

# American Government

Since the advent of civilization, humans have had an impulse to form governments. It is an experiment thousands of years in the making.

This course asks a lot of fundamental questions about the nature of government and society. Among them:

- What is the purpose of government?
- What types of governments are there? What is a democracy?
- Where is the center of governmental power? Is it national or local?
- Is America's government too big? Too small? Constantly shifting with the times?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of each American citizen?

We do not answer these questions; that is up to you. Defining the role of government has been thousands of years in the making. Welcome to the laboratory of democracy.

This document has been assembled from the online version of [American Government from US History.org](http://AmericanGovernmentfromUSHistory.org). This document is abridged to contain only those portions of the book that are used in Unit 4 of the Puyallup School District Civics course. Sections in this unit have been rearranged from the online version.



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## Voting: A Forgotten Privilege? (4.3)



*Courtesy of WRAL Online*

*Voter participation is lower in local elections, especially in years when there are no presidential elections. This woman votes in a mayoral election in Raleigh, NC.*

Voting is at the heart of democracy. A vote sends a direct message to the government about how a citizen wants to be governed. And yet, only 48.8% of eligible voters cast their BALLOTS in the 1996 presidential election. That figure represents the lowest general

presidential election turnout since 1824. In off-year elections (those when the president is not running) the statistics are even worse. Why don't people vote?

Aside from voter attitudes, there are institutional barriers that could be impacting voter turnout. Among the most commonly cited examples are the following:

### **1. Difficulty of Registration.**

About a hundred years ago, both political parties were caught STUFFING BALLOT BOXES with bogus votes, and the states decided to make it more difficult for a person to vote. So, most of them set up a host of VOTING REQUIREMENTS, including REGISTRATION at least 10 to 30 days before an election. Most other democracies make it much easier for a citizen to vote. For example, some countries automatically register their citizens to vote. In the United States, the citizen is responsible for his or her own registration. States that have permitted same-day registration have seen slightly higher voting rates than other states.

### **2. Difficulty of Absentee Voting.**

Even if you remember to register ahead of time, you can only vote in your own precinct. If you are going to be out of town on Election Day, you must vote by ABSENTEE BALLOT. States generally have stringent rules about voting absentee. In some, you must apply for your ballot in person.

### **3. The Number of Offices to Elect.**

Americans elect more people to public office than do citizens of any other democracy. For example, in Britain the only national vote cast by citizens is for their representatives to Parliament. In the United States, we vote for REPRESENTATIVES, SENATORS, as well as the President and VICE-PRESIDENT. We also vote for GOVERNORS, Senators, and Representatives on the state level. In some states, a citizen may vote for many other state officials, such as LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR, Judges, and STATE COMMISSIONERS. And we have special local elections for school board, MAYORS, and CITY COUNCIL members. With so many elections and CANDIDATES — largely due to our system of federalism — elections are frequent. Someone is being elected to some office almost every week in United States. Such frequent voting can depress turnout.

### **4. Weekday Voting.**

In many other democracies, elections take place on weekends. By law, national general elections in

the United States are held on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Most state and local elections are also held during the week. Many people find it difficult to get off work to go vote.

### 5. Weak Political Parties.

In many countries, parties make great efforts to get people to the polls. Even in earlier days in the United States, parties called their members to ensure that they registered and voted. Parties also would often provide transportation to the polls. American political parties today are not as strongly organized at the "GRASS ROOTS" — or local — level.




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*The Center for Voting and Democracy posed the question "Why don't we vote?" to young people across the United States.*

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## The Motor-Voter Law

How can the United States improve its voter turnout? A major reform of recent year aims at the difficult registration process. In 1993, Congress passed the NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION ACT, more commonly known as the "MOTOR-VOTER" LAW. The act requires states to allow people to register to vote when applying for a driver's license. The legislation took effect in 1995, but it did not improve voter turnout in the 1996 presidential election.

However, its supporters estimate that an additional 50 million people will eventually be registered because of the law. Critics say that it will increase voter fraud and that it will be expensive for the states to implement. Some Republicans have expressed fears that the law was a gimmick to register more inner-city Democrats.

Perhaps the medium that could herald the greatest change is the Internet. The connected world of cyberspace allows for the potential of easier registration, more convenient voting, and a host of new ways of participating in the American democracy.

## American Political Attitudes and Participation (4.4)



*The political views of Washington power-couple Mary Matalin and James Carville are on either side of the political spectrum. During the 1992 election, Carville worked for the Clinton campaign while Matalin worked for the Bush campaign.*

Democracy, liberty, equality, and justice. These values are not very controversial. But Americans have vastly divergent viewpoints on the meanings of these core values. Does assisting the poor represent a movement toward equality, or does it create an unfair burden on the middle and upper classes? Does the permission of abortion defend the liberty of American women or endorse the ending of a human life? Do elected officials really represent the people, or are they just out for themselves? These issues and many more reflect a wide range of political attitudes that shape how Americans participate in government and politics.

## Are You Liberal or Conservative?



*Political labeling becomes confusing as lines between liberalism and conservatism become blurred. Some people don't believe they fit entirely into either category.*

The terms "liberal" and "conservative" mean different things to different people, but they broadly describe contrasting political ideologies — views of the world that reflect an individual's values and ideas. Generally, a LIBERAL ideology favors the use of government power to regulate the economy and bring about justice and equality of opportunity. For example, liberals believe that the government should do more to help minorities, the homeless, women, the elderly, and society's "have-nots." They also believe that the government should provide foreign aid to countries in need. LIBERALS generally favor a tax system that taxes the rich more heavily than it does the poor.

Conservatives also believe in justice and equality of opportunity. However, CONSERVATIVES believe that individuals are primarily accountable for their own well-being, and that government's responsibility is to see that they have the freedom to pursue their dreams. Any government support should come from the local and state levels, or preferably, from families and private charities. To a conservative, big government infringes on individual rights.

