

# About Political Parties and Political Influences

## HISTORICAL ROLES OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND MODERN POLITICAL PARTIES

The United States has had many political parties throughout its history, including major parties and minor parties. While these parties emerged at different times and for different purposes, political parties in general have certain characteristics in common.

Political parties have a consistent underlying ideology or belief that guides their policies, and they recruit and support candidates who align with this ideology. It is important to note that a party's ideology may shift or evolve over time to reflect public opinion and the needs and interests of voters. Political parties also develop platforms that communicate their ideology and policy goals. And all political parties have similar compositions, made up of party leaders, active members, and general supporters.

Most importantly, political parties are organized with the goal of gaining and maintaining political power at all levels of government to advance their specific interests and policies. This process begins with identifying and recruiting candidates and running their campaigns for elected office. The party then plays a key role in shaping the agendas and policies of elected officials once they are in office. Members of major and minor parties see themselves as working in some way for the American people and the good of the country, and the platforms, agendas, and policies they adopt reflect this belief. However, it is important to note that parties approach this belief from different perspectives.

### Long-Term Effects of Entrenched Political Parties

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The United States has a two-party system, which has been dominated by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party since 1852. At different points in the country's history, one party or the other has become entrenched, controlling both the executive branch and Congress as a "unified government." When this happens, a major party can significantly impact domestic and foreign policy.

For example, the Republican Party was the controlling party in the federal government from 1860 through 1884, giving Republicans control over Reconstruction. As a result, the party was able to pass unprecedented legislation, including three constitutional amendments ratified by the states, that expanded civil rights for African Americans. At the same time, dominance by the Republican Party contributed to resentment by disenfranchised Democrats in the South. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Democratic Party was the controlling party in the federal government. This allowed Democrats to enact New Deal policies that ameliorated the Great Depression, reshaped and expanded the power of the executive branch, and increased the role of the federal government in daily life, including creating new social safety nets for Americans. The Democratic Party, led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and later Harry S. Truman, also influenced U.S. policy during World War II and the beginning of the Cold War.

Entrenched political parties can also have negative consequences for the country. Enduring political control by one party can weaken political opposition; the controlling party can also change the rules on how political decisions are made. Furthermore, entrenched parties can prevent innovation or other necessary change from happening. Who holds power in the executive branch and in Congress also influences appointments to the judicial branch, which can have a lasting impact well beyond when a political party is out of power. As a result, the ideologies of Supreme Court justices and other members of the federal judiciary may not reflect the wider beliefs or interests of the American people.

## Positions of the Major Parties

Today, the Democratic Party is most closely associated with a larger, more active federal government that regulates the economy and promotes equality and the general well-being of citizens through various government programs. By contrast, the Republican Party is more closely associated with states' rights and a smaller national government that plays a limited role in regulating the economy.

## SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS, ASSOCIATIONS, AND PACs

Special interest groups, associations, political action committees (PACs), and super PACs are an important part of the election process. In addition to lobbying elected leaders to influence public policy, they also raise and contribute considerable funds to campaigns. In the 2015–16 election cycle, 13 percent of the \$1.7 billion donated to Democratic candidates and 10 percent of the \$621.4 million donated to Republican candidates came from super PACs and other groups.

This table shows the top twenty donors—including special interest groups, unions and associations, and PACs and super PACs—during the 2015–16 election cycle.

Donor	Total	% to Democratic Candidates	% to Republican Candidates
NextGen Climate Action	\$34,128,680	100%	
Priorities USA Action	\$31,846,874	100%	
Service Employees International Union	\$26,981,301	100%	
National Education Association	\$25,812,966	100%	
Laborers Union	\$25,512,323	98%	2%
Senate Leadership Fund	\$22,476,800		100%
One Nation	\$21,700,000		100%
Carpenters & Joiners Union	\$21,417,863	97.7%	2.3%
Republican Governors Association	\$20,725,000		100%
For Our Future	\$19,193,621	99.8%	0.2%
AFL-CIO	\$18,492,644	100%	
Starr Companies	\$15,290,000		100%
American Federation of Teachers	\$12,240,886	100%	
Environment America	\$11,975,000	100%	
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees	\$11,377,357	100%	
National Association of Realtors	\$10,905,307	100%	
Operating Engineers Union	\$8,415,902	92.8%	7.2%
National Nurses United	\$8,084,362	100%	
Plumbers/Pipefitters Union	\$6,837,285	97.1%	2.9%
United Steel Workers	\$6,495,264	100%	

Not shown in the table are leadership PACs, which are political action committees founded by elected federal officials with the goals of raising funds and gaining political allies. Leadership PACs typically donate funds to candidates of the same party in close races—for example, an incumbent struggling to maintain a seat in Congress or a challenger attempting to flip a seat from one party’s control to another. Leadership PACs may accept funds from individual donors and from other PACs.

