



CHAPTER 6

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Outline

- Patterns of American Electoral Behaviour
- The 'American Voter' Model and the New Deal Coalition
- The Decline of the New Deal Coalition and the Rise of a Divided Electorate
- Controversy 5. Non-Voting: Does it Matter?
- Controversy 6. Are American Elections Corrupt?
- Controversy 7. Does the Decline in Social Capital Matter?
- Non-Electoral Political Participation
- Summary
- Questions for Discussion
- Glossary
- Notes
- Further Reading

Elections commit the people to a sense of responsibility for their own betterment. It seems clear that they are essential to us as props of the sentiment of legitimacy and the sentiment of participation.

– W. J. M. MACKENZIE, *POLITICAL STUDIES*

There is currently a widespread sense, shown by public opinion surveys and complaints by informed observers that the American electoral system is in trouble. Some believe

that this trouble is minor and can be dealt with through moderate reforms; others think it goes deep and requires extensive political surgery, perhaps accompanied by sweeping changes in the larger social order.

– A. JAMES REICHLEY, *ELECTIONS, AMERICAN STYLE*

America's claim to status as a democratic country depends almost entirely on the nature and extent of public participation in political life, and from the earliest years of the republic there has been dispute and controversy over what, precisely, participation means. To the educated eighteenth-century citizen, 'democracy' was equivalent to a republican form of government that limited electoral participation to those with an established stake in society – white men of property. Any further extension of participation raised the spectre of rule by the mob and the eventual breakdown of civil society. In contrast, a much wider electorate imbued many artisans and small farmers, especially in New England, with a more egalitarian brand of democracy that implied participation. Slowly, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this egalitarian spirit gained ascendancy over the more elitist views of the Founding Fathers.

Today, the degree of electoral participation would truly shock eighteenth-century man. Measured in terms of the number of public offices open to electoral choice, the United States is the most democratic of countries; in total approximately 530,000 posts are elected, from the humblest local officials, through local and state judges, mayors, councillors, governors and legislators, to the vice president, president and members of the US Congress. In addition, many Americans vote in primary elections to nominate the party candidates who will stand in the election proper. Many states and localities have also introduced a number of devices associated with populism or direct democracy. Hence, some citizens vote in referendums or in initiative and recall elections, all of which are designed to give the voter a direct say in policy-making.¹ Further, there are no formal barriers to the participation of any particular social group. Property and taxpaying restrictions were abolished by the 1840s, effectively enfranchising all adult white males. Women won the right to vote in national elections following the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Formal restrictions on southern blacks' electoral participation were swept away by the 1965 Voting Rights Act and by a number of Supreme Court decisions. Finally, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, reduced the minimum voting age to 18.

By the simple measure of electoral access, therefore, there is no doubting the democratic nature of the American system. Yet, as our discussion of political parties revealed, there is very much more to participation than mere access to elections. More important are questions of *choice* and *control* over government policy. Many people ask whether the United States can be 'truly' democratic when electoral turnout is low and when the choice offered by elections has, at least historically, often been so narrow. More recently, criticism has been directed at the enormous expense involved in US elections and at the exaggerated rhetoric of election campaigns that may have increased the social and political divisions in American society. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to these and related questions. The first section concentrates on electoral behaviour – why Americans vote as they do, what sort of choice they are offered by the electoral process, and how patterns of behaviour have changed over time. The second section looks at the increasing polarization of the electorate and how this has affected voting patterns. The third section introduces a discussion of non-electoral participation, which is continued in later chapters.

Patterns of American Electoral Behaviour

Basic questions

Observers of voting behaviour usually first ask the simplest and most obvious question: 'Who has voted for which party?' So we are used to reading opinion poll findings, which indicate that support for a particular party has risen or fallen, or that some region, or ethnic or social group has shifted its allegiance away from or towards a party. Survey or poll data can be an invaluable aid when answering these questions, and have helped to establish some very general norms or expectations about people's voting behaviour. So table 6.1, showing the distribution of votes by social group since 1972 in presidential elections, confirms tendencies which apply in most democratic countries: higher socio-economic status, white voters tend to be more conservative (i.e. vote Republican) than younger, lower-status, ethnic minority voters. Table 6.1 also reveals patterns which may be peculiarly American: the South of the USA appears markedly more conservative than the East; women are much more prone to vote Democrat than are men. But even these general trends provoke a number of deeper questions. What, precisely, is meant by 'conservative' and 'liberal' in the American context? To what extent does the *party* as opposed to candidates and issues determine voting behaviour? It must be that the balance of influence shifts quite markedly between the three, for some candidates manage to overcome party ties and attract voters from the other party. Hence we saw the phenomenon of the 'Reagan Democrats' during the 1980s, when many traditional Democratic voters switched their allegiance to the Republicans. The same phenomenon was evident in some parts of the country in 2016 when many working-class white voters voted for Donald Trump. Other questions arise. Why are African Americans so overwhelmingly Democratic in their loyalties? What accounts for the regional variations in voting behaviour? We return to these questions in detail below, but for now it should be noted that American voting behaviour seems considerably more complex than electoral participation in other countries. In many European countries, for example, class, regional, ethnic or religious divisions are quite clearly defined and can act as accurate predictors of voting intentions. In the USA, however, the political parties are loose coalitions, and ideological and other social cleavages are relatively weak, so analysing who votes for whom and why can be that much more difficult.

We can broadly categorize the Democrats as the liberal or even 'left' party and Republicans as the conservative or 'right' party, but when the whole range of candidates in each of these parties is examined there are numerous exceptions even to this generalization. To complicate matters further, federalism and the separation of powers have spawned myriad elections and distinctive levels of government, each with a different constituency. At the national level this shows itself most graphically in the relationship between presidential and congressional elections. Individual members of Congress are beholden to their own constituents, whose interests may be quite separate from those of the national electorate responsible for electing the president. It used to be the case that the successful party at the presidential election would also at least be partly successful at the congressional level, but in recent years voters have increasingly split their tickets and voted for one party at the congressional level and the other at the presidential level. In 1972, for example, the near-landslide victory of a Republican president, Richard Nixon, was not accompanied by any

Table 6.1 Distribution of the 1976–2016 presidential vote by social group and issues (%)

100% of the electorate ^a	Total vote	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
	Democrat	50	41	40	45	43	49	48	48	53	51	48
	Republican	48	51	59	53	38	41	48	51	46	48	46
	Independent	—	7	—	—	19	8	2	—	—	—	—
Men	Democrat	50	36	37	41	41	43	42	44	49	45	41
	Republican	48	55	62	57	38	44	53	55	48	42	54
	Independent	—	7	—	—	21	10	3	—	—	—	—
Women	Democrat	50	45	44	49	45	54	54	51	56	55	53
	Republican	48	47	56	50	37	38	43	48	43	44	42
	Independent	—	7	—	—	17	7	2	—	—	—	—
White	Democrat	47	36	35	40	39	43	42	41	43	39	37
	Republican	52	56	64	59	40	46	54	58	55	59	58
	Independent	—	7	—	—	20	9	3	—	—	—	—
Black	Democrat	83	85	90	86	83	84	90	88	95	93	88
	Republican	16	11	9	12	10	12	8	11	4	6	8
	Independent	—	3	—	—	7	4	1	—	—	—	—
Hispanic	Democrat	—	56	62	69	61	72	62	53	67	71	65
	Republican	—	35	37	30	25	21	35	44	31	27	29
	Independent	—	8	—	—	14	6	2	—	—	—	—
Asian	Democrat	—	—	—	—	31	43	54	56	62	73	65
	Republican	—	—	—	—	55	48	41	44	35	26	29
	Independent	—	—	—	—	15	8	4	—	—	—	—
18–29 years old	Democrat	51	44	40	47	43	53	48	54	66	60	55
	Republican	47	43	59	52	34	34	46	45	32	37	37
	Independent	—	11	—	—	22	10	5	—	—	—	—
30–44 years old	Democrat	49	36	42	45	41	48	48	46	52	52	50
	Republican	49	55	57	54	38	41	49	53	46	45	42
	Independent	—	8	—	—	21	9	2	—	—	—	—
45–59 years old	Democrat	47	39	40	42	41	48	48	48	49	47	47
	Republican	52	55	60	57	40	41	49	51	49	51	48
	Independent	—	5	—	—	19	9	2	—	—	—	—

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Cont'd)

	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	
60 and older	Democrat Republican Independent	47 52 -	41 54 4	39 60 -	49 50 -	50 38 12	48 44 7	51 47 2	46 54 -	47 51 -	44 56 -	45 53 -
Liberals	Democrat Republican Independent	71 26 -	60 25 11	70 28 -	81 18 -	68 14 18	78 11 7	80 13 6	85 13 -	89 10 -	86 11 -	84 10 -
Moderates	Democrat Republican Independent	51 48 -	42 49 8	47 53 -	50 49 -	47 31 21	57 33 9	52 44 2	54 45 -	60 39 -	56 41 -	52 41 -
Conservatives	Democrat Republican Independent	29 70 -	23 73 4	17 82 -	19 80 -	18 64 18	20 71 8	17 81 1	15 84 -	20 78 -	17 82 -	15 81 -
Not a high-school graduate	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	51 46 2	50 50 -	56 43 -	54 28 18	59 28 11	59 39 1	50 49 -	63 35 -	64 35 -	- - 45
High-school graduate	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	43 51 4	39 60 -	49 50 -	43 36 21	51 35 13	48 49 1	47 52 -	52 46 -	51 48 -	- 51 -
Some college education	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	35 55 8	38 61 -	42 57 -	41 37 21	48 40 10	45 51 3	46 54 -	51 47 -	49 48 -	43 52 -
College graduate	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	37 62 -	39 41 20	44 46 8	45 51 3	46 52 -	50 48 -	47 51 -	49 45 -
Postgraduate education	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	48 50 36	50 40 14	52 40 5	52 44 3	55 44 -	58 40 -	55 42 -	58 37 -
White Protestants	Democrat Republican Independent	41 58 -	31 63 6	27 72 -	33 66 -	33 47 21	36 53 10	34 63 2	32 67 -	34 65 -	30 69 -	37 ^b 60 ^b -
White Catholics	Democrat Republican Independent	52 46 -	40 51 7	42 57 -	43 56 -	42 37 22	48 41 10	45 52 2	43 56 -	47 52 -	40 59 -	45 ^b 52 ^b -
Jewish	Democrat Republican Independent	64 34 -	45 39 15	67 31 -	64 35 -	80 11 9	78 16 3	79 19 1	74 25 -	78 21 -	71 29 -	71 24 -
Born-again or evangelical Christians	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	40 56 3	30 69 -	24 74 -	31 56 14	- - -	- - -	34 65 -	41 57 -	21 78 -	18 81 -
Attend religious services at least once a week	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	36 48 15	- - -	39 59 2	38 60 -	43 55 -	36 63 -	40 56 -
Under \$15,000	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	49 43 7	- - -	- - -	58 23 19	59 28 11	57 37 4	63 36 -	73 25 -	63 35 -	53 -
\$15,000-\$29,999	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	45 35 20	53 36 9	54 41 3	57 42 -	60 37 -	60 42 -	- -
\$30,000-\$49,999	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	41 38 21	48 40 10	49 48 2	50 49 -	55 43 -	57 42 -	51 12 -
\$50,000-\$74,999	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	40 41 18	47 45 7	46 51 2	43 56 -	48 49 -	44 52 -	46 -
\$75,000-\$99,999	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	44 48 7	44 52 2	45 52 2	45 55 -	51 48 -	51 48 -	- -
\$100,000 and over	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	32 65 -	- -	38 54 6	43 54 2	41 58 -	49 49 -	54 45 -	47 -
\$200,000 and over	Democrat Republican Independent	- - -	- - -	- - -	- - -	- -	- -	- -	35 63 -	52 46 -	- -	- -