## Scandals and Voter Apathy




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*Most trace the public's current skepticism towards government back to the Watergate scandal that rocked America in the early 1970s. Here, former President Richard Nixon waves farewell as he boards his helicopter on the day of his resignation in 1974.*

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Since the mid-1960s, Americans have become increasingly frustrated with their government? The current trend toward negativism can be traced to the disillusionment engendered by the government's handling of the VIETNAM WAR and the WATERGATE scandal. President Lyndon Johnson was accused of lying to the public about the progress of the war, and President Richard Nixon was caught in a web of deception and cover up of the 1972 break in of the Democratic Party's campaign office in the Watergate building. President Ronald Reagan's administration was tainted by the IRAN-CONTRA SCANDAL, and President Bill Clinton was impeached for obstructing evidence in a civil suit brought against him.

But earlier Presidents have made mistakes. Why do these events seem to have such long-lasting effects? Some observers believe that the growing political influence of the media is largely responsible for public skepticism about government and politics. For example, the complete 1974 Watergate hearings were broadcast on television. Millions of Americans followed the proceedings and anticipated the answers to important questions. "Were top aides in the White House a part of the deception?" "How much did he [Nixon] know?" "Is he lying to us?" Public opinion so overwhelmingly condemned Nixon that he was forced to resign.

Others blame investigative reporting because it emphasizes sensational, high interest stories. Continuing scandals, such the 1998-99 MONICA LEWINSKY scandal and investigation of the personal behavior of PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON, keep the public focused on negative aspects of politics. According to this view, the media almost never reports anything good that politicians do, so they feed and extend the influence of negativism.






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*The media is often accused of stoking the flames of discontent among American voters. Critics say the media's emphasis on scandal over substance discourages citizens from becoming involved in the political process.*

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Others believe that we expect too much of government. With the dramatic increase of government responsibilities since the New Deal era, how can politicians live up such high expectations? Others contend that voter indifference is on the rise because times are good. If Americans are content with the progress of their economy, why should they bother with following every political issue?

Although Americans share some broad agreements on basic political values, such as liberty, equality, and justice, they reflect a wide range of political attitudes, from highly conservative ideologies to very liberal ones. Despite their differences, modern Americans share one other political view — they are highly critical of politicians, and they have high expectations for their government and their elected leaders.

## What Factors Shape Political Attitudes? (4.4)



*The Bush clan shows that politics runs in the family. George Bush Sr. was a Congressman, then President of the United States, George W. Bush was the Governor of Texas before being elected President in 2000, and Jeb Bush is the Governor of Florida.*

A common political culture by no means suggests that all Americans think alike. Some are conservative and tend to vote REPUBLICAN. Some are liberal and tend to vote DEMOCRATIC. Some have more negative attitudes toward public officials than do others. These attitudes determine how Americans participate, whom they vote for, and what political parties they support. Many factors — including family, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and region — all contribute to American political attitudes and behavior.

### Family

Despite family disagreements and generation gaps, children tend to grow up and vote the way their parents do. Families are generally the first, and often the most enduring, influence on young people's developing political opinions. As people grow older, other influences crisscross the family, and naturally their attitudes tend to diverge from those of their parents. However, the influence still remains. Logically, the more politically active your family, the more likely you are to hold the same beliefs. Just look at the Bush family. This relationship is less strong on specific issues — like school prayer, abortion, and welfare programs — but they all hold the same general political views.

### Gender



*The Kennedys are one of America's most politically powerful families, claiming members at all levels of government. Here, three of the Kennedy clan — President John, Attorney General Robert, and Senator Edward — smile for the camera.*

POLITICAL SCIENTISTS have noticed some major shifts in gender influence since women first got the vote in 1920. Through the 1950s women tended to vote for Republicans. Even though more women voted for Franklin Roosevelt — a Democrat — than for his Republican opponents, they still supported him by smaller margins than did men. By the 1960s, women began to shift their loyalty to the Democrats.



In recent elections women have voted strongly Democratic. Why? Most observers believe that women think the Democrats more strongly support "women's issues," such as equal work, equal pay, and equal legal rights. Polls indicate that many issues about which women feel most strongly, such as education and health care, are more favorably addressed by the Democratic Party. Does this voting behavior mean that women are likely to vote for female candidates for office? The evidence doesn't provide any clear evidence that they do.

## Religion




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*Religious beliefs often sway the way people vote. The Christian Coalition is a group that has over two million members and represents the view that "people of faith have a right and a responsibility to be involved in the world around them."*

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Older studies dating to the late 1940s generally show that Jewish voters are more likely to support Democrats than are Catholics or Protestants. Catholics tend to be more liberal on economic issues (such as minimum wage and taxes) than they are on social issues (such as abortion and divorce). More recent studies have focused on how affiliates of the "Religious Right" differ in their political attitudes and behavior from everyone else. The RELIGIOUS RIGHT tends to support more conservative candidates for public office, and they are more likely to contribute to the Republican Party than to the Democratic Party. This tendency is more clearly associated with social issues such as school prayer, abortion, and divorce, than with economic issues or foreign affairs.

## Race and Ethnicity

As a general rule, for the past half-century African Americans have been the most loyal Democrats than any other identifiable group. Some experts believe that this loyalty is weakening, but recent elections have confirmed the strong tendency for black Americans to vote Democratic. Latinos as a whole have a tendency to vote Democratic, but the relationship is not as strong as it is for blacks. To further complicate matters, the various Latino groups have very different voting patterns. For example, Cuban Americans overall have a strong tendency to vote Republican, and Mexican Americans have an equally strong tendency to vote Democratic. Some studies indicate that Asian Americans tend to vote conservative, but there is still a lack of concrete evidence to prove this.