Individuals may be affiliated with PACs in several ways. One way is through membership in a union or association that has a PAC to lobby and fundraise for candidates. Another way is by making contributions directly to PACs that support candidates or causes that a person aligns with. PACs may solicit donations in the same way campaigns do, including by advertising, hosting fundraising events, sending mailers and emails, and telephone banking.

## FEDERAL CAMPAIGN FINANCE AND SPENDING

Over time, the federal government has worked to regulate campaign finance and spending in federal elections. The goals of campaign finance regulation are to reduce political corruption, increase campaign and candidate transparency, and reduce the influence of donors on American politics.

### The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002

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The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA) was first introduced in 1997 by Republican senator John McCain and Democratic senator Russ Feingold. The law had two main goals: to close loopholes in the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (FECA) and to curb the power of donors in elections. The BCRA was in response to the proliferation of “soft money”—unlimited contributions made by PACs and corporations to political parties, as opposed to contributions made to political candidates that were subject to FECA limits—in the 1996 election cycle. The BCRA worked to achieve its goals in several ways, including by

- limiting how much money PACs could receive from corporations,
- prohibiting federal candidates from accepting and spending “soft money” on federal election campaigns,
- limiting the airing of issue-advocacy advertisements related to specific candidates to thirty days before a primary and sixty days before a general election,
- preventing candidates and PACs from coordinating, and
- requiring candidates to endorse ads created by their campaign.

While hearings in the Senate were held on the proposed BCRA, it did not receive a committee referral. The bill was reintroduced in the Senate in 2000 and passed by a vote of 59 to 41 in early 2001. It was later passed by the House of Representatives and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002.

Campaign contribution limits have remained largely the same since the 2015–16 federal election cycle, with a few exceptions. For the 2023–24 federal election cycle, the following changes were implemented:

- The limit on individual and PAC (non-multicandidate) contributions to candidate committees increased to \$3,300 per election.
- The limit on individual and PAC (non-multicandidate) contributions to national party committees increased to \$41,300 per year.
- The limit on individual and PAC (non-multicandidate) contributions to additional national party committee accounts increased to \$123,900 per account per year.

Federal law requires campaigns for federal elections to show which donations are meant for the primary election and which are meant for the general election. A candidate who wins their primary and participates in the general election may spend remaining primary funds on their general election campaign.

In some instances, campaigns may receive excessive contributions. This occurs when donors make contributions that exceed federal contribution limits. It can also occur when a campaign's funds following an election exceed its total debt. When this happens, campaigns are required to refund the money to their respective donors, or they may ask that the funds be redesignated within sixty days. For example, a campaign can ask a donor to redesignate excessive funds given to a primary election for use in the general election.

Federal regulations also stipulate how campaigns must handle funds when a candidate loses their primary or exits the race before the general election. When this happens, money accepted for a general election campaign during the primary must be refunded to donors within sixty days. Campaigns can also ask donors to redesignate or reattribute the funds—in other words, give the money to another candidate's campaign.

## The Presidential Election Campaign Fund

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The Presidential Election Campaign Fund (PECF) was established in 1966 to decrease the need for, and influence of, private funding in presidential elections by making public funds—comprising voluntary contributions by taxpayers—available to candidates. Candidates who accept public funds may use the money for qualified campaign expenses. These include expenses directly related to the campaign that are incurred by a candidate, by a candidate's committee, or on behalf of a candidate. The expenses may not violate any federal or state laws. Examples of qualified expenses include salaries for campaign staff, advertising, transportation costs, events, and renting space for campaign activities.