Table 6.1 (Cont'd)

	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
Better today	Democrat	30	-	-	24	66	61	19	37	84	72
	Republican	70	-	-	61	26	36	80	60	15	24
	Independent	-	-	-	14	6	2	-	-	-	-
Same today	Democrat	51	-	-	41	46	35	50	45	18	46
	Republican	49	-	-	42	45	60	49	53	80	46
	Independent	-	-	-	17	8	3	-	-	-	-
Worse today	Democrat	77	-	-	60	27	33	79	71	58	19
	Republican	23	-	-	14	57	63	20	28	40	78
	Independent	-	-	-	25	13	4	-	-	-	-
Population over 500,000	Democrat	-	-	63	62	68	71	60	70	69	-
	Republican	-	-	35	37	28	26	39	28	29	-
	Independent	-	-	-	-	13	3	-	-	-	59
Population 50,000 to 500,000	Democrat	-	-	46	52	50	57	49	59	58	-
	Republican	-	-	53	47	33	40	49	39	40	35
	Independent	-	-	-	-	16	2	-	-	-	-
Suburbs	Democrat	-	35	38	42	41	47	47	50	48	45
	Republican	-	55	61	57	39	42	52	48	50	50
	Independent	-	9	-	-	21	3	-	-	-	-
Population 10,000 to 50,000	Democrat	-	-	-	38	48	38	48	45	42	-
	Republican	-	-	-	61	42	59	50	53	56	34
	Independent	-	-	-	-	20	2	-	-	-	-
Rural areas	Democrat	-	39	-	44	39	37	39	45	37	-
	Republican	-	55	-	55	40	59	59	53	61	62
	Independent	-	5	-	-	20	2	-	-	-	-
First-time voters	Democrat	-	-	38	47	46	54	53	69	70	56
	Republican	-	-	61	51	32	34	45	30	30	47
	Independent	-	-	-	-	22	11	-	-	-	-

Source: 2008 and earlier *New York Times* CBS polls; 2012 www.cbsnews.com/election-results-2012/exit.shtml?state=US&race=P&jurisdiction=0&party=G.

^aPercentage of electorate data are from 2008.

^b2016 data refer to all Protestants and Catholics irrespective of race.

significant inroads by his party into the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. The pattern was similar in 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996. In 1996 Bill Clinton won the presidency for the Democrats but the Republicans retained control of both houses of Congress.

The result in 2000 was one of the most unusual in American history but confirmed what appeared to be the end of presidential 'coattails' in Congress. George W. Bush won the election with a minority of the popular vote and a majority of just one in the Electoral College. Meanwhile the drift back to the Democrats continued at the congressional level, where the Senate was split 50/50 and the Republican advantage in the House was just seven seats. After 2006 divided government returned with the triumph of the Democrats in both the House and the Senate. While in 2008 unified government returned, with the Democrats increasing their majorities in the House and the Senate and winning the presidency by a comfortable margin. By 2012, however, the Republicans had re-captured the House, and they regained control of the Senate in the 2014 midterm elections. 2016 did, of course, produce one of the greatest upsets in US electoral history. Few expected Donald Trump to win but he secured a comfortable Electoral College margin of victory even if he did lose the popular vote by more than 2.8 million. The Democrats also underperformed in Congress leaving the Republicans with control of both houses.

A second question raised in any simple description of voting behaviour is: who actually votes? A wealth of social science and professional opinion poll research enables us to make quite accurate assessments of electoral participation patterns. Very generally, people of higher socio-economic status (a combination of income, occupation and education) vote and participate in other political activities to a much greater extent than people of lower socio-economic status.² The relationship between voting and age is a little more complex, with participation rising from a low at 18 to a peak during middle age and then declining gently in later middle and old age. Until the late 1960s one of the most dramatic differences in participation was between black and white Americans. Until the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, very few southern blacks were able to register to vote (for example, in 1964 a mere 7 per cent in Mississippi) and among those registered actual turnout was low. Since the 1965 Voting Rights Act, however, registration has steadily increased, and by 1990 the percentage of African Americans registered to vote was only 8 per cent below the figure for whites. Black turnout remains generally lower than that of whites, but mainly because a disproportionate number of blacks are of low socio-economic status. In 2008, with an African American candidate running for president, turnout among blacks actually matched that of whites at around 60 per cent – and in 2012 the two groups also had a similar turnout rate of approximately 60 per cent. However, in 2016 black turnout declined slightly and the number voting Democrat fell from 93 per cent in 2012 to 88 per cent (Table 6.1).

Finally, turnout among women is slightly higher than for men. However, the gap is small (around 2 per cent in 2016) and, compared with differences based on socio-economic status and age, voter participation rates between men and women are comparatively close.

A third basic question is: how many of the people actually vote? In the USA turnout is notoriously low for all elections. Even the contest perceived by most people as the most significant – electing the president – hardly inspires a high level of mass participation. Since 1960 turnout has been declining, and now rarely exceeds 55–60 per cent for presidential elections and 50 per cent for congressional contests (figure 6.1).

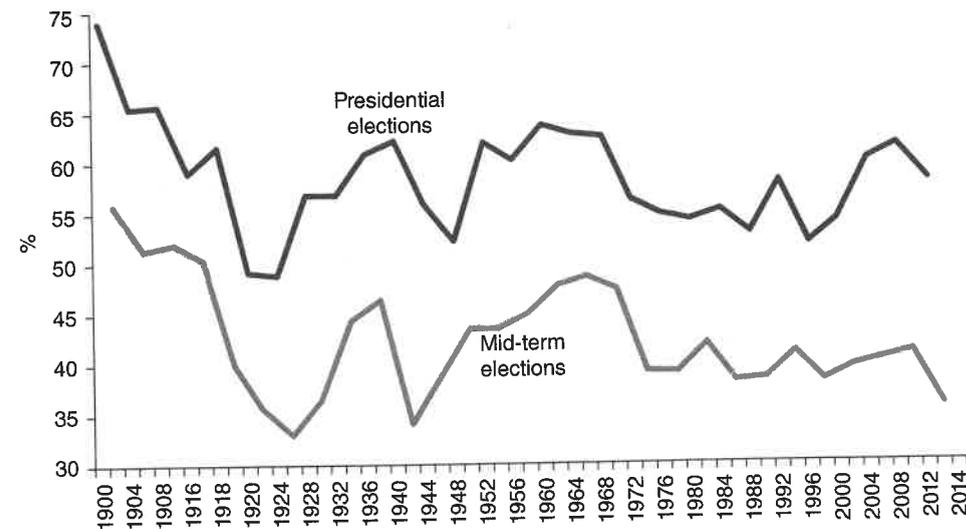


Figure 6.1 Voter turnout rates, presidential and mid-term elections, 1900–2014

Source: Michael P. McDonald, Associate Professor, University of Florida, Department of Political Science, United States Elections Project, <http://electproject.org/>.

In 1996 turnout sank to 48.4 per cent – the lowest for a presidential election since 1924, although it did recover to 51 per cent in 2000 and to an impressive 64 per cent in 2008, only to slump again in 2012 to 60 per cent and fall further to 58 per cent in 2016.

At the state and local levels turnout is even lower and can fall as low as 20 per cent. This seeming political apathy has long puzzled and disturbed American political scientists. Explanations usually fall into one of two categories – institutional and non-institutional. The institutional barriers to voting are, in fact, considerable, although claims that the formidable number of elections reduces turnout are probably erroneous. After all, turnout at presidential elections has remained generally low in spite of their relative infrequency and the disproportionate amount of publicity and attention paid to them by political parties and the media. More significant are America's voter registration laws. Under the laws of individual states, voters must themselves make the decision to register, and most states apply minimum residency requirements. Although for presidential elections Congress has reduced this requirement to only 30 days, the fact remains that in a mobile, open society many people fail to register or to register in time. Unlike in most European countries, there is no automatic nationally organized compulsory registration system, and recent studies have shown that, were such a system introduced, turnout might increase by between 10 and 12 per cent. In 1993 Congress passed the so-called 'motor voter' law, which encouraged states to allow people to register to vote whenever they applied to renew their driving licence. Although by some estimates this increased the number of citizens registered to vote by 9 million by 1996, there is little evidence that these new registrars actually voted. Indeed, 1996 exit polls showed that the percentage of first-time voters (of all those voting) dropped from 11 to 9 per cent.³

Non-voting may also be linked to the fact that the USA has a first past the post, single-member, district electoral system rather than one based on proportional representation (PR).

Table 6.2 Voter turnout by registered voters and voting-age population, selected countries (major national elections 1968–2014)

Vote as a % of registered voters		Vote as a % of voting age population	
Australia	91	Sweden	82
Denmark	85	Denmark	80
Sweden	85	Australia	78
France	80	France	71
Italy	75	Netherlands	71
Netherlands	74	Italy	68
Germany	71	Germany	66
Canada	68	Canada	62
United Kingdom	66	United Kingdom	60
United States	66	United States	53
Japan	52	Japan	51
Switzerland	48	Switzerland	38

Source: Data from Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, www.idea.int/vt.