## Region



*This map provides a statistical breakdown of the 1996 presidential election. Democrat Bill Clinton won states in red, while states in blue were won by Republican Bob Dole. Note that Clinton did well on the coasts of the country, while Dole took most of the mid-west.*

As a general rule, people on either coast tend to be more liberal than those in the middle of the country. However, there are many exceptions to this tendency. Many Californians are ARCH CONSERVATIVES, as are a number of New Englanders. The Southeast presents some special problems with the rule, partly because their political affiliations have been changing over the past fifty years or so. The "SOLID SOUTH" — the tendency to vote for Democrats, no matter what — began to erode during the 1950s, so that both Republicans and Democrats are competitive across the South today. However, recent presidential elections indicate a general support for Republicans in the South.

Tracking trends in political culture is very tricky. There is no "typical American." These factors and others are merely indicators of tendencies, yet there are many exceptions. In the end, Americans are influenced by a wide array of factors when they cast their secret votes on Election Day.

## American Political Culture (4.4)



*Horatio Alger, Jr.'s novels embodied the American ideal that hard work and determination would eventually be rewarded. The young protagonists of his books "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps" and proved America to be the land of opportunity.*

The AMERICAN DREAM. It's the belief that each American has the freedom to pursue a better life — a nice house, a car or two, and a more comfortable existence than our parents.

This freedom has fueled incredible "RAGS TO RICHES" stories, such as Presidents starting out in log cabins and highly successful entrepreneurs who came to America as penniless immigrants — not to mention the guy that dropped out of Harvard to become the richest man in the world. These stories contribute to the American political culture.

Every country has a POLITICAL CULTURE — widely shared beliefs, values, and norms that define the relationship between citizens and government, and citizens to one another. Beliefs about economic life are part of the political culture because politics affects economics. A good understanding of a country's political culture can help make sense of the way a country's government is designed, as well as the political decisions its leaders make. For example, why does Great Britain still have a queen? She doesn't have any real political power, so why don't they just end the monarchy? These questions can be puzzling, unless you understand something about the British political culture — one that highly prizes tradition.

### Alexis de Tocqueville

Why does our system of government work for us better than for almost anyone else? French writer ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, an early observer of the American political culture, gave some answers during the 1830s.

Tocqueville came to the United States primarily to answer the question, "Why are the Americans doing so well with democracy, while France is having so much trouble with it?" France was in turmoil at the time, swinging back and forth between absolutism and radical democracy, and Tocqueville thought that France could learn a thing or two from the Americans. Tocqueville's observations remain today a classic study of American political culture.

He identified several factors that influenced America's success — abundant and fertile land, countless opportunities for people to acquire land and make a living, lack of a feudal aristocracy that blocked the ambitious, and the independent spirit encouraged by frontier living.

## The American View




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*American political culture puts a special emphasis on hard work and is rife with stories of successful businessmen and leaders. Consider Abraham Lincoln, who achieved great stature despite having been born in a log cabin.*

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The American political culture that Tocqueville described in the 1830s has changed over the years, but in many ways, it has remained remarkably the same, even after the continent was settled coast to coast. The American view has been characterized by several familiar elements:

- **LIBERTY:** Most people believe in the right to be free, as long as another's rights aren't abused.
- **EQUALITY:** This generally translates as "equality of opportunity," not absolute equality.
- **DEMOCRACY:** Elected officials are accountable to the people. Citizens have the responsibility to choose their officials thoughtfully and wisely.
- **INDIVIDUALISM:** The individual's rights are valued above those of the state (government); individual initiative and responsibility are strongly encouraged.
- **THE RULE OF LAW:** Government is based on a body of law applied equally and fairly, not on the whims of a ruler.
- **NATIONALISM:** Despite some current negative attitudes toward the government, most Americans are proud of our past and tend to de-emphasize problems, such as intolerance or military setbacks. This value includes the belief that we are stronger and more virtuous than other nations.
- **CAPITALISM** At the heart of the American Dream are beliefs in the rights to own private property and compete freely in OPEN MARKETS with as little government involvement as possible.




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*One of the hallmarks of British political culture is the existence of a monarchy, despite the fact that today's King or Queen has little power or authority over the government.*

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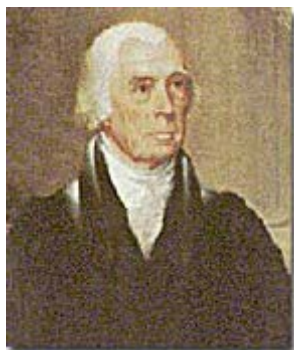
Other countries may share some, or even all, of these beliefs and values. However, the arrangement and subtleties of this core form an array that makes every political culture a little different than all the others. The elements of the American political culture include disagreement and debate. They include ideals, but they leave room for the reality of falling short of goals.

Famous events from American history — the movement West, the Civil War, the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, involvement in World Wars I and II, the New Deal and the Great Society — have been expressions of American political culture. Many events have questioned and answered various interpretations of American values and beliefs. But most of all, the political culture defines political attitudes, institutions, and activities that are most cherished in American political life.



# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

## How Do Citizens Connect with Their Government? (4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9)



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*One of James Madison's many contributions to The Federalist Papers was an essay that outlined his vision of Congress as a body of chosen individuals that the public could submit their ideas to for debate, refinement, and, ultimately, implementation for the public good.*

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It's a big country out there. Not only does the United States have nearly 300 million CITIZENS, it has so much territory that most Americans live a long way from the White House.

Sure, state and local governments allow many more opportunities to get in touch with government, but in some ways, federalism just makes government more confusing and unapproachable. Yet a democracy depends for its very livelihood on meaningful contacts between the people and the government. How does this happen in modern America?



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*Although the members of the House of Representatives represent the views of the people, population growth has made it, so each member is now responsible for almost 65,000 citizens. This makes "linkage groups" like political parties and the media vital to keeping people informed and involved.*

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The founders intended for members of Congress to provide the link between citizens and government. James Madison explains in Federalist #10 that public views are refined and enhanced "by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country..." Today, however, each House member represents almost 65,000 people.