To reduce the influence of private campaign funding, the PECF requires participants to agree to campaign spending caps during the primary and general elections. Candidates may accept private contributions during the primary—and if so, must fundraise in at least twenty states—but not during the general election. Candidates who receive PECF funds are subject to the same contribution limits as other candidates as specified by the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA). The 2008 presidential election marked a turning point in the PECF program. Republican candidate John McCain declined public funding during the primary but accepted it during the general election; meanwhile, Democratic candidate Barack Obama declined public funding during both the primary and the general election. No major party candidate has accepted public funds during a presidential election since.

The main reason for this shift away from public funding is that the PECF's spending caps are very low relative to what candidates can raise from private donors. As a result, candidates who accept public funds are at a significant disadvantage compared to privately funded candidates, especially during the primaries. This has led Congress to debate whether to end the PECF or update the program. Some proposed changes to the PECF include eliminating campaign spending limits, increasing funding to primary candidates, increasing how much private funding candidates may accept while also receiving public funds, and increasing the matching funds to candidates in the general election. Increased public funding to candidates could be paid for by increasing the voluntary contribution from taxpayers and changing the qualifying fundraising amounts candidates must hit to receive matching public funds.

Public opinion of the PECF tends to be mixed. Historically, many people polled like the idea of reducing the role of private money in federal elections. However, most also dislike the idea of taxpayers funding political campaigns. Political scientists point to a variety of reasons for this, ranging from a reluctance to fund a candidate who may be much less likely to win to a desire to keep government-collected money out of citizens' elections.

## Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission

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Significant portions of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 were invalidated in 2010 with the Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. Citizens United, a nonprofit group, funded, promoted, and aired *Hillary: The Movie* in 2008, a documentary that criticized Democratic presidential candidate Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Citizens United planned to make the movie available thirty days before the 2008 Democratic primaries through cable television providers. The Federal Election Commission (FEC), however, prevented the group from promoting the film because it violated regulations on “electioneering communications” established by the BCRA.

Citizens United filed an injunction in federal court to continue promoting and airing the movie, but the injunction was denied. The group then appealed the case to the Supreme Court. In a 5–4 decision, the justices ruled that portions of the BCRA—the limits on how much corporations could spend on political broadcasting—violated the First Amendment right to protected political speech. The result was that corporations, unions, and special interest groups could spend unlimited amounts of money on campaigns (without directly linking themselves to a candidate) through independent expenditure-only committees, otherwise known as super PACs. The effects of the ruling were immediate; the number of registered super PACs grew from 83 in 2010 to around 1,300 in 2014. Meanwhile, the total funds they spent—whose sources they did not need to disclose—ballooned from around \$63 million to \$345 million, reducing the incentive of presidential candidates to accept public funding through the PEFC.

### PUBLIC OPINION

Polling is the gathering and recording of attitudes and opinions from the general public about various issues. Polls come in many shapes and sizes and are conducted for a variety of purposes. Common polling types include

- public opinion polls, which measure how the general public feels about a variety of topics and issues, and mass surveys, a type of public opinion poll that measures the views of a larger portion of the population;
- benchmark polls, which are conducted at the start of a campaign to determine voters’ opinions and knowledge of candidates and then compared to subsequent polls about the same candidates throughout the election cycle;
- tracking polls, which ask the same group of people the same set of questions to determine if their opinions stay the same or change over time; and
- exit polls, which survey voters as they leave their polling place on Election Day, producing data that is used to make predictions about election outcomes before precincts begin reporting actual election results.

Polls are made up of three components: questions, a sample, and a method of interview. Polling questions may be open-ended or closed-ended. An open-ended question allows the participant to answer freely—for example, “How do you feel about school lunches?” Closed-ended questions include a fixed set of responses for participants to choose from. For example, a poll question might ask, “How do you feel about the variety of school lunches in the cafeteria?” and have participants choose from the following options: “satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” “neutral,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” and “dissatisfied.” Good poll questions are direct, answerable, and written as clearly and simply as possible. They should not be intentionally misleading.

A sample consists of the people who participate in the poll or survey. Random samples are used to represent the diverse views of the larger population. Depending on the poll, random samples may be generated by randomly selecting phone numbers (for calling or texting) or home addresses from across the country. Pollsters use weighting to help even out discrepancies in polling samples. For example, people with no college degree are less likely to participate in polls than people with a college degree. To remedy this, pollsters give the responses of these participants greater weight in the survey results to reflect the overall percentage of this group in the general population.