By closely relating votes cast to representation in legislatures, PR 'wastes' few votes. Under a single-member district system, however, voters know that in many constituencies their vote will make no difference because of the large majority enjoyed by one party. Their incentive to vote is, therefore, reduced. In fact, if turnout is measured in terms of the *number of people who are registered*, then the picture looks very different (table 6.2). Nonetheless, Americans remain concerned with their rate of voter participation. The American data in table 6.2 are for presidential elections. Turnout for House and Senate elections, which are, after all, for national offices, is low by international standards. Moreover, an increasingly educated population should lead to an improvement in turnout. Very broadly, two schools of thought have attempted to explain this: the sociological and public choice. Public choice theorists argue that it is simply not rational to vote when the choice offered by parties is so limited.

Certainly, the relative absence of well-defined and deep-rooted social cleavages articulated by class-based or ethnically or regionally based parties reduces the direct and immediate interest the voter has in ensuring that 'his' or 'her' party is represented in government. American parties and candidates rarely promise social revolution; nor do they often promise to defend well-defined sectional, class, religious or ethnic interests. And this applies even in ideologically charged elections such as those in 2008 and 2016. Moreover, research has shown that citizens often vote *retrospectively*; or they decide to vote for party A rather than party B by judging an incumbent's past performance – usually in terms of whether the party's period in office has increased the voter's real income. As Morris Fiorina and others have shown, it is difficult to make this calculation when party programmes are so diffuse and when the appeal to voters is by individual *candidates* rather than parties.⁴ This more atomized, individualized politics may account for the decline of voting among all social groups between 1960 and 1996. Interestingly, voter turnout went up in 2000, 2004 and 2008 when the differences between the parties were perceived by voters to be large. On a range of issues, therefore, voters felt that

they had more to lose should 'their' party lose the election. This was particularly true in 2008 when, in the context of serious economic dislocation and unpopular foreign wars, voters turned out in record numbers to vote for Barack Obama, whose policy positions were starkly different from those of the incumbent Bush administration. A similar pattern was repeated in 2012 when, in spite of continuing economic woes, Barack Obama's base constituency of women, city dwellers and ethnic minorities remained loyal. Turnout declined slightly in 2016 perhaps reflecting the lowered expectations that black and other minority voters had in the Hillary Clinton candidacy. Turnout was also down in the more liberal areas (mainly larger cities) in the 'swing states' such as Pennsylvania and Michigan that proved so crucial in determining the outcome of the election.

The sociological school argues, simply, that poorer, less well-educated citizens vote less than richer, better-educated citizens. The data certainly confirm this, with around 50 per cent of manual workers apparently excluded from voting altogether.⁵ Again this is a mainly American phenomenon. In other democracies the (usually much smaller) number of non-voters is drawn from all social groups, with few citizens caught in a pattern of permanent non-voting. Non-voting among lower-status groups can also be linked to rational expectations. Their sense of political effectiveness tends to be lower because they are poorer and, as importantly, they find it difficult to identify with a party that fails to appeal to voters on class lines. Significantly, between 1968 and around 2000 the party that used to project such an appeal, the Democratic Party, moved further and further away from class-based politics and towards issue- and candidate-based politics. Since then, however, the Democrats have renewed their class appeal as income and wealth inequalities have risen and economic dislocation has intensified. Indeed, at least some of the increased turnout in 2008 can be explained in terms of large numbers of voters supporting a Democratic candidate who promised a redistribution of incomes through the tax system and hefty increases in federal spending to boost the economy. In 2012 the same issues dominated the election, with Republican candidate Mitt Romney associated with a privileged elite and Barack Obama with the middle class and less well off. Paradoxically, in 2016 it was the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, who made a class-based appeal to poorer white voters by promising them jobs and tax reductions. Meanwhile Hillary Clinton was increasingly associated with the politics not of class but of identity based on race, ethnicity and gender.

Concern about non-voting in the United States is compounded by the fact that an increasingly educated and sophisticated population should have led to increased rather than decreased electoral participation. This phenomenon, above all, confirms political scientists' claims that voters cannot easily make rational decisions when faced by inchoate parties and a politics based on individual officeholders unable to offer effective programmes of social and economic change.

The 'American Voter' Model and the New Deal Coalition

During the 1950s and early 1960s a number of studies were published whose findings established a 'model' of American voting behaviour (the seminal work was *The American Voter*, published in 1960⁶). The unique contribution of this work was to explain the voting

of individual citizens in terms of *psychological* orientation. By asking survey respondents how they felt about parties, candidates and issues, and then relating these sentiments to actual political behaviour, it was possible to build up a cognitive picture of how individuals thought about politics. The results were surprising, to say the least. In a more recent study, Nie, Verba and Petrocik summarized the findings thus:

The American public had a remarkably unsophisticated view of political matters characterised by an inability to consider such matters in broad abstract terms.... Citizens had inconsistent views when one looked across a range of issues.... Most Americans had strong, long term commitments to one of the major political parties and this commitment served as a guide to their political behaviour.... Citizens felt relatively satisfied with the political system and relatively efficacious.⁷

Very few – a mere 2.5 per cent of *The American Voter's* sample – were categorized as ideologues, or people who thought about politics in abstract terms. Most evaluated candidates and parties in terms of the benefits they brought to social groups (42 per cent) or in terms of the 'nature of the times' (24 per cent). In other words, most voters had little sense of 'left' and 'right' or the role that parties and candidates might play in moving society in a particular direction. Instead, immediate or recent events or simple promises by politicians to lower taxation, say, or to increase social spending influenced voters. Reinforcement of this analysis was provided by studies showing that voters were often inconsistent in their views across issues. Some citizens favouring increased social spending also wanted a reduced role for government in society; anti-communists were not always in favour of an increased role for the United States as international policeman. Most importantly of all, when attitudes on all issues were examined it was not possible to find any pattern consistent with a coherently thought-out ideology, whether liberal, conservative, socialist or whatever.⁸

The image projected, therefore, is one of a rather ill-informed voter who thinks rather little about politics. However, in one important respect American voters were found to be consistent – in their attachment to political parties, voters displayed enduring loyalties. Labelling this phenomenon *party identification*, voting analysts discovered that people acquired a positive or negative psychological attachment to a party early in childhood which remained with them throughout their lives.

In essence citizens were *socialized* by family and other social cues into thinking of themselves as Democrats or Republicans, a phenomenon which may account for the fact that 78 per cent of respondents to a 1958 survey had the same party identification as their parents. Not all voters were found to be strong party identifiers. Some identified less clearly with a party, while others considered themselves either independent or independently supportive of one or other of the parties (see figure 6.2).

We discuss this changing pattern of party identification below, but for now note the consistency of Democratic support, which constitutes a clear majority for most of the period. As these figures are for voting in presidential elections they raise an interesting question: how is it that the Republicans managed to win most presidential elections between 1968 and 2016 given the inbuilt Democrat majority implied by the preponderance of Democratic identifiers?

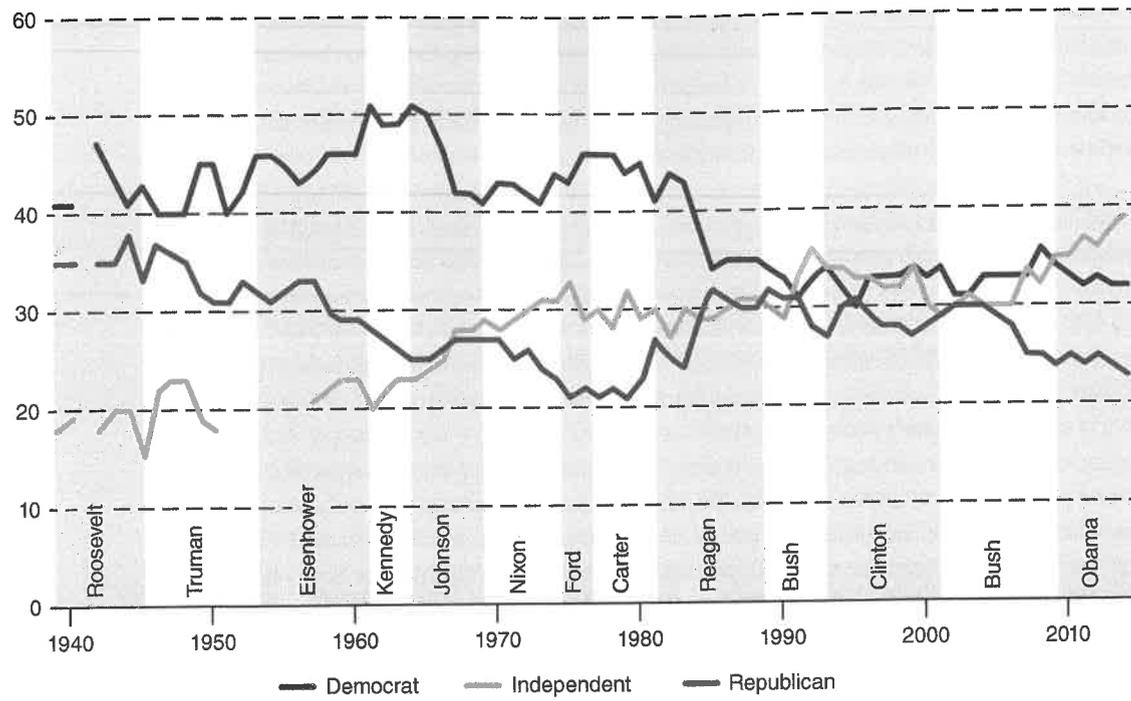


Figure 6.2 Trends in party identification, 1952–2014

Source: Pew Research Center, www.people-press.org/interactives/party-id-trend/.

Note: 1939–1989 yearly averages from the Gallup Organization interactive website. 1990–2014 yearly totals from Pew Research Center.