In the modern United States, four types of groups, known as "LINKAGE" INSTITUTIONS, play a vital role in connecting citizens to the government. They are not officially a part of the government, but without them, a democracy would be very difficult to maintain. These groups in American politics include the following:

- **POLITICAL PARTIES** represent broad points of view — or IDEOLOGIES — that present people with alternative approaches to how the government should be run. Each party seeks political power by electing people to office so that its positions and philosophy become public policy. For example, both the Republican and Democratic candidates for President present competing plans for solving a wide array of public issues. People, then, link to their government by



## How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

identifying themselves as "Democrats," "Republicans," or "Reform" party members, for example.



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*Citizens get the vast majority of their political and governmental information from the media, which includes television, print journalism, radio, and now the Internet. Here, former Independent Prosecutor Kenneth Starr faces the media upon exiting his office.*

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- **CAMPAIGNS** and elections involve citizens by reminding them of their ultimate power — the vote. Campaigns today are increasingly elaborate and long, costing millions of dollars, and attracting the public's attention in any way they can. For all the expense and glitz, the process of electing government officials provides citizens with vital information regarding issues and candidates' qualifications for office.
- **INTEREST GROUPS** organize people with common interests and attitudes to influence government to support their points of view. They generally represent only one issue or a closely related set of concerns. So, people can organize according to their profession, business, corporation, or hobby — yet another way to "link" to government.



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*Here, the symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties engage in some good-natured ribbing.*

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- The **MEDIA** play an important role in connecting people to government. Most of us find out about candidates for office, public officials' activities, and the burning issues of the day through television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. The media's power to shape the American mind has often been criticized, but it also allows people to give feedback to the government.

The United States is far too large a country to operate effectively as a direct democracy. Even with elected representatives in Washington and in state capitals, it is still difficult for modern Americans to participate in their government in meaningful ways. Democracy still works though, partly because linkage institutions make important connections that allow the government to hear what its people are saying.

# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

## Political Parties (4.6)



During the 1860s, Thomas Nast — a cartoonist for the magazine *Harper's Weekly* — developed the idea of using the donkey and the elephant to represent the Democrats and Republicans, respectively. The above cartoon — titled "Stranger Things Have Happened" — dates from 1879.

From the beginning, American political parties have had a tarnished reputation. In his 1796 FAREWELL ADDRESS to the nation, GEORGE WASHINGTON warned against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party" as inciting American citizens "with ill-founded jealousies."

Today many Americans take pride in their status as "INDEPENDENT VOTERS," partly because they see parties as lacking vision for the country. Since many Americans have become disenchanted by partisan politics, they avoid identification as a "loyal Democrat" or a "staunch Republican." These negative attitudes toward parties are rooted in the roles that they play in American politics.

## Roles of Political Parties

- **Running candidates for political office.** Parties select candidates for many elected positions in American politics. With so many officials to choose, most voters would be overwhelmed by the decisions they would have to make if candidates did not wear party "labels." Parties present policy alternatives for voters. Some voters even choose a straight ticket, or candidates from the same party for all positions in that election.



Thomas Jefferson opposed the views of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams regarding centralized government and states' rights; and in doing so helped to build the foundation of the modern Democratic Party.



- **Checking the other party.** A party that does not hold the majority in Congress often keeps the party in power from taking complete control. Party leaders can publicly criticize actions of a President who was elected by the opposite party. The criticism of "PARTISANSHIP" comes from this party role because many Americans think that the "checking" becomes petty and self-serving.
- **Informing the public.** Parties take stands on issues and criticize the points of view of the other parties. Their well-publicized discussions help to inform citizens about important issues and present alternative ways of solving societal problems.
- **Organizing the government.** Congress and the state legislatures are organized according to party affiliations. LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVES usually support their party's position when considering potential laws and policies, and most votes fall roughly along party lines. Virtually all candidates run for public office with party labels that define their behavior after they win.

### Why a Two-Party System?



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*The Green Party encourages its members to work in grassroots efforts on issues of ecology and social equality. In both 1996 and 2000, consumer advocate Ralph Nader was the Green Party nominee for President.*

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Most other democratic nations have multi-party systems. Even though third parties have popped up regularly throughout American history, they have either died, or their ideas have been absorbed by a major party. Three good reasons for the American two-party system include the following:



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*Alexander Hamilton contributed to laying the framework of the modern Republican Party. His support for the ratification of the U.S. Constitution led to the formation of the Federalist Party, which fizzled out by 1824.*

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- **Consensus of Values.** It is easy to complain about petty bickering between Democrats and Republicans. What we sometimes forget is that Americans share a broad consensus, or agreement, of many basic political values. Both parties believe in liberty, equality, and individualism. Neither advocates that the Constitution be discarded. Both parties accept the election process and concede defeat to the winners. In many countries with multi-party systems, the range of beliefs is greater, and disagreements run deeper. For example, in modern day Russia, one party advocates a return to communism, some offer modified SOCIALISM and/or capitalism, and one promotes ULTRA-NATIONALISM.
- **Historical Influence.** The nation began with two political parties — the Federalists and the DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICANS. During early American history politicians tended to take sides, starting with the debate over the Constitution, and continuing with the disagreements between two of George Washington's cabinet members — Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. The tendency has persisted throughout American history.
- **The Winner-Take-All System.** The single most important reason for a TWO-PARTY SYSTEM is the WINNER-TAKE-ALL electoral system. In contrast to systems with proportional representation, the winner in American elections is the one who receives the largest number of votes. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent, but only one vote more than his or her opponents. If a third party receives 15% of the vote for every contested Senate seat, that party wins zero seats in the United States Senate. Consequently, one of the two major parties almost always wins a PLURALITY, and third parties are completely shut out of national offices.