Pollsters conduct interviews using a variety of methods. The first polls were conducted by interviewers who went door-to-door. This practice endured from the 1930s through the 1980s. Paper-and-pencil polls are sent directly to participants' homes and are still used today. Telephone polling began during the 1980s and is still used today, though it is used less and less. Online and text surveys are increasingly popular methods of polling because they are faster for people to complete and less expensive than other methods.

It's important to consider accuracy when analyzing the results of a poll. Polls are not an exact science, and they cannot include everyone in the population. This means pollsters must survey a large enough sample to include a diverse snapshot of the larger population; the larger and more diverse a sample, the more accurate the polling results. For example, a poll of twenty people is going to be less accurate than a poll of two thousand. The margin of error is another factor when looking at the accuracy of a poll. Margin of error, also called sampling error, is a measurement of how closely survey responses reflect the views of the larger population. A smaller margin of error means that the results of the survey are more likely to be accurate.

Pollsters come in all shapes and sizes. Some pollsters are private companies, like Gallup Inc. and the Pew Research Center. Major news outlets, such as ABC News, CNN, and *The New York Times*, and university research centers, such as Siena College and Monmouth University Polling Institute, also conduct their own polling. In some instances, pollsters work together; for example *The New York Times*/Siena College and ABC News/*The Washington Post* have highly reputable polls.

## THE MEDIA'S EFFECTS ON POLITICS

As mentioned in the previous section, the media and polling are often connected. Media outlets may conduct their own polls, then share those results and the results from other pollsters with consumers. Sharing poll results is a way for the media to keep the electorate informed and, depending on the poll, to provide the public's opinion on certain issues to the government and elected leaders. But what happens when the results of the polls are less accurate than expected?

In recent presidential election cycles, pollsters have underestimated the weight that voters with no college degree carried in opinion polls leading up to the election. They have also failed to accurately predict how undecided voters would cast their ballots on Election Day. As a result, media coverage has consistently predicted the outcome of elections as foregone conclusions when they were actually much more contentious, catching pollsters, journalists, political pundits, and voters by surprise. The lack of accuracy in polling and subsequent coverage has contributed to decreased trust in the media.

# About Elections, Voting, and Representation

## U.S. ELECTIONS

Voting is the most important part of the democratic process; as such, it is helpful for students to know what to expect on Election Day, including voting in person, voting early, and voting absentee.

### Voter Registration

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Citizens aged eighteen and older must be registered to vote to participate in an election. In Louisiana, voter registration completed in person, by mail, or at the Office of Motor Vehicles must be submitted four weeks before the day of the election. Voter registration completed online must be submitted three weeks before the day of the election. Sixteen-year-olds may register to vote in person at the Louisiana Office of Motor Vehicles or the Registrar of Voters Office; seventeen-year-olds may also register to vote. However, these teens must still wait until they are eighteen to cast a ballot.

### Voting on Election Day

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Each voter is assigned a polling place based on where they live. Voters receive the location of their polling place by mail on their voter information card. They can also find their assigned polling place by visiting the online Louisiana Voter Portal or by calling the Registrar of Voters Office in their home parish. At the polling place, voters are asked to provide identification. Acceptable forms of identification include:

- a driver's license
- a Louisiana special ID
- an LA Wallet digital driver's license
- a U.S. military photo ID
- another form of picture ID with the voter's name and signature

Voters without an identification card may also vote if they sign a voter affidavit, a written statement attesting that they are who they say they are.

Instead of identifying their preferred candidates using a paper ballot, eligible citizens cast their votes using a digital voting machine. The way ballots are organized varies from precinct to precinct; voters may preview a sample ballot prior to the election by visiting Louisiana's GeauxVote site or the website of the Louisiana secretary of state.

The voting machines are designed for privacy. They are also designed for accessibility to accommodate voters with special needs, including those who use wheelchairs. Individuals who are unable to read, are unfamiliar with English, or have a disability may receive assistance while they vote, or they may use an audio ballot.

On Saturday elections, polling places are open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. On Tuesday elections, polling places are open from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Lines may form at certain polling places; if a voter is in line before the polling place is scheduled to close, they still have the right to cast their ballot and must be permitted to do so.

If a person is registered to vote but their name is not listed on the voter rolls at their polling place, they may certify their eligibility in writing and then complete a provisional ballot. Provisional ballots are limited to federal races.

