anyone else. In some states, a candidate must win a majority of votes—more than 50 percent. Otherwise, a runoff election is held.

Special Elections Special elections are sometimes held at the state and local level to decide an issue. For example, a special election might be held to replace an officeholder who has died in office.

Holding an Election Federal elections are required to take place on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November of every even-numbered year. Most state and local elections are also held on this day. Voters go to the polling place in their voting precinct and cast a secret ballot reflecting their choices. In some places, paper ballots are used. In others, electronic voting machines are used.

Voters unable to vote at their polling place may cast an absentee ballot. An **absentee ballot** is a ballot submitted on or before election day by a voter who cannot be present on election day. All states now allow absentee voting by mail. Twenty-two states require voters to give a reason for using the vote-by-mail process. More than 30 states also allow voters to vote early—before election day.

Reading Check Contrasting How is a special election different from a general election?

Campaigns and the Public Good (p. 272)

Political parties, interest groups, and individuals all play a part in determining who represents us in our local, state, and national government. Working together, they choose candidates and help define the issues so that policy can be made.

Elections and the Public Good

Election campaigns spend a lot of time and money to inform voters about the candidates and the issues. This helps voters make informed choices on election day.

Criticism of Campaigns On the other hand, the way many campaigns are run has been criticized. Some people say that

campaigns provide too little or incorrect information because of their reliance on short TV advertisements. Other critics dislike negative advertising that tries to influence voting behavior. Some people say that these factors, along with the voter registration process and a reduced role of political parties, contribute to low voter turnout.

Reading Check Summarizing What are two criticisms of political campaigns?

SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

1. **Describe** How does a person become a candidate?

2. **Identify** What are **write-in candidates**?

3. **Recall** What two basic requirements must a person meet to be eligible to vote?

4. **Recall** What is the federal general election date?