Even though political parties are often regarded as "necessary evils," they still play an important role in American government and politics today. The two broad-based major political parties offer alternatives to voters and help connect citizens to their government.





## Campaigns and Elections (4.6)

Collectively on all levels of government, Americans fill more than 500,000 different PUBLIC OFFICES.

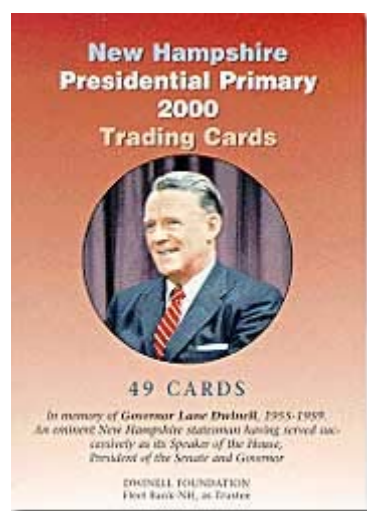


The "winner-take-all" system of elections in the United States has many benefits, including a stable government administered almost exclusively by two parties. But one drawback is that third parties whose platforms differ from those of the Republicans and Democrats find it hard to compete.

Elections form the foundation of the modern democracy, and more

elections are scheduled every year in the United States than in any other country in the world. Campaigns — where candidates launch efforts to convince voters to support them — precede most elections. In recent years campaigns have become longer and more expensive, sparking a demand for campaign finance reform. No one questions the need for campaigns and elections, but many people believe that the government needs to set new regulations on how candidates and parties go about the process of getting elected to public office.

## Types of Elections



The New Hampshire presidential primary has been first in the nation since 1920. This is so important to the state's political identity that in 2000, it began issuing "Presidential Primary Trading Cards."



- **PRIMARIES.** One reason that the process of campaigning is longer and more expensive is that primary elections now play such an important role in nominating candidates for office. Until the late 19th century, party activists generally selected candidates. Then primary elections were invented as part of a movement to democratize party nominations, and over the years, most states have adopted them. DIRECT PRIMARIES allow all party members to vote to choose the party's candidate for the general election. Most states conduct CLOSED PRIMARIES, in which only registered party members may vote for their party's nomination. A few states allow voters to choose the party primary in which they want to vote on primary election day — a process known as OPEN PRIMARIES. Primaries are usually held in the spring before the general election in the fall.
- **GENERAL ELECTIONS.** By law, candidates for Congress must be selected on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. The President and Vice-President have four-year terms, so they are only selected in every other general congressional election. State and local elections can be held at the same time and on the same ballot with national candidates, but sometimes they are elected in odd-numbered years or at other times of the year. For most elected positions, 50% of the vote is not required, but candidates need to win more votes than anyone else.

## Federal Election Commission

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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*The primary function of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) is to administer and enforce the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) — the statute that governs the financing of federal elections.*

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### Presidential Campaigns

Campaigns can be very simple or very complex. Running for the local school board is relatively simple. Candidates may just be required to file their names, answer a few questions from the local newspaper, and sit back and wait for the election. Running for President is altogether different. Today it is almost impossible to mount a campaign for the presidency in less than two years. How much money does it take? It certainly involves millions of dollars.



# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?



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*The Nixon-Kennedy debate in 1960 was the first televised debate between nominees from the major parties. This debate is still studied by scholars interested in the effect of the media on presidential politics.*

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Even the decision to run can be an expensive process. Potential candidates typically launch "EXPLORATORY COMMITTEES" that involve extensive polling and fund-raising activities. Once potential candidates announce their candidacy, they must campaign for the primaries. Because primaries are conducted by states over several months in the spring before the election, candidates must crisscross the country, spending lots of time and money in the process. By tradition, the first primaries (Republican and Democratic) are held in New Hampshire in February, and the winners usually get a great deal of attention. As they mount their next campaigns, the winners often get more contributions than the losers, and so a phenomenon known as front-loading is created. The candidates who win the first few primaries almost always tend to win the later ones.

PARTY ACTIVISTS gather at the PARTY CONVENTIONS held in the summer to nominate their candidates formally. In the days before primaries, the party's selection was often uncertain going in to the convention. Today, however, the primaries make the decision. The candidates also announce their vice-presidential running mates at the summer conventions.

After the conventions, the race for the general election begins. Since most American voters identify themselves as MODERATES, candidates often shift their messages to "capture the middle." Presidential and vice-presidential DEBATES, usually held in October, have become an important part of recent campaigns.

As campaigns become more expensive across the country, candidates, government officials, and outside agencies have called for limits on where money can come from. The intent of these limits would be to return power to the ELECTORATE and take it out of the hands of SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS. Others believe that to limit campaign contributions in any way would take away the first amendment rights of individuals and groups to express their opinion on issues and candidates.

The expense and length of modern American elections and campaigns has become one of the biggest issues in politics today. Some recommend that political party spending be more closely monitored, and others believe that overall spending caps must be set. Still others advocate national, not state, control of the primary process in order to reduce the length and expense of campaigns. Whatever the criticisms, American elections and campaigns represent a dynamic and vital link between citizen and government.



## Interest Groups (4.7)



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*When controversy erupted over whether to keep both the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts as single-sex organizations, representatives from both groups exercised a form of lobbying — they testified before Congress at hearings on the issue.*

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So, the election is over. How can the average American remain involved in politics without waiting for the next election? One chief means of influencing the American government is by joining an INTEREST GROUP — an organization that pressures elected officials to enact legislation favorable to its causes.

### Types of Interest Groups

There are three major types of interest groups. Animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and environmental interest groups such as GREENPEACE usually organize as PUBLIC-INTEREST GROUPS. These groups claim to work not for self-interest but for the best interest of the public.