## Absentee Voting

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Some voters may vote using an absentee ballot if they will not be in their home parish on Election Day. Qualified reasons to receive an absentee ballot include:

- serving in the military
- living overseas
- being a senior citizen aged sixty-five or older
- being temporarily absent from Louisiana or your home parish
- working offshore (e.g., on an oil rig in the Gulf)
- attending an institution of higher education outside of Louisiana or your home parish
- being a member of the clergy or a spouse/dependent of a member of the clergy working outside of Louisiana or your home parish
- moving more than one hundred miles (161 km) outside of your home parish within thirty days of the election
- being involuntarily confined at a treatment facility outside of your home parish
- being hospitalized
- being incarcerated for a crime other than a felony
- participating in the state's Address Confidentiality Program
- serving on a jury
- having a physical disability
- being homebound

Eligible citizens can apply for an absentee ballot online or by submitting a mail-in application. A paper ballot is sent to the voter's home address for completion. In addition to completing the ballot, the voter must also provide information on the exterior envelope, including their signature, a witness signature, and the date of completion, for their ballot to be counted on Election Day. The registrar of voters reviews each ballot after it is received; if information on the exterior envelope is missing, the registrar of voters will notify the voter by mail, telephone, or email so the voter may populate this information to have their ballot counted. Absentee ballots may be returned by mail or fax, or they may be hand-delivered to the parish registrar of voters. Military, overseas, and hospitalized voters must return their absentee ballots by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day; all other absentee voters must return their absentee ballots by 4:00 p.m. the day before Election Day.

## Early Voting

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All Louisianans may cast their ballots early; they do not need to apply or have a specific reason to do so. Early voting is done in person at designated locations in each parish. Early voting locations are different from assigned polling places used on Election Day; voters should contact their parish Registrar of Voters Office to determine where early voting is being held. In presidential elections, early voting may take place eighteen to seven days before Election Day; for all other elections, early voting may take place fourteen to seven days before the day of the election. Early voting locations are open from 8:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday, except on holidays.

As when voting at a polling place on Election Day, early voters are asked to identify themselves by providing an acceptable photo ID or signing a voter affidavit, and they cast their ballots using digital voting machines. The machines collect and store the election results, which are then printed and delivered to the Parish Board of Election Supervisors on Election Day.

## FEDERAL ELECTION PROCESS: THE PRESIDENT

The way that parties choose presidential candidates has changed significantly since the country's founding, from congressional caucuses to state party-dominated conventions to the primary and caucus system we have today. National party conventions tend to have predictable outcomes, but this does not mean that party leaders do not try for the occasional upset. The first parts of this section discuss two notable examples.

### The Republican Party Convention of 1860

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The Republican Party Convention of 1860 is often overshadowed by the drama of the Democrats' contested convention and subsequent division into Northern and Southern Democrats. But the Republican convention was equally dramatic, including a dark horse candidate and corruption.

Heading into the convention, William Seward, a U.S. senator from New York, was the favorite for the Republican nomination, while Abraham Lincoln was the likely vice presidential candidate. When Seward failed to garner the majority of votes on the first ballot, Lincoln's election team went to work behind the scenes to convince state delegations from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana to throw their support behind Lincoln. They also promised government positions in exchange for support and went so far as to use counterfeit tickets to fill the arena with pro-Lincoln supporters, edging out Seward's supporters. Lincoln emerged as a contender on the second ballot and secured the party's nomination on the third ballot. Lincoln, unaware of his team's questionable tactics, was not in attendance at the convention; he was at home in Springfield, Illinois.

### The Democratic Party Convention of 1972

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In 1972, the Democratic Party set out to reform its national convention. Sixty percent of delegates were chosen by voters, and the party passed new rules that required state delegates to be more diverse. Despite these efforts, the convention was still subject to less-than-legitimate actions to sway the outcome of the event. At the start of the convention, South Dakota senator George McGovern was the favorite for the party's nomination. However, McGovern's popularity with and acceptance of feminists, anti-war protestors, and civil rights activists concerned the Democratic Party leaders. During the convention, they attempted to change how California awarded its delegates from winner-take-all to a proportional system to block McGovern's nomination. Their efforts failed, and McGovern became the Democratic Party candidate for president, ultimately losing to Richard Nixon in the general election.