In answering this question, political scientists at first stressed that party identification was very much a psychological orientation to politics. There may be elections when voters deviate from their normal identification because of the particular appeal of the candidate (as was the case in the 1950s with Dwight Eisenhower) or because of the importance of certain issues (for example, law and order in 1968). Obviously, however, the Democratic majority must come from somewhere; it cannot be purely psychological. The answer is that there have been certain periods in American history when rapid social and economic changes have forged new political coalitions. During these periods orientations towards parties change as the parties themselves come to represent an emergent social group or region. By implication, during these years of turbulence, the voter is guided by the issues and by objective economic and social circumstances. Political scientists have called such transitions periods of *realignment*, when new electoral majorities are built. Between 1896 and 1928 the Republican Party reigned supreme. Urbanization, economic depression, the naturalization and integration of new immigrant groups and the emergence of an organized working class transformed party politics during the 1920s and early 1930s, however, and culminated in the resounding Democratic victory of 1932 (table 6.3). From the late 1920s the Democrats became the party associated with the urban working class, trade unions and the underprivileged. The near invincibility of what was to be called the New Deal Coalition

Table 6.3 Presidential election results, 1928–2016

Candidates	Party	Electoral College vote	Popular vote	Percentage share	Number of states won ^a
1928	Herbert Hoover Alfred E. Smith	444 87	21,392,190 15,016,443	58.2 40.8	42 6 (all southern)
1932	Norman Thomas Franklin D. Roosevelt	0 472	267,420 22,821,857	1.0 57.3	0 42
1936	Herbert Hoover Norman Thomas Franklin D. Roosevelt	59 0 523	15,761,841 884,781 27,751,597	39.6 2.2 60.7	6 (all northeastern) 0 46
1940	Alfred M. Landon Norman Thomas Franklin D. Roosevelt	8 0 449	16,679,583 187,720 27,244,160	36.4 0.5 54.7	2 (Maine and Vermont) 0 38
1944	Wendell L. Willkie Norman Thomas Franklin D. Roosevelt	82 0 432	22,305,198 99,557 25,602,504	44.8 0.2 52.8	10 0 36
1948	Thomas E. Dewey Norman Thomas Harry S. Truman	99 0 303	22,006,285 80,518 24,179,345	44.5 0.2 49.5	12 0 32
1952	Thomas E. Dewey J. Strom Thurmond Henry A. Wallace	189 39 0	21,991,291 1,176,125 1,157,326	45.1 2.4 2.4	12 4 (all southern) 0
1956	Norman Thomas Dwight D. Eisenhower Adlai E. Stevenson	0 442 89	139,572 33,936,234 27,314,992	0.2 55.2 44.5	0 40 8 (all southern)
1960	Dwight D. Eisenhower Adlai E. Stevenson John F. Kennedy	457 73 303	35,590,472 26,022,752 34,226,731	57.4 42.0 49.9	41 7 (all southern) 23 ^b
1964	Richard M. Nixon Lyndon B. Johnson	219 486	34,108,157 43,129,484	49.6 61.1	26 46
1968	Barry M. Goldwater Richard M. Nixon Hubert H. Humphrey George C. Wallace	52 301 191 46	27,178,188 31,785,480 31,275,166 9,906,473	38.5 43.3 42.7 13.5	5 (Southern and Arizona) 32 14 5 (all southern)
	American Independent				

(Continued)

Table 6.2 (Cont'd)

	Candidates	Party	Electoral College vote	Popular vote	Percentage share	Number of states won ^a
1972	Richard M. Nixon	Republican	520	47,169,911	61.3	49
	George McGovern	Democratic	17	29,170,383	37.3	2 (DC and Massachusetts)
	John G. Schmitz	American	0	1,099,482	1.4	0
1976	Jimmy Carter	Democratic	297	40,830,763	50.1	24
	Gerald R. Ford	Republican	240	39,147,973	48.0	27
	Eugene J. McCarthy	Independent	0	756,631	1.0	0
1980	Ronald Reagan	Republican	489	42,951,145	51.0	46
	Jimmy Carter	Democratic	49	34,663,037	41.0	5
	John B. Anderson	Independent	0	5,551,551	7.0	0
1984	Ronald Reagan	Republican	525	54,450,603	59.2	49
	Walter Mondale	Democratic	13	37,573,671	40.8	2 (DC and Minnesota)
1988	George Bush	Republican	426	47,917,341	54.0	40
	Michael Dukakis	Democratic	112	41,013,030	46.0	11
1992	Bill Clinton	Democratic	370	44,908,233	43.0	32
	George Bush	Republican	168	39,102,282	37.4	18
	Ross Perot	Independent	0	19,741,048	18.9	0
1996	Bill Clinton	Democratic	379	47,401,504	49.2	31
	Bob Dole	Republican	159	39,197,350	40.7	19
	Ross Perot	Independent	0	8,085,285	8.4	0
2000	George W. Bush	Republican	271	50,456,002	47.9	30
	Al Gore	Democratic	266	50,999,897	48.4	21
	Ralph Nader	Green	0	2,882,995	2.7	0
2004	George W. Bush	Republican	286	62,025,554	50.7	31
	John Kerry	Democratic	251	59,026,013	47.3	20
	Ralph Nader	Independent	0	406,940	0	0
2008	Barack Obama	Democrat	365	69,445,229	52.9	29
	John McCain	Republican	173	59,923,677	45.7	22
2012	Barack Obama	Democrat	332	65,915,795	51.1	27
	Mitt Romney	Republican	206	60,933,504	47.2	24
2016 ^c	Donald Trump	Republican	306	62,625,928	46.2	30
	Hillary Clinton	Democrat	232	65,152,112	48.2	21

^aFrom 1960 includes Alaska and Hawaii. From 1964 includes Washington, DC.

^bFifteen Electoral College votes were cast for segregationist candidate Harry F. Byrd, including eight in Mississippi, which he effectively 'won'.

^cPreliminary figures.



Plate 6.1 Republican 2016 candidates at one of the Republican debates
Source: Getty.

was assured because of the support guaranteed by the traditionally Democratic South. By the mid-1930s the intellectual establishment and many members of an insecure middle class had joined the coalition, resulting in the *maintaining* elections of 1936, 1940, 1944 and 1948. Not until incumbent Democrats (most notably Harry Truman) began to support civil rights for Southern blacks did the first cracks in the majority appear (in 1948).

The Republican victories of 1952 and 1956 were, according to the scholars, *deviating* elections. In other words, the Democrats remained the 'natural' majority party, but the specific circumstances of these elections allowed the Republicans to triumph. Eisenhower was an avuncular, charismatic war hero; in contrast, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate, projected an aloof, intellectual and narrowly eastern establishment image. This personality contrast was, above all, responsible for the Republican victories. Significantly, these successes were only partly repeated at the congressional level. Following Republican victories in 1946 and 1952, after 1954 Congress was firmly controlled by the Democrats.

The Decline of the New Deal Coalition and the Rise of a Divided Electorate

This neat and appealing theory of electoral behaviour seemed to be reinforced by the 1960 and 1964 presidential elections. Democratic victories returned, with the Republicans reverting to their normal status as the minority party. However, from the late 1960s a number of developments appear which in total present a rather serious challenge to the accepted theory. In particular we note the following.

Partisanship declines

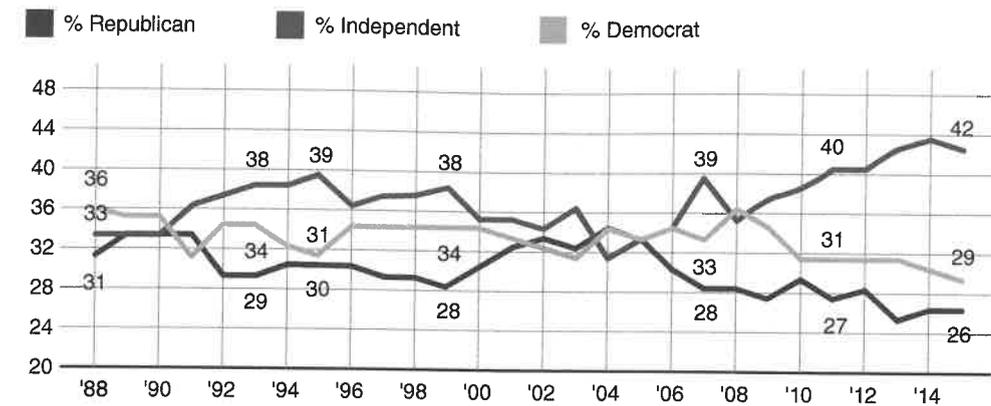
A popular interpretation of Richard Nixon's victory in 1968 was that it heralded a new Republican majority.⁹ More citizens were suburban, middle class and conservative, so the Republicans should find themselves ascendant. Moreover, the South, so long solidly Democratic, could no longer tolerate the integrationist policies of Democratic presidents. They famously won back Congress in 1994,¹⁰ and the presidency in 2000 and, more convincingly, in 2004.

Superficially, the 1972 election seemed to reinforce these trends (table 6.3). Yet 1968 and 1972 were not classic *realigning elections* like 1932. The number of Republican Party identifiers, far from increasing, decreased slightly during these years (see figure 6.2), and the Democrats retained their dominance of Congress. Similarly, at the state level there was little evidence of an unstoppable Republican surge. Note, however, that Democratic Party identification also declined during the 1960s. This fact, together with the rise of independent identifiers, has led some commentators to speculate that what was occurring was party *dealignment*, or the slow demise of party identification as a key indicator of political preference.

By 1976, this process of dealignment seemed to have stabilized (figure 6.2), but at the same time neither party had recaptured the centre stage in the way in which the Republicans did after 1896 or the Democrats did after 1932.

Another indicator of declining partisanship is 'ticket splitting' or the tendency for voters to divide their loyalties between candidates of different parties. Ticket splitting rose sharply from 1952 to 1980. By that year some 34 per cent of the voters split their tickets between presidential and house candidates. A similar picture emerged for state-wide offices (elections for senators, governors, state legislatures) in a number of states and regions.