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*The National Organization for Women (NOW) pressures Congress and other legislative bodies to adopt laws and measures that they feel most benefit American women. They also work hard to get more women into elected office.*

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Underpaid professional workers may organize as groups. Lawyers belong to the AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, doctors belong to the AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, and teachers belong to the NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION or the AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS. Labor unions such as the AFL-CIO and the TEAMSTERS' UNION to protect workers in factories or businesses.

The most common type of interest group is formed around businesses, corporations, and trade associations. Part of their reputation for power is based on the fact that they represent about half of all interest groups in Washington. People who criticize interest groups for having undue power in government believe that the business groups get special privileges for people who already have more wealth and power than ordinary citizens. For example, the oil and tobacco industries each have interest groups who promote their respective interests on CAPITOL HILL.

# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

## How Interest Groups Work

Interest groups send representatives to state capitals and to Washington, D.C. to put pressure on members of Congress and other POLICYMAKERS. They engage in LOBBYING, or the organized process of influencing legislation or policy. Lobbying can take many forms. Interest groups can testify in CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS. For example, several years ago, when Congress was considering discrimination in private clubs, representatives of the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts appeared in hearings to try to persuade Congress to allow each one to remain a single-sex organization. Lobbyists also contact government officials directly or informally, present research results and technical information, talk with people from the press and the media, and sometimes even help to draft legislation.



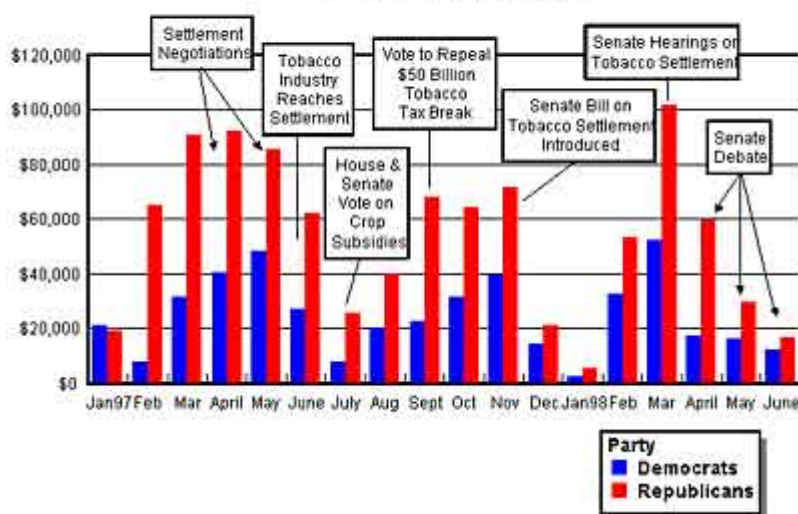
The AFL-CIO is a massive labor union organization, with over 13 million members in 68 individual unions across America.

Interest groups also actively involve themselves in political campaigns. This electioneering is intended to help elect candidates who favor their positions or to defeat those who oppose them. It is generally conducted by POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES (PACs), who serve as special political arms for the interest groups.

Why should the politicians listen?

Interest groups also actively involve

**Tobacco PAC Contributions  
Month by Month  
1997-98 Election Cycle**



This chart outlines the donations of political action committees (PACs) that represent the tobacco industry from January 1997 to June 1998. Notice how the levels of giving fluctuate given the corresponding congressional action.



The number of PACs has grown rapidly since the early 1970s, when CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM laws were passed that restricted individual contributions to campaigns. PACs have changed the face of American elections. They have contributors who write checks to them specifically for the purpose of CAMPAIGN DONATIONS. For example, if a person wants to support candidates who oppose gun control, he or she can contribute to the PAC that represents the NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION. The PAC, then, will make direct contributions to individual campaigns of selected candidates.

Do interest groups corrupt government by "buying" influence? Critics believe that they do because more money comes from businesses and corporations than from any other source. This, they contend, gives them a connection to government that ordinary people do not have. From another point of view, everyone is free to form and join interest groups. So many exist that there is literally a group for everyone. These multiple contacts make the American democracy stronger, because they give the opportunity for all Americans to have better access to their government.



# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

## The Media (4.8)



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*Ronald Reagan's ability to use the media to reach the people helped him land the nickname "The Great Communicator." Here, Reagan steps to the podium to deliver a speech at the 1984 Republican National Convention.*

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*"I view this as a mini-series that has to be told over four nights."  
Andy Card Co-chair of the 2000 Republican Convention*

Does the media primarily report politics, or does it shape political events? The quote above certainly reflects the power of the media to determine the course of major political events. The purpose of a political party convention is to formally nominate a presidential candidate, but of course the party wants to win votes in the general election. When politicians play to the media, does the media then control politics? Many people today criticize television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet for unfairly using their power as a major link between citizens and their government. Do the media fairly explore issues, or do they impose their own positions?

The influence of the media is increased by the fact that campaigns today have become more focused on the individual than on the party. To win primaries, individual candidates seek media attention to gain attention from voters. As a result, do voters hold political power, or has the media simply replaced political parties as the primary force behind candidate selection?

## The Political Influence of the Media

The media can shape government and politics in many ways. Here are a few:



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*The Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network — better known as C-SPAN — has been bringing live, commercial-free coverage of House of Representatives and the Senate sessions into homes since 1979.*

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- **1. By influencing political opinions of voters.** Not surprisingly, the voting behavior of people who are actively interested in politics is probably not changed by the media. Committed Democrats and Republicans selectively learn what they want to from media sources. However, the media can SWAY people who are uncommitted or have no strong opinion in the first place.

## How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

Since these voters often decide elections results, the power of media in elections can be substantial.