### Primaries vs. Caucuses

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Today, states use primaries, caucuses, or a combination of both to choose a party's candidate for president. In three states—Alaska, Hawaii, and Missouri—Republicans participate in caucuses and Democrats vote in primaries. In an open primary or caucus, a participating voter can be registered with any party. In a closed primary or caucus, only voters registered with that party can complete that party's ballot or participate in that caucus. In a semi-closed primary or caucus, the political party decides whether independent voters can take part.

While both methods achieve the same purpose—identifying the candidate that state delegates to the national party convention will likely support—their structure and organization are different. Primaries are elections run by states and local governments, whereas caucuses are organized by the political parties and run at the county, district, or precinct level. Some caucuses use ballots for members to make their choice for a candidate, while others ask participants to organize themselves into groups to indicate the candidate they support. Candidates or their surrogates are often present to meet voters and explain their stance on issues. In general, a caucus is more of a dynamic meeting of party members across a region—often at an almost neighborhood level—while a primary is a typically straightforward election with a ballot listing all the party's candidates for office in the state.

## The General Election and the Electoral College

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Months after the primary and caucus season, the general election for the presidency takes place every four years on Election Day, set by the Constitution as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years. Voters cast a ballot on which are written the names of the candidates chosen at the major parties' national nominating conventions as well as any minor-party candidates who met states' eligibility requirements to appear on the ballot. Participation in the general election is not limited by participation in the earlier primary or caucus or by a voter's party affiliation. Most voting for president occurs on Election Day, but most states also allow people to vote early and to cast absentee ballots by mail. In Louisiana, people may vote at predetermined locations in their parish in a span of eighteen to seven days before the presidential election.

While the presidential general election takes place in early November, the popular vote is not what determines the winner of the election. Per the Constitution, the president is chosen by the Electoral College, whose members meet on the Tuesday after the second Wednesday in December in their home states to officially cast their ballots for president and vice president. The candidate who receives more than half of the electoral votes (today 270 or more) wins the election. In forty-eight states, the candidate who won the state popular vote wins all of that state's electoral votes; in Maine and Nebraska, electoral votes are awarded based on the proportion of the popular vote that each candidate wins. Each state records the electors' votes on a certificate, which is then sent to Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The electoral votes are officially counted on January 6—fourteen days before the new president is inaugurated—during a joint session of Congress, presided over by the current vice president.

## The Changing Presidential Election Cycle

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The modern presidential election cycle is incredibly long—nearly two years from when candidates may register with the Federal Election Commission to Election Day. This is compared to the lengths of election campaigns in similar races in democracies around the world, including an average of fifty days in Canada and ninety days in Mexico.

U.S. presidential election cycles were not always this drawn out. Up until the 1950s, candidates announced their campaigns in the same year as the general election. One reason for this is that party elites had a much greater role in selecting presidential candidates. As the major parties shifted to the modern primary and caucus system, control over presidential nominations increasingly was placed in the hands of voters. As a result, candidates have greater incentive to announce their campaigns early to reach as many voters in as many states as possible before and during primary season—the idea that “the early bird gets the worm.” The proliferation of television and other technology, including the Internet and social media, means that voters are now inundated with ads and election content starting in the spring of the year *before* the election and all the way through Election Day.

### FEDERAL ELECTION PROCESS: CONGRESS

Candidates for seats in the U.S. Congress also go through the primary and caucus stage of elections before the winners of those proceed to the general election, which takes place on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November, both alongside presidential elections and in other even-numbered years. However, unlike presidential elections, the popular vote in the general election determines who will fill a House or Senate seat.

Elections take place every two years for every seat in the House of Representatives. Elections for the Senate also take place every two years, but only one-third of the Senate is elected during an election cycle, causing membership in this chamber to remain more stable than in the House.

## Redistricting

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Redistricting is the process of redrawing the lines around districts where elected officials are chosen by voters. Redistricting occurs every ten years and is based on population data collected during the decennial census. Each state is responsible for creating its own redistricting maps. While the rules for redistricting vary from state to state, all states are responsible for adhering to the Constitution and to federal laws that prohibit discrimination.

