

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**POSC 105
THE AMERICAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM
(Continued)**

- I. THIS MORNING:
 - A. American election campaigns
 - B. Electoral system features
 - C. Elections and democracy

- II. MODERN CAMPAIGN PRACTICES:
 - A. The strategy of ambiguity
 - B. Self-selected candidates:
 - 1. Decline of party influence in candidate selection
 - 2. Examples: Steve Forbes, Patrick Kennedy, S. B. Woo, Joe Biden, Pat Buchanan, Jimmy Carter...
 - C. Candidate centered campaigns
 - 1. Electing an individual, not party or policy, is the objective
 - D. The impact of advanced technology (“adtech”)
 - 1. Television, polling, computers, direct mail, phone banks
 - 2. Example: Focus groups
 - a. “Boston Harbor” and “Pledge of Allegiance” and Reagan Democrats
 - b. The uses of technology
 - E. The new generation of political consultants
 - 1. James Carville, Lee Atwater, Dick Morris
 - 2. Clinton’s strategy in 1996
 - F. The consequences:
 - 1. Soaring costs of running for office
 - 2. Trivialization of issues
 - 3. Personal agendas
 - 4. Personality over substance
 - 5. Generalization over specifics
 - 6. Negative advertisements
 - 7. The debasing of political discourse
 - 8. Apathy and the loss of accountability
 - 9. Possible loss of capacity

- III. THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM:
 - A. Each of these has a profound affect on political capacity and the chances of democracy.

- B. Plethora of public offices filled by elections and independent constituencies.
 - 1. The party that wins the Congress (or one house) does not necessarily control the government.
 - 2. Decoupling of presidential and congressional elections leads to conflict, stalemate.
 - 3. Ballot confusion
- C. Primary versus general elections.
 - 1. Primaries: contests for a party's nomination
 - a. Kevin Vigilante first had to defeat a primary opponent before running against Patrick Kennedy.
 - 2. See the section on parties.
- D. Single-member plurality, winner-take all districts.
- E. "Election day": second Tuesday in November.

IV. ELECTIONS AND PUBLIC POLICY:

- A. The simplistic view: legislators enact their constituents wishes.
 - 1. Direct representation (see the web site)
- B. A more complicated interpretation: representatives consult their constituents preferences on some questions.
 - 1. The public may have an impact in some policy areas but not others.
 - 2. Many questions of foreign policy, for example, do not attract public attention and legislators have room to maneuver on their own.
 - 3. In other areas an issue is so publicly that representatives cannot ignore the voters.
 - a. Example: medicare and social security are the third rails of American politics
- C. Elections as mandates:
 - 1. Winners frequently interpret their victories at the polls as mandates to enact certain policies.
 - a. Background: 1994 and the "Contract With America"
 - 2. Requirements:
 - a. Presumably to claim a mandate a candidate or party must speak for a majority of citizens, not just those who vote.
 - b. The electorate must be aware of the candidate or party's position.
 - c. The electorate must have preferences.
 - 3. There is little evidence that these conditions were satisfied in 1994 or at other times.
- D. Elections as legitimizing rituals
 - 1. Public preferences as "dependent variables."
 - 2. It can be argued that elections do not control or determine public policy making to the extent that we think. Instead, they may provide mostly psychological reassurance and comfort.

V. NEXT TIME:

- A. Test and perhaps quiz
 - 1. See the web site for sample questions.
 - 2. The notes point to the parts of the readings that will be covered. The other parts of the chapters can and should be read for general knowledge.
- B. Political parties
- C. Reading:
 - 1. Start *Debt and Deficits*

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