In spite of the Republican victories in 1980, 1984 and 1992, the Democrats continued to control the House of Representatives and (bar the 1981–7 period) the Senate. The Republicans also failed to build a permanent majority among the 50 states – although their control of the South strengthened. By the early 2000s some signs that, at last, the Republicans had become the majority party were evident. They famously won the presidency in 2000 and more convincingly in 2004. Moreover, by 2004 they controlled 28 of the Governors' mansions. However, their success was short-lived. They lost both houses of Congress in 2006 and only managed to hold on to 22 of the Governors' mansions. By 2008 it was the Republicans that looked like the minority party, for after the elections of that year they controlled neither Congress nor presidency nor a majority of the states. In terms of party identification, the Democrats enjoyed a dramatic surge in support in 2007 and 2008 (figure 6.3) as the Republicans became increasingly associated with a failing economy and a deeply unpopular president fighting an unpopular war in Iraq. The Democratic surge proved to be short-lived, however. Recession plagued Obama's first term and the Democrats were trounced by the Republicans in the 2010 mid-term elections. By 2010 the Republicans had also narrowed the party identification gap (figure 6.3). However, Barack Obama famously won a second term for the Democrats in 2012, although the Republicans retained control of the House, thus putting paid to any claims that a re-alignment to Democratic dominance was occurring. 2016 also failed to settle the question of which was the dominant party. For although Donald Trump won the



Based on multiple day polls conducted by telephone

Figure 6.3 Trends in party identification, 1988–2015

Source: 11 January 2016, Democratic, Republican Identification Near Historical Lows by Jeffrey M. Jones, Gallup at www.gallup.com/poll/188096/democratic-republican-identification-near-historical-lows.aspx.

Electoral College, he lost the popular vote by more than 2 million and the Democrats made small inroads into the Republican congressional majorities in both the House and the Senate.

A natural corollary to changing patterns of partisanship is that citizens (or at least those of them who vote) are using some other criterion when making a decision on whom to vote for. Candidates and issues had always played some part in the voting calculus, of course, but from the 1970s they began to play a much more prominent role. It also follows that if people are voting for individual candidates or for particular issues, the electorate is much more sophisticated than implied by the 'American Voter' model. Indeed, in their 1976 work, *The Changing American Voter*, Nie, Verba and Petrocik discovered that from about 1964 voters showed a significantly increased consistency in their views on domestic and foreign policy issues. Unlike the rather unthinking citizen portrayed by *The American Voter*, the public appeared more able to see the connections between issues, parties and candidates and to view the world in terms of broad ideological categories such as 'liberal' or 'conservative'. Certainly, presidential elections took on a more ideological stance after the 1970s. In 1980 there was a clear-cut choice, with the conservative Ronald Reagan facing an incumbent president, Jimmy Carter, identified – albeit reluctantly on his part – with the liberal cause. There was also a clear-cut choice in 1984, with Ronald Reagan appealing directly to the right and Walter Mondale to liberals and the left. In 1988, however, the two candidates were much closer together on basic issues. So much so, in fact, that George Bush worked hard to label Michael Dukakis a 'liberal' so as to secure the conservative vote. George Bush found his identification with conservative policies a liability in 1992, however, when the electorate called for new economic policies following a period of recession. Bob Dole tried to learn this lesson four years later in 1996, when he worked hard to capture the middle ground. Incumbent Bill Clinton also moved to the centre, and in the context of a healthy economy this was sufficient for him to win re-election.

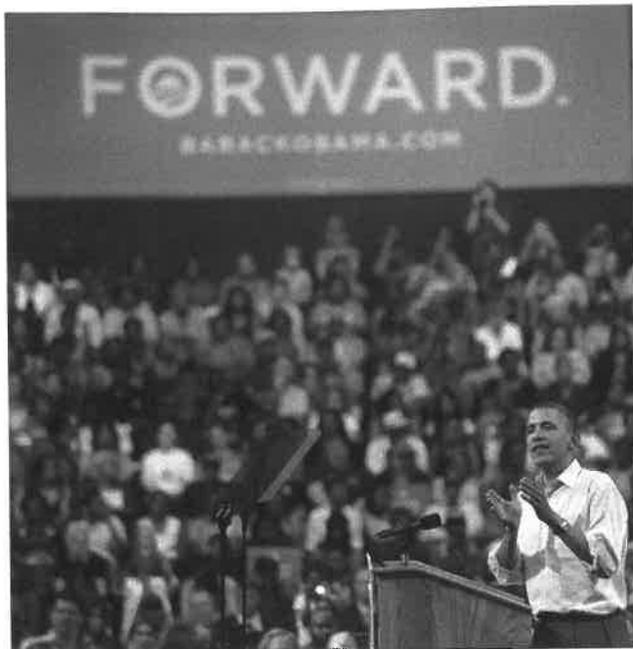


Plate 6.2 US President Barack Obama speaks during a campaign rally at Virginia Commonwealth University, 5 May 2012 in Richmond, Virginia
 Source: Sara D. Davis/Getty Images.

CONTROVERSY 5 NON-VOTING: DOES IT MATTER?

According to rational choice theory – the school of social behaviour arguing that all an individual's political actions are motivated by self-interest – rational citizens rarely have an incentive to vote. In other words, the costs of voting, including actually registering and travelling to the polling station, are usually greater than the benefits – the chance that an individual vote will make a difference to the outcome. In the vast majority of cases the individual vote makes not the slightest difference. (The major exceptions are elections with very small electorates; for example, committee or small-town meetings.) Indeed, most of us know perfectly well when we go to the polling booth that our one vote will not, on its own, count. Instead we reason collectively rather than individually and assume that the total of votes for a particular candidate is what matters. It could be argued that in the United States, where turnout is low, a more individualistic political culture has deterred 'rational' citizens from voting. Moreover, American political parties are made up of broad coalitions of interests rather than particular groups and interests. It is therefore more difficult for citizens to see a close identity between their own interests and those of a party. Compare this with Northern Ireland, for example, where it would be almost inconceivable for a Protestant to vote for Sinn Fein or for a Catholic to vote Unionist. Perhaps not surprisingly, turnout in Northern

Ireland is high. This analysis implies that, by some measures and notably voter rationality, it does not matter that election turnout is low in the United States. However, there is a further dimension to US turnout, which is simply the fact that, as in all other countries, low turnout is closely correlated with social class. Low-income Americans vote the least; higher-income better-educated Americans vote the most. Moreover, unlike in some other countries, non-voters often permanently exclude themselves from participation in the electoral process and fail to vote throughout their lifetimes. This phenomenon has led some commentators to conclude that political alienation among the disadvantaged is greater in the US than elsewhere. The fact that so many poor and disadvantaged people do not vote also helps to skew the electoral agenda towards the middle class and the rich. As a result, the claim is that political parties are reluctant to pursue redistributive policies in such areas as taxation, health and education for fear of offending the majority of middle-class voters.

Interestingly, there are occasions in American history when poorer voters do turn out to vote in numbers greater than might be expected. Usually this is when economic dislocation adds a class dimension to politics that is usually absent. Just such an event occurred in 2008 when Barack Obama promised income redistribution and job-creation programmes to speed recovery. Turnout among the poor and minorities increased correspondingly. A similar pattern occurred in 2012 when, in spite of continuing economic dislocation, Barack Obama managed to appeal to poorer voters by contrasting his support for a social agenda favouring the disadvantaged with that of his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney. The Democrats failed to maintain this pattern in 2016, however when Donald Trump famously succeeded in winning over disgruntled white working class voters. Meanwhile the 'Obama coalition' showed some signs of weakening as turnout among poorer urban minorities failed to match the 2008 and 2012 figures.

It was not until the elections of after 2000, however, that ideology and issue voting returned resolutely to the centre of the stage. In all four elections since then elections the distance between the candidates was large, with the Democrats identified as liberal and the Republicans as conservative. In 2000 the electorate was remarkably evenly divided between the two parties as it was in 2004. However in 2008 the balance shifted to the Democrats as more voters aligned themselves with a candidate intent on policies designed to stimulate the economy. What is interesting about these developments is the increasing coincidence of party identification with issue and candidate alignments. In other words to most Americans the label 'Democrat' means being liberal in domestic and social policy, and unlike earlier periods this applies across a whole range of issues – to foreign policy, the environment, the economy, immigration and the social issues (abortion, family values). Republicans are associated with precisely the opposite positions. These trends were reinforced in 2012: Mitt Romney was identified as a champion of the rich and privileged, while Barack Obama deliberately pitched his campaign to appeal to the broad mass of working Americans. And, as noted, Donald Trump turned class alignments upside down by winning the support of many white working-class voters and especially those living in smaller towns and rural areas.

CONTROVERSY 6 ARE AMERICAN ELECTIONS CORRUPT?

The 2000 presidential election brought to the attention of the world the sometimes erratic and possibly corrupt nature of American elections. In some states 'convicted felons' are ineligible to vote, which means that in Florida, for example, more than 10 per cent of male African American voters are disenfranchised. Worse still, the official list of felons has been shown to be wildly inaccurate, containing as it does a large number of non-felons. These and other problems associated with voting in the US derive from the simple fact it is the state legislatures that decide the technical details of voter eligibility as well as how votes are counted and the size and shape of constituencies. While some overt corruption undoubtedly occurs, the most cited problems are usually technical in nature, such as insufficient voting places, inefficient vote counting and out-of-date or improperly drawn up electoral rolls. But the most serious distortion of elections is in fact perfectly legal – the manipulation of constituency boundaries to favour the party that controls the state legislature. Known as 'gerrymandering', this practice has become more widespread in recent years, and with the Republicans on the ascendant in state elections until 2004 and again after 2010, this meant a system that favoured Republican incumbents. Hence both state and national electoral boundaries (for the House of Representatives) were drawn up in such a way that concentrated Democratic votes and dispersed Republican votes to ensure a Republican majority. The resulting constituencies are often bizarrely shaped and look like doughnuts, embryos, lobsters and other odd constructions. This practice (which is of course indulged in by both Republican and Democratic states) has resulted in a remarkably uncompetitive House with, in 2004, no more than about 25 competitive seats. Only Iowa has had the temerity to assign redistricting to an independent bureau. In the rest of the states, voters have little real choice, except in state-wide elections (for senators and governors), where redistricting is, of course, irrelevant. The Democratic House victories in 2006 and 2008 are all the more remarkable because they were achieved in spite of the considerable advantage enjoyed by most Republican incumbents in the House of Representatives. Perversely, in 2016 Donald Trump claimed that the system was biased against the Republicans by alleging that over 3 million votes for the Democrats were fraudulent (votes cast by dead people, non-residents and aliens). However, there was no evidence whatsoever that this was true.