The redistricting process also varies from state to state. Six states—Alaska, Delaware, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming—have only one congressional district, which means that they do not need to redistrict for federal congressional district purposes. About one-fifth of the states use commissions to draw new district maps; depending on the state, commissions may be exclusive to people who do not hold elected office, or they may allow elected officials to participate. In the majority of states, including Louisiana, state legislatures are responsible for generating and passing redistricting maps. This means that the controlling political party has exceptional influence over the redistricting process, and in many instances, new redistricting maps are passed along party lines.

Referred to as “partisan gerrymandering,” redistricting based on party lines is legal and can have a significant impact on the outcomes of elections. Controlling parties may redistrict in a way that maintains and helps expand their majority over time. To do this, controlling parties create “safe districts,” or districts where their candidate is most likely to win the election.

One way to do this is by “packing,” or consolidating voters from the opposing party into just a few districts. The controlling party assumes it will lose these districts in the election while still carrying the majority of the remaining districts across the state. Another way to create safe districts is by “cracking,” or breaking up voters from the opposing party across multiple districts to dilute their voting power and decrease their overall influence in each district. Packing and cracking give a significant advantage to the controlling party. In states where the support for the two major parties is roughly equal, the controlling party may have a disproportionate number of seats in the state legislature and in Congress that does not accurately reflect the political inclinations of a large part of the electorate.

In addition to consolidating the political power of the controlling party, redistricting can also change the legislative priorities of a district by breaking up groups with shared concerns or needs, referred to as communities of interest. For example, the interests of a suburban community are likely to differ from those of urban and rural communities. Redistricting to break up these distinct types of areas means that the needs of each community are less likely to be met.

Changes in population have impacted redistricting in Louisiana. Based on the 1980 census, Louisiana was awarded eight congressional districts. This was later changed to seven congressional districts following the 1990 census, then six following the 2010 census.

## STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS IN LOUISIANA

Elections for Louisiana’s executive and judicial branches are held every four years in the odd year immediately preceding a federal presidential election. Many of these elections (including those for governor and attorney general) follow the state’s majority-vote, or “Cajun,” primary system, in which all qualified candidates appear on the ballot and the candidate who wins the majority of votes wins the office, with no need for a general election. If no candidate wins a majority of votes, the two candidates who received the most votes then participate in a runoff election. As of 2026, elections for congressional office, the state supreme court, the Louisiana Public Service Commission (LPSC), and the eight elected seats on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) follow a party primary–general election process.

Elected executive leaders and state legislators serve four-year terms. Depending on the election year, a variety of other positions may appear on the ballot, including judges and justices and municipal positions, such as police jury members. Ballot measures like recalls may also appear on the ballot on Election Day. Voters may preview ballots at Louisiana's GeauxVote site by filtering for their parish, ward, and precinct two weeks prior to the election.

## Qualifications and Terms of Office: The Executive Branch

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The governor is the leader of the executive branch of state government. In Louisiana, governors are elected to four-year terms and may serve two consecutive terms for a maximum of eight years in a row. They may run for governor again after at least one term out of office. Elections for governor are held the year before presidential elections. The powers of Louisiana's governor include

- preparing and submitting yearly state operating budgets and five-year capital outlay budgets;
- suggesting legislation for consideration by the legislative branch;
- releasing people from judicial sentences and delaying or reducing those sentences; and
- commanding the state's military forces, including the National Guard, during times of emergency.

The lieutenant governor is the executive branch's second-in-command. The lieutenant governor takes over for the governor when the governor is unable to serve. Unlike in national elections, where presidential and vice presidential candidates run on the same ticket, Louisiana's gubernatorial and lieutenant gubernatorial candidates do not run for office as a team. Sometimes the positions are filled by members of different political parties.

In Louisiana, the lieutenant governor is also the commissioner of the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism. The lieutenant governor has the power to appoint people to key positions within that department. They are also tasked with promoting and marketing Louisiana as a preferred choice for retirement and improving the economic climate statewide, as well as promoting civic participation and community activism.

Other elected officials in the executive branch include

- the secretary of state, who serves as the state's chief election officer, overseeing all preparations for state and national elections and certifying the ballots at the conclusion of an election;
- the attorney general, who serves as the state's chief legal officer and, as the leader of the state's Department of Justice, makes sure the state's rights are protected in disagreements with people, businesses, other states, and the national government;
- the treasurer, who is in charge of public money and, if both the governor and lieutenant governor are unable to serve, is third in the line of succession, after the secretary of state and the attorney general;
- the commissioner of agriculture, who oversees the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and helps administer programs and enforce regulations related to agriculture and forestry in the state; and
- the commissioner of insurance, who oversees the Louisiana Department of Insurance, regulating the insurance marketplace in the state and making sure that insurance companies follow laws enacted to protect insurance consumers.