- **2. By determining the behavior of candidates and officials.** Many good politicians have learned that they can succeed — in getting elected and in getting things done — if they know how to use the media. President Franklin Roosevelt was famous for his "FIRESIDE CHATS," in which he soothed the pain of economic depression and war by talking to citizens over the radio. President Ronald Reagan's skills as a film and television actor enabled him to communicate very effectively with American voters. Government officials and candidates for office carefully stage media events and PHOTO OPPORTUNITIES. Critics believe that too much attention is focused on how politicians look and come across on camera, rather than on how good a job they are doing in public service.
- **3. By setting the public agenda.** Most Americans learn about SOCIAL ISSUES from print or electronic media. The fact that the media focuses on some issues and ignores others can help set what gets done in government. Media sources have often been accused of emphasizing scandal and high-interest issues at the expense of duller but more important political problems. The government's priorities can be rearranged as a result.



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*Who are these people? Gary Hart had a good chance of becoming President in 1988, but when his affair with Donna Rice was revealed by the press, he was forced to abandon his campaign.*

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The media clearly has a great deal of power in American politics today. Is that a good or a bad thing for government? From one point of view, the media abuse their power, especially since they are driven by profit motive to give people what they want, not necessarily what they need. On the other hand, perhaps the media serves as an important player in a modern "checks and balances" system. Reporters function as "WATCHDOGS" to be sure that Presidents, Representatives, and Justices do not abuse their powers. The media in turn is checked by government regulations, by skilled politicians, and by the people's own good judgment.



# How Do Citizens Connect With Their Government?

## The Internet in Politics (4.8)

Not since television has an innovation had the potential to impact politics greater than the INTERNET. With more and more Americans getting wired, the ability to reach millions of voters will be a lure which no politician can resist.

In the year 2000, the Internet has not eclipsed the influence of newspapers, radio, or television. However, cyberspace has an advantage over the older news sources. The Internet is an interactive medium, allowing citizens to send information as well as receive it — in real time.



Danuta Otfinowski

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*Former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, actively supported the Internet since the early 80s. He spearheaded congressional bills that placed the Internet in schools, homes, and businesses across the country.*

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In 1996, all major presidential candidates developed WEBSITES to support their campaigns. NEWSGROUPS have been created to cover the entire political spectrum. Interest groups have reached new audiences on the World Wide Web, creating the potential for an even greater influence in Washington. FRINGE ORGANIZATIONS on the far left and the far right have used the relatively unregulated medium — free from profit motive or government control — to broaden the support networks.

Voting via the Internet has been tested and used in elections across the country during the November 2000 election. Proponents say that such a method will increase voter participation by making it easier, faster, and more accessible to vote. Opponents of Internet voting say that it is too easy to tamper with and DISENFRANCHISES lower-income voters who do not have computer access.

Given its interactive capabilities, why not let citizens vote directly online? Two states already experimented with this in the presidential primaries in the 2000 contest. A voter could register online, and later cast his or her vote into CYBERSPACE.

The original idea of direct democracy was to let all citizens vote on all issues. With a nation as large as the United States, it became unfeasible to assemble the citizenry for such direct involvement to take place. The Internet could turn that impossibility into a reality. Rather than letting the Senate and House of Representatives to vote on an issue, why not create a national referendum and permit Americans to voice their opinions in an online vote? Supporters and opponents of a bill could post information pertinent to the issue on a web page. Debate could take place informally in chat rooms. Optimists point to the potential of the Internet to create a more democratic America.

Use of the Internet in this fashion has critics as well. Fears of a malicious hacker breaking into a voting site and shutting it down or tampering with the results have led most states to proceed cautiously. A technological gap still exists between connected Americans and those without the financial means to own a computer or pay for Internet service.



Some intellectuals question the expertise of the average American to cast important votes on policy matters. Until these questions get resolved, the use of the Internet in the political arena remains mostly potential. But at the dawn of the 21st century, even the naysayers see the revolutionary changes on the horizon introduced by this exciting new medium.

Regardless, the Internet is already a powerful tool for delving into political issues and delving into the history of the United States. After all, it is the medium you are currently using.

## Measuring Public Opinion (4.8)




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*George Gallup could be considered the "father of American polling." In 1935 he founded the American Institute for Public Opinion. His Gallup Organization continues to track America's opinions today.*

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It all started in 1932 when his mother-in-law ran for public office in Iowa. She was running against a popular INCUMBENT, and everyone except him thought her candidacy was a lost cause. He polled her constituency, told her she could win, and gave her some advice. Hers was only the first of many elections he was to predict correctly.

His name was GEORGE GALLUP — the founder of modern POLLING.

Since then, POLLING ORGANIZATIONS have proliferated, so that they now play a vital role in American politics. They are able to measure public opinion so accurately because they have carefully developed some very precise methods.




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*For all the attention paid to them, public opinion polls often miss the mark. The most famous example was the 1948 presidential election, when pollsters predicted a landslide victory for Thomas E. Dewey. Instead, Harry Truman defeated Dewey by more than two million popular and 114 electoral votes.*

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POLLS generally start when someone wants a political question answered. For example, a candidate may wonder, "How many people in my district know who I am and what I do?" Polls can give some answers, which can help him or her plan a campaign for office. Or a newspaper may want to know, "How do people in this country feel about big tobacco companies?" The publisher can commission a poll, and a reporter can base a story on the research findings. The POLLSTERS then follow several important steps in gathering accurate STATISTICS:

- **Questions must be carefully and OBJECTIVELY WORDED.**

For example, consider a question such as, "How much do you resent the deceptiveness of big tobacco companies?" You could hardly expect an accurate answer. Sometimes the slightest shift in the wording of a question can bring very different results.

- **The SAMPLE must be randomly selected.**

First, pollsters determine the universe, or the entire group whose attitudes they wish to measure. Since it is generally impossible to question everyone, they must use RANDOM SAMPLING, a method of selection that gives each potential member of the universe the same chance of being selected. For example, if the universe is 30% urban, 40% Mexican American, and 50% male, so should the sample be.