Partisanship revives

In an important book published in 1992, a group of scholars based at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Brigham Young University argue that the decline of party voting in the USA had been greatly exaggerated.¹¹ Most people who may, in answer to survey questions, call themselves independents, do in fact have some allegiance to one of the major parties. The number of pure independents has changed little in the 50 years up to 2012. But,

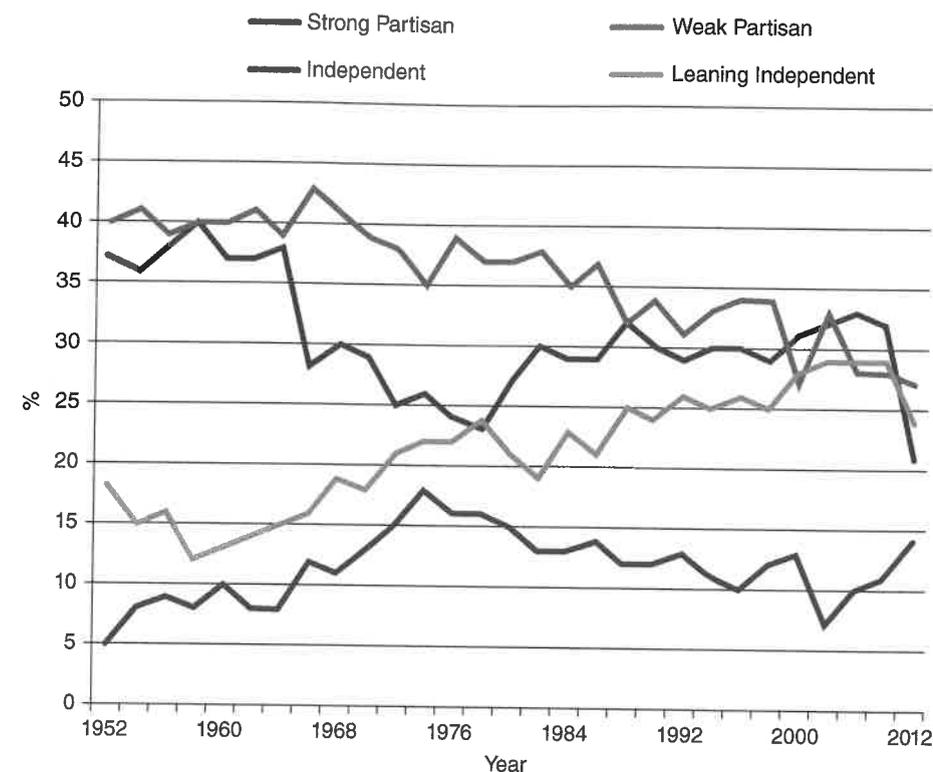


Figure 6.4 Strength of partisanship, 1952–2012

Source: Computed from American National Election Studies (ANES) data at Party Identification 7-Point Scale (revised in 2008) 1952–2012, www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab_2a_1.htm.

as can be seen from figure 6.4, the number of voters with some party affiliation who lean independent has steadily increased and, as a group, these voters are now as numerous as strong party identifiers, whose numbers have dropped considerably since 2000.

In addition, there has been a discernible ideological polarization of the electorate, with more people calling themselves liberal in the period since about 1990 (figure 6.5). It would also appear that many of these voters are more certain in their ideological commitment than was the case in the past, and are thus less likely to be persuaded by candidate appeal.

The crucial importance of gender

The 'gender gap' among voters has been increasingly pronounced for at least the last seven presidential elections, with more women voting Democrat than should have been expected from national trends. In 1996, women split their vote 54 versus 37 per cent between Clinton and Dole, compared with a 44 versus 44 per cent margin for men. In 1992 only 46 per cent of women voted for Clinton, compared with 41 per cent of men. Younger, educated and single women are especially prone to vote Democrat, reflecting, perhaps, an antipathy towards the tendency for Republican candidates to be conservative on a range of issues which resonate

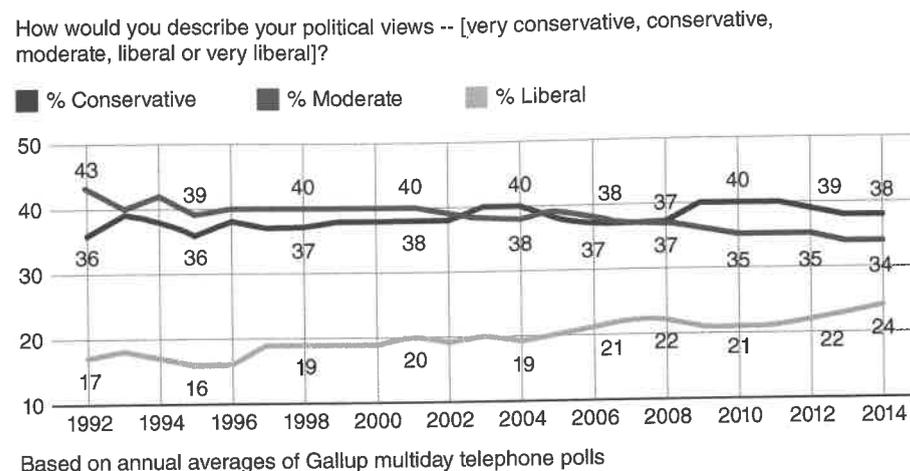


Figure 6.5 Liberal-conservative self-identification, 1972–2014

Source: 9 January 2015, U.S. Liberals at Record 24%, but Still Trail Conservatives, by Lydia Saad, Gallup at www.gallup.com/poll/180452/liberals-record-trail-conservatives.aspx.

with women (abortion, childcare, gun control, education, affirmative action, aggressive foreign policy). There are a number of other interesting aspects to this phenomenon. For one thing, the personal behaviour of candidates seems to be less important than their stand on the issues. The scandals surrounding Bill Clinton, for example, including his admitted dishonesty over his sexual affairs, seemed to do him little electoral harm among women.

In 2000 the gender gap between the two candidates remained substantial (54 per cent of women voted for Gore and only 43 per cent for Bush). As in the past, the gap was especially large among younger working women and minority women, who increasingly see the Republican Party as dominated by sexist, older white males. The gender gap persisted in 2004, although it narrowed to around 7 per cent (table 6.1). This may have been because 'security' or protection from terrorism was an important issue in the election, and many women assign security a very high value. However in 2008 the gap returned with a vengeance, with no fewer than 56 per cent of women voting Democrat, compared with 49 per cent of men – a trend that continued in 2012 when 55 per cent of women voted for Barack Obama compared with only 45 per cent of men. Perhaps surprisingly given Donald Trump's 2016 campaign comments on women, that which were widely seen as sexist, Hillary Clinton actually won the support of slightly fewer women than did Barack Obama in 2012. This may be explained by the number of working class white women who, along with their male equivalents, supported Donald Trump that year.

Voters and foreign policy

Although 'strength abroad' was a dividing issue in the 1980s, with Reagan supporters being decidedly more hawkish than Mondale voters, the issue all but disappeared from the political landscape after the end of the Cold War. All this changed with 9/11, which had the effect

of rallying almost all Americans behind the flag in the 'War on Terror'. However, the Bush administration's conduct of the war, and especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003, led to a deepening divide on the question, so that by the 2004 election campaign foreign policy had once again become an important issue. Republican voters were very much more supportive of an aggressive foreign policy than were Democrats. In fact by 2003 the gap was a yawning 25 percentage points. It should be stressed that most of those who opposed the Bush administration's policy in Iraq did support a vigorous anti-terrorist strategy. It is just that they viewed the Bush strategy as heavy-handed and ineffective. They were also highly critical of the threat that they saw the policy posed for civil liberties at home. After 2010 the foreign policy issue declined in importance, partly because neither of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan was resolved satisfactorily and partly because the economy continued to trump other policy areas as an election issue. However the triumph of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016 promised to return foreign affairs to the centre of the stage.

Region

Major changes in the regional pattern of voting have occurred since the 1960s. During the first half of the twentieth century the South was solidly Democratic, and until the 1930s New England was solidly Republican. Today the South is markedly more Republican than Democratic, not just at the presidential but increasingly at the state and local levels as well. The region is far from being as solidly Republican as it used to be Democratic, however, even if it is conservative. In 1996 Bill Clinton, himself very much a southerner, won five of the South and border states to the seven secured by Bob Dole. And while, in the two subsequent presidential elections, the Republicans swept the board by winning *all* the southern states in 2008, the Democrats won Virginia, North Carolina and Florida. Even in 2012 Barack Obama managed to win Florida and Virginia and in 2016 Hillary Clinton won Virginia, although the Republican vote in the Deep South states remained solid.

The mountain, plains and western states are also mainly Republican, with the notable exception of the Pacific states (Washington, Hawaii, Oregon and California), and especially California, which is now unambiguously Democratic at the presidential level. Northern and northeastern states are more Democratic and liberal – as should be expected from their industrial past. Bill Clinton managed a near-sweep of these regions in both 1992 and 1996, as did Al Gore in 2000, John Kerry in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008 and in 2012. In 2016, however, Donald Trump easily won Ohio and narrowly won Michigan and Pennsylvania mainly thanks to his appeal among white working class voters. So we should be wary of assuming that the North and East can always be labelled Democratic. At the congressional, state and local levels the Republicans remain quite strong in many of the northern states, and voter preference at the presidential level is often as much dictated by the attractiveness of individual candidates as it is by party label.

None the less, at the presidential level by 2012 the geographic distribution of votes seemed to have settled into a pattern – most of the South, mountain and plains states voting Republican, and the Pacific and northeastern states voting Democratic. The so-called 'battleground states' – Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Michigan – are also now consistently competitive. In effect, therefore, the vagaries of the Electoral College concentrate presidential election outcomes in a relatively small number of states.

Race and ethnicity

Finally, we should note the very high and consistent support for the Democrats among African American and some other minority voters. In 1984, a staggering 90 per cent of blacks voted Democrat, 4 per cent up on 1980 and against the national trend. In 2000, 90 per cent voted for Gore and a mere 9 per cent for Bush. And in 2016 just 12 per cent voted for Donald Trump. Two conclusions can be drawn from these figures. Either the vast majority of blacks perceive themselves to be the direct beneficiaries of Democratic policies or they display a remarkable sense of group solidarity. On the former point, Democrats are more supportive of the civil rights and welfare policies from which many African Americans benefit. But by no means all blacks are direct beneficiaries of these policies, and the high support for the Democrats implies that the party is always unambiguously in favour of welfare and civil rights, which is certainly not the case. Indeed, the Clinton administrations supported quite draconian reforms to the welfare system, involving reductions in welfare benefits for mothers with dependent children (see chapter 17). More feasibly, most African Americans feel a strong sense of racial solidarity and vote Democrat because they know that many of their number are more likely to benefit from Democratic policies than from Republican measures. No other social group of significant size shows such solidarity, which speaks volumes for the very special and troubled status of blacks in American history and present-day society. Of course, in 2008 and again in 2012, with a black candidate for president even more voted Democrat than is 'usual', with the figure reaching over 90 per cent. The bias towards the Democrats is also evident among other ethnic minority groups, including Hispanics, Asians and Jews. The Hispanic vote is of particular import given the rapid increase in the Hispanic population and their concentration in key election states such as Florida, New Mexico and Colorado. Indeed in 2012, 71 per cent of Hispanics voted Democrat, up from 56 per cent in 2004. Perhaps surprisingly given Donald Trump's characterization of illegal Mexican immigrants as 'criminals and rapists' during the 2016 campaign this figure fell to 65 per cent in the election of that year, although turnout among minorities in general was down on 2012.