The BESE and the LPSC are also a part of the state's executive branch. The BESE is made up of eleven members; eight of these members are elected, one from each of the eight BESE districts in Louisiana. The other three members are appointed by the governor. To be an elected member of the BESE, a candidate must be a resident of the district they are running to represent. Board members serve four-year terms and are elected at the same time the governor is elected. Members may serve three consecutive terms in office before waiting two years to serve again.

The LPSC is made up of five members. To run for the LPSC, a candidate must be at least eighteen years old, have lived in Louisiana for at least two years, have lived in the district where they are running for office for at least one year, and be a qualified elector. Members of the LPSC serve six-year terms; like members of the BESE, they may serve three consecutive terms in office before waiting two years to serve again.

## ISSUES AND CHALLENGES TO THE ELECTION PROCESS

The Supreme Court has played an increasingly important role in elections—especially redistricting—since the 1960s, starting with *Baker v. Carr*, a case that originated in Tennessee. Tennessee's total population grew from 2 million people to 3.5 million between 1901 and 1961. Meanwhile, its eligible voting population grew from half a million to more than 2 million. Despite these changes, the state had not reapportioned its districts in sixty years. Charles W. Baker, the former mayor of a town called Milligan, claimed that Tennessee's failure to reapportion districts based on the decennial census violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1946, the Supreme Court had ruled in a similar case (*Colegrove v. Green*) that only the legislative branch could address issues of apportionment and that the judicial branch did not have jurisdiction when it came to redistricting because it was a "political question," or one solved at the voting booth. In *Baker v. Carr* (1962), the justices reversed the earlier decision in a 6–2 ruling, noting that the court did in fact have justiciability in reapportionment cases, especially as they pertain to the equal protection clause under the Fourteenth Amendment.

In 1964, the Supreme Court heard *Reynolds v. Sims*. Residents of Jefferson County, Alabama, contested the state's uneven population distribution between districts in the state. Jefferson County had far more eligible voters than other districts in Alabama, which meant that its residents were underrepresented in the state legislature. The court decided in an 8–1 ruling that Alabama's apportionment scheme violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment by violating citizens' rights to direct representation in government. Further, the ruling reinforced the principle of "one person, one vote" implied by Article I, Section 2, of the Constitution; in other words, the vote in one district should count as much as a vote in another district. In practice, this means that the populations of each voting district should be as close to equal in number as possible so that a vote cast in one district counts as much as a vote cast in another.

The principle of "one person, one vote," along with other constitutional concerns, was central to the case *Vieth v. Jubelirer*, argued in 2003 and decided by the Supreme Court in 2004. Following the 2000 census, the state of Pennsylvania lost two seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Republican Party controlled the state legislature and passed a redistricting plan that significantly disadvantaged the Democratic Party. Members of the Democratic Party challenged the plan in federal court on the grounds that it violated the "one person, one vote" principle as well as the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and the privileges and immunities clause of Article IV, Section 2, of the Constitution. The federal district court ruled the apportionment plan unconstitutional on the grounds that it violated the "one person, one vote" principle; however, it dismissed all the other claims. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court. In a 5–4 decision, the justices decided not to rule on the case on the grounds that political gerrymandering was nonjusticiable (not hearable by the courts).

The case *Shaw v. Reno* was also a landmark case in the arena of race and redistricting. Following the 1990 census, the U.S. attorney general rejected a redistricting map by the state of North Carolina on the grounds that it established only one Black-majority district. The next attempt at a redistricting map resulted in a second Black-majority district, yet its shape—at times no wider than a nearby major interstate—led to a challenge to its constitutionality, as a group of North Carolina residents claimed that this district was only created to allow for the increased likelihood of more elected African American representatives. The case was eventually appealed to the Supreme Court on the basis of violating the equal protection clause. In 1993, the justices ruled 5–4 that states cannot take unnecessary actions to redistrict based on race and equal protection—including ignoring the geography of a district—and remanded the case back to the state's district court to decide as to the actual justification of the second redistricting map.