- **Respondents must be contacted in a cost-efficient way.**

However, accuracy cannot be sacrificed to efficiency. For example, a STRAW POLL that asks television viewers to call in their opinions is generally not very accurate. After all, the people that call in usually feel very strongly about the issue. And some of them call in more than once. TELEPHONE POLLS are probably used most commonly today, partly because of the capability of random-digit dialing.

Should politicians monitor the polls? Candidates have been criticized for "WAFLING" — shifting their positions based on the results of PUBLIC OPINION POLLS. But if a politician is supposed to represent the true will of the people, shouldn't public opinion be highly regarded. Americans have different opinions about whether a leader is expected to use his or her own judgment or reflect the viewpoints of his or her constituency.

Poll results must be carefully and accurately compiled and reported. This is not always an easy task, especially for tracking polls that are measuring changing public opinion. A good example is an ELECTION POLL. Statistics that are a week old are not usually very reliable when trying to predict a close presidential race.

Polls can never be completely accurate because a sample cannot replicate the universe exactly. Pollsters allow for this slight chance of inaccuracy with a MARGIN OF ERROR. Standard samples of about 1,000 to 1,500 individuals can usually represent a universe of millions of people with only a small amount of error. A typical margin of error — a measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll — is about 3%. In a poll that says that 52% of the respondents favor Janet Smith for Mayor, somewhere between 49% (-3) and 55% (+3) of the voters do support her. You can see how predicting a close election can be very difficult.

Given the challenges of accurate polling of public opinion, it is amazing that polls that follow the right steps almost always make the right predictions. They've come a long way since George Gallup helped his mother-in-law win her election in 1932.

## Participating in Government (4.9)



*Citizens gather in massive groups to show that they support a particular idea or agenda, in hopes that they will influence the political process. Marches, letter-writing campaigns, and political rallies (like this one for Al Gore) are all methods of participating in government.*

People may participate in politics in many ways. They can write their Representative or Senator or work in for a candidate or political party. They can make presentations to their local school board or city council or call the police to complain about the

neighbor's dog. Partly because of our federalist system, people have many opportunities to participate in our democracy on federal, state, and local levels. Some forms of participation are more common than others and some citizens participate more than others, but almost everyone has a voice in government.

## Who Participates and Why?

Experts have found several social and economic characteristics to be strongly associated with high levels of POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

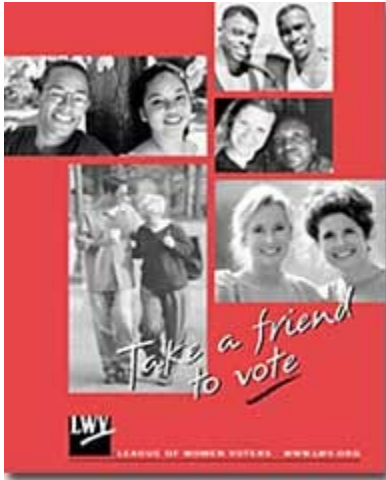
- **Education.**

The single most important characteristic of a politically active citizen is a high level of education. Generally, the more education an individual has, the more likely he or she is to VOTE. Why? Perhaps because the well-educated understand complex issues better, or maybe they have learned the importance of CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY. Or it could just be that their occupations are more flexible in allowing them to take time to go to the polls. Others argue that since educated people tend to be wealthier, they have more at stake in the political process.



*One-way citizens can participate in government is by protesting ideas, policies, or agencies. Here, some high school students protest inhumane labor practices around the world by taking off their shirts to reveal slogans, rather than wearing clothes made by sweatshop labor.*





- **Age.**

Despite the big push in the early 1970s to allow 18-year olds to vote, 18-24-year olds have consistently held the lowest rate of voting. In fact, in recent years their older siblings (age 25-34 don't do a whole lot better. The highest percentages of eligible voters who actually vote are in those groups 45 and above.

- **Racial and Ethnic Groups.**

If only race and ethnicity are considered, whites have higher VOTING RATES than do blacks and Latinos. However, that tendency is somewhat deceptive. Some studies that control for income and education levels have found that the voting rates are about the same for whites, blacks, and Latinos.

- **Gender.**

For many years women were underrepresented at the voting booths, but in recent elections, they have turned out in at least equal numbers to men. In fact, in 1992 and 1996, turnout among women exceeded that of men.

## Declining Voter Turnout

Since the beginning of the 20th century, American VOTER TURNOUT has been on the decline. Fewer than 50% of eligible voters went to the polls during the 1996 presidential election. Smaller percentages are routinely reported for congressional elections, and even fewer Americans bother to vote for their local representatives. The United States ranks near the bottom of modern democratic nations who measure voter turnout.

There are many factors that could contribute to low voter turnout. Many analysts cite growing alienation among voters. The scandals of the past several decades have engendered a cynicism that has led to a decrease in political interest, particularly among the nation's young voting population. There tends to be a correlation between SELF-EFFICACY — or the belief that an individual can make a difference — and voting. Some observers believe that the decline in voter turnout indicates that Americans feel less certain that they can have an impact than Americans of the 19th century.

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*The League of Women Voters encourages people to "take a friend to vote" when they go to the polls as a way of increasing voter turnout and participation in government.*

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Other analysts feel differently. They argue that American nonvoting may be a passive vote of confidence. Since many Americans are pleased with economic progress, they may feel reluctant to make a change, so they stay at home on Election Day. Also, American participation in political activities other than voting exceeds that of other modern democracies. More Americans report the willingness to participate in community projects, attend school board meetings, or contact their representatives directly than European citizens. Participation takes many forms. The American democracy enables its people to join a political party, work on a campaign, or contribute money toward a political cause. More locally, citizens form action groups, draw up petitions, and send mail to their representatives. Although American voter turnout has been declining, these other avenues of participation remain strong.