Class

While there has always been some degree of class voting in the US, it took on a new meaning in 2008 and especially in 2012. With steady and falling real incomes being experienced by many Americans, rising fuel and food costs and continuing job insecurity, increased evidence of class voting emerged during the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, white males tended to align themselves on the left on economic issues (job security, health-care reform, taxation) but were towards the centre or the right on many of the social issues, and especially the war issue. Paradoxically this very same group swung decisively towards Donald Trump in 2016, almost certainly because during the campaign he spoke directly to their interests, while Hillary Clinton campaigned on broader, general issues.

We can conclude, then, that the volatility that characterized the electorate in the period from the 1970s to the late 1990s has been replaced by a rather different pattern. The electorate is now much more polarized on what might broadly be called social/war and economic issues. These include civil rights and liberties, the environment, family issues including same-sex marriage and abortion, job security, taxation and the role of the US abroad. Although the welfare/economic issues looked less important in the aftermath of 9/11 and

CONTROVERSY 7 DOES THE DECLINE IN SOCIAL CAPITAL MATTER?

Since the publication of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, concern has been expressed at the decline of social capital in the US. Social capital refers to networks of reciprocal social relations, or the glue that holds society together. According to Putnam, the main indicators of social capital have been moving in the wrong direction – declining trust in government, falling voter turnout, less direct participation in political meetings and such things as direct action campaigns. Putnam sees this as part of a general decline in civic community in the US that extends into the non-political. Hence people now join fewer clubs (such as bowling leagues, thus the title *Bowling Alone*), entertain less at home and are generally more isolated from one another. This phenomenon is general but is most serious in larger, rapidly growing cities and in ethnically and linguistically mixed communities. Putnam believes that this development could have dire consequences. In essence, if citizens are not engaged in society and politics they are less likely to acquire a commitment to the polity. They are also less likely to trust not just political authority but also authority in general, and even each other. The result could be a partial breakdown of civil society and the undermining of political legitimacy. Putnam and others offer a number of solutions, and in particular support official efforts to engender 'deliberative democracy' at the community level. Critics point out that although Putnam's data may be sound, they do not relate to more serious indicators of political stability and strife in the US and elsewhere. So such indicators as political violence, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, regime-threatening political parties and movements, and even general crime levels all show rapid falls over the past 30 years just as 'social capital' has been declining. It may be, therefore, that a more individualized (and isolated) society is what people want, and the political implications of this are relatively minor. Whatever the consequences of declining social capital, the debate is likely to rage on for some years to come.

during most of the presidency of George W. Bush, they returned to centre stage with the serious economic dislocation and fuel and food price rises after 2008. As suggested above, there is a strong gender/region/race/class dimension to this cleavage, with the electorate roughly evenly divided between the liberal and conservative positions. And while the 2008 and 2012 results showed that the demographic trends favoured the Democrats in 2016 these were overcome (in the Electoral College balance of votes, at least), partly because Donald Trump honed in directly on the grievances of white working-class voters. Younger voters as well as Hispanics, Asians and African Americans are all strongly Democratic (see table 6.1). Stanley Greenberg has characterized this divide in the following way:

There is no doubt that this represents a new and important development in American politics. In essence, the volatility and unpredictability that characterized American politics for much of the

post-1970 period has been replaced by a much more confrontational and abrasive style of politics. How long this new divide will last is difficult to predict, but the strength of feeling is such that it is likely to have implications for the nature of political debate in America for some years to come.¹²

Non-Electoral Political Participation

As implied above, elections must by their very nature represent limited means of control over those forming and implementing policy. A considerable degree of centralized political power is necessary even for a relatively low level of economic efficiency, national security and social justice. With centralized power, individual citizens casting their votes in periodic elections can only hope to exercise an occasional veto influence over those at the apex of the constitutional system. This applies even in state and local elections, where voters, although closer to the officeholders, are still several steps removed from day-to-day decision-making.

But elections are just one of a number of means whereby citizens can influence the decision-makers. Participation extends to a number of other activities, particularly those associated with the local community. Historically, the local community was the primary focus of political life, with both formal and informal access to local officials being the very essence of American democracy. For most Americans, then, non-electoral participation involves contact with local officials or community leaders over such questions as school management, zoning, public works projects and law enforcement. This is a continuing, constantly changing activity. It is also perceived by all parties to be highly legitimate, and local policies are created, modified and vetoed through citizen involvement. Of course, this process is not equivalent to direct or pure democracy. The earlier noted biases against participation by lower income groups, women and ethnic minorities remain, and virtually no apparently local policy issue is entirely local today. Federal and state funding of local programmes ensures that local political activity is but one of a number of influences at work. None the less, the importance of local community activity should not be underestimated, especially in the light of the very high percentage of citizens (17 per cent in 1987) who had directly helped to form a group or organization to solve a local community problem.¹³ The same study shows the continuing strong relationship between income and education, on the one hand, and participation on the other. It should come as no surprise, then, that ethnic and racial minorities, who tend to be poorer than better-off whites, participate much less in politics. It is noteworthy, however, that Latino Americans and in particular non-citizens have the lowest participation rates. This reflects the fact that many among these groups are recent arrivals in the USA and therefore have had less opportunity to become involved in community affairs. Figure 6.6 shows how participation levels have changed since the 1950s. Interestingly, all types of activity have increased in this period, thus confounding some of the more pessimistic of the declining 'social capital' claims (see Controversy 7). These figures do not show the level or intensity of citizen involvement, however.

So, recent research has dwelt on the wider question of 'social capital', or the extent to which citizens are engaged in the broader political and social community. In particular, Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, shows that in the mid- and late 1990s, irrespective of the trends shown in figure 6.6, Americans were becoming less involved in other

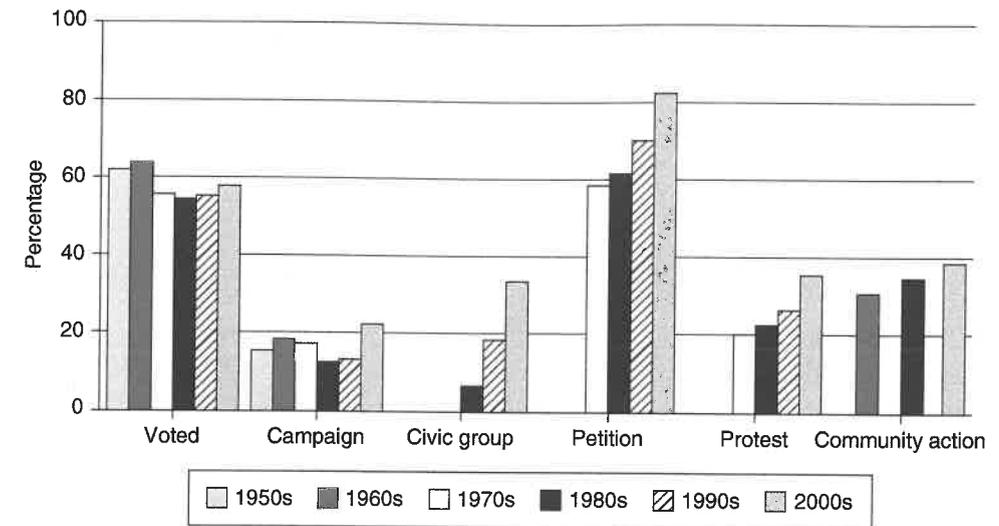


Figure 6.6 Trends in American political participation, 1950s to 2000s

Source: *Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation* (pages 76–98), Russell J. Dalton, Version of Record online: 1 February 2008, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x, figure 2. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. © 2008 The Author.

forms of civic and social activity. Their levels of political knowledge and grassroots activism had declined, as had their membership and participation in local clubs and organizations. Even informal social ties such as entertaining at home had declined. And all of this was particularly true of younger rather than older voters and of those living in the West and large cities rather than smaller rural communities.¹⁴ Putnam and others bemoan this development and argue that this much more selfish and less trusting society holds dangers for democracy.

This said, in comparative context, American levels of non-electoral political participation are very high. As can be seen from figure 6.7, while Americans may not be inclined to vote in elections, they are much more involved in community work and contact officials more frequently than the citizens of comparable countries – although they now tend to do this in isolation from one another by mail or email. Again, this relates to dissatisfaction with electoral politics, where the public's demands are often left unfulfilled.

There are two further varieties of political participation that are important for the political process. The first involves the activities of national interest groups. As chapter 14 shows, there is hardly an area of economic or social life that is not influenced by interest groups. How representative or democratic groups are is a point we cover below, but, as implied above, interest-group membership and loyalties do cut across party allegiances, so their activities must be considered an additional part of the representative process. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the internet has had an important effect on electoral political participation, but it has also made it much easier for like-minded people to access information and communicate with one another on particular issues. This has almost certainly made it easier to organize non-electoral campaigns on such issues as the environment,

abortion and opposition to Wall Street and all it represents. As a result large numbers of small financial contributions can be amassed much more easily than in the past – a phenomenon that helps redress, at least in part, the great financial and organizational advantage that large corporations have in advancing their interests.

Second, there are all those political actions usually viewed as external to the established channels of political access: demonstrations, marches, boycotts and, more rarely, acts of political violence and terror. Clearly, the last are evidence of the breakdown of democratic processes, and at the national level, at least, have been remarkably rare in the US. In recent history they have largely been confined to the actions of isolated individuals (assassinations, hijacks) or have been precipitated by a single, sometimes ephemeral, issue (the Vietnam War, civil rights). At the local level the picture is somewhat different. Until the 1960s political violence was a relatively common feature of some parts of southern society, with the black population being the victims of systematic intimidation and random violence. Rarely, however, has local political violence been motivated by a desire for regime change. More often the motivation has been the assertion of authority over a politically and socially subordinate minority group. Often, these illegal acts were implicitly endorsed by the legitimate authorities.

One partial exception to this generalization is the 'survivalist' and militia movements that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. Although for the most part these fiercely antigovernment groups are non-violent, there have been some notable exceptions. The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1996, which killed 164 people, is generally attributed to one of the more extreme of these groups. It is easy to exaggerate the size and importance of such organizations, however. They represent a tiny fraction of Americans, and they lack ideological and organizational coherence.

More difficult to evaluate are acts of political protest – demonstrations, marches, boycotts, political strikes. These are very much a part of American life and at certain times have played a crucial role in politics. Starting in the 1940s and reaching a crescendo in

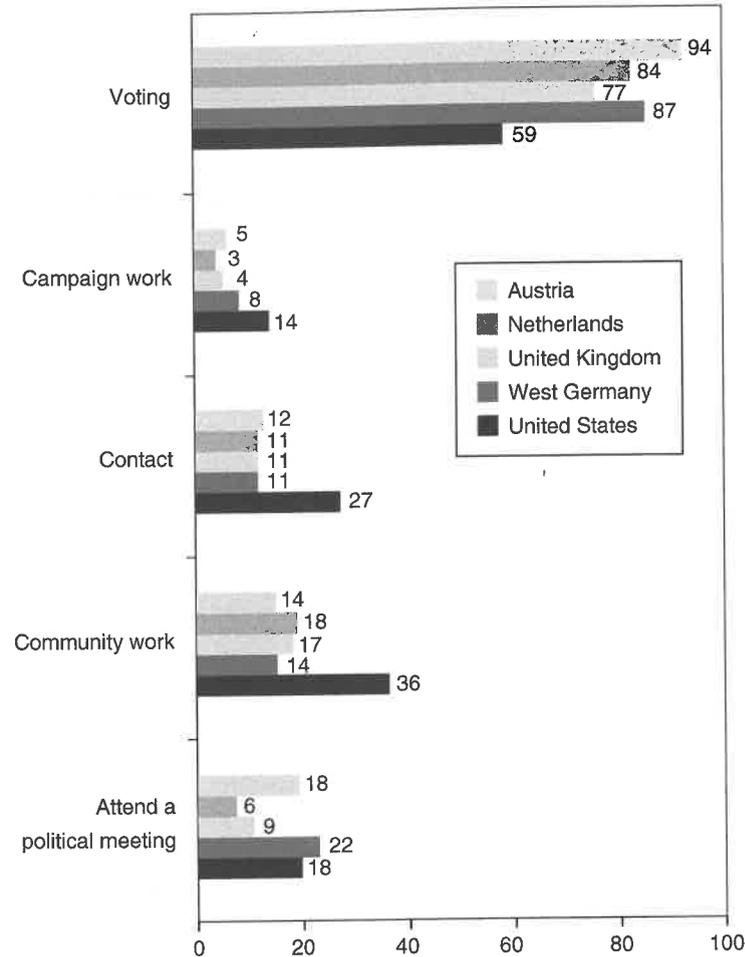


Figure 6.7 Comparative political activity rates in five countries (%)

Table 6.4 Political activities by race (% active)

Activity	Anglo-whites	African Americans	Latinos	Latino citizens
Vote	73	65	41	52
Campaign work	8	12	7	8
Campaign contributions	25	22	11	12
Contact	37	24	14	17
Protest	5	9	4	4
Informal community activity	17	19	12	14
Board membership	4	2	4	5
Affiliated with a political organization	52	38	24	27

Source: Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civil Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), table 7.9. Copyright © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

the early 1960s, these were precisely the methods successfully employed by the civil rights movement – a fact that must help to explain the greater proclivity for the African American community to partake in this type of political activity today (table 6.4).

Other than civil rights, however, it is difficult to find an issue where protest is successful and broadly accepted as legitimate, and even the civil rights movement helped to inspire the urban riots of the 1960s, which aroused bitter controversy and, eventually, a 'backlash' from many whites. This is not to deny that protest has been influential. In many instances – over unemployment in the 1930s and the Vietnam War in the 1960s – clearly it has. But it is almost impossible to *measure* its influence, or in some cases to judge whether it actually helped or hindered the cause in question.

What we can conclude is that protest is very much a last resort. Only when the unambiguously legitimate means of access are either unavailable or exhausted do individuals and social groups have recourse to protest. In some cases, such as southern blacks in the 1950s and early 1960s, they had no choice, because within southern states normal channels of access were closed. But even in this example, the movement needed and received vital support from established political actors and institutions in the North. In other cases – protest over the Vietnam War, nuclear energy, the use of abortion, for example – some argue that direct political action was illegitimate because normal channels of access were available and the democratic process took its course. This last point demonstrates nicely the problems involved in discussing political participation. As emphasized, 'the democratic process' – whether electoral or through interest-group activity – must always be an imperfect representative mechanism. Some individuals and social groups will win or lose more than others; some have disproportionately greater access and hence greater political power than others. What is perhaps remarkable about the American system is that, in spite of the obvious biases in the system in favour of certain interests and classes, there is a broad acceptance of basic constitutional arrangements. Protest and political violence are comparatively rare. Most Americans accept the legitimacy of the established channels of political access – elections and the activities of interest groups.



Plate 6.3 Peace march, Washington, DC, 1967
Source: Marc Riboud/Magnum.

While this is true, evidence of increasing cynicism about political institutions suggests that, for many voters, the electoral system is far from being a perfect mechanism for the translation of public demands into public policy. As chapters 8 to 11 show, this helps explain the disenchantment often shown towards Congress and incumbent presidents.

Summary

American citizens have numerous opportunities to decide on their representatives at the national, state and local levels. Generally the Republicans are the party of the right and the Democrats of the left, with lower-income groups and ethnic minorities tending to vote Democrat and the better-off Republican. There are many exceptions to this pattern, however, especially if voting is broken down by regions. Turnout in the US is generally low – although increasing markedly in recent national elections, in part because some of the institutional barriers to voting have been reduced. Many Americans vote according to their party identification, or the psychological attachment they have to parties. Since the 1980s, however, there has been increasing evidence of voting based on ideology, issues and candidates, with the ideological divide being especially pronounced since 2000. Indeed, the 2008, 2012 and 2016 elections showed a marked polarization of the electorate into liberal and conservative camps. Non-electoral political participation is also important in the US, where citizens engage in political campaigns and movements rather more than in comparable countries. Extreme regime-threatening politics rarely occur in the US, however.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Why are women more likely to vote Democrat than men? Answer with respect to changes in voting patterns from 1980 to 2016.
- 2 Account for the rise in the number of Americans calling themselves Independents since 1980? What is the significance of this development?
- 3 Why do Americans vote as they do? Answer with specific reference to the 2016 presidential election.
- 4 Discuss the changes in non-electoral political behaviour that have occurred since the 1950s. How important is this means of political expression today?

Glossary

'American Voter' model The model of voting behaviour based on party identification

coattails The secondary political effects of victory in a presidential election that spills over into victory for the president's party in Congress

Cold War The ideological conflict between the West and the Soviet Union and China between 1949 and 1991

dealignment The weakening of party identification in elections to the point where voters abandon traditional voting cues

deviating elections Elections, such as those of 1952 and 1956, where voters temporarily vote out of line with their party identification

gerrymandering The manipulation of electoral boundaries for political advantage

initiative Voters placing an item on the ballot sheet through the presentation of a minimum number of signatures

maintaining elections Elections, such as those of 1960 and 1964, that maintain the majority party in power

'motor voter' law Voter registration laws that allow voters to register to vote when renewing their driving licences

New Deal Coalition The coalition of industrial workers, farmers, intellectuals and the South that underpinned Democratic Party success from 1933 to 1969

party identification The psychological attachment to parties held by voters over time

realignment A major shift in party identification from one party to another, as happened in 1932

recall (elections) Citizen-inspired elections to recall an official from office. Used at the state level only

referendums Votes directly on state ballot sheets on a particular aspect of public policy

retrospective voting Voting in support of or against candidates based on their record in office

social capital The accumulated networks of social interaction based on trust and community identity

survivalist movement Extremist militia groups who prepare for complete social breakdown and possible violent conflict with the federal government

voter registration laws Laws governing the conditions under which citizens can register to vote

Notes

- 1 'Recalls' enable the electorate, following the presentation of a minimum number of signatures, to hold a special election to recall an official from office. Initiatives are similar devices, enabling the electorate by petition to vote directly on a proposition (such as a tax change), thus bypassing the state or local legislature. Referendums are proposed by legislatures and present to the electorate the opportunity to vote directly on an issue. Referendums – but not recalls and initiatives – are increasingly common in Europe to legitimize constitutional changes, such as the peace agreement in Northern Ireland or membership of the European Union.
- 2 See, in particular, Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
- 3 Quoted in *USA Today*, 8 November 1996, p. 3A.
- 4 Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
- 5 See Walter Dean Burnham, 'The turnout problem', in A. James Reichley (ed.), *Elections, American Style* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), table A4.
- 6 Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960).
- 7 Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter*, enlarged edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 42.
- 8 Philip Converse, 'The nature of belief systems in mass publics', in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 543.
- 9 Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970).
- 10 Walter Dean Burnham, 'Realignment lives: The 1994 earthquake and its implications', in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (eds), *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals* (Chatham: Chatham House, 1996).
- 11 Bruce E. Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).
- 12 Stanley Greenberg, *The Two Americas: The Current Political Deadlock and How to Break It* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004), p. 1.
- 13 Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), table 3.6.
- 14 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Further Reading

The best analysis of political participation in the US is Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). For a discussion of changes in electoral behaviour, see Bruce Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). The classic statement of the voter as rational actor is Morris P. Fiorina's *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). Presidential elections are fully covered by Nelson W. Polsby, Steven E. Schier,

David A. Hopkins and Aaron Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011). On the 2008 election, see Robert G. Boatright, Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, David E. Campbell and Roger H. Davidson, *The American Elections of 2008* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). On the 2016 contest, see Stephen J. Wayne, *The Road to the White House 2016: The Politics of Presidential Elections*, 10th edn (New York: Wadsworth, 2016) and Thomas Lake and Jodi Enda, *Unprecedented: The Election That Changed Everything* (New York: Melcher Media, 2016).