

## Electoral Politics in the USA

**Voting:** In representative, liberal democracy, voters vote for who they want to represent them in government, but also increasingly on policies 政策 in a special kind of election called a referendum 全民公决 (usually a “yes” or “no” vote on a single proposal). Suffrage, or the right to vote, expanded slowly since the founding of the USA in 1776 to include every citizen, but the procedures of voting have remained quite stable. Many are surprised by how long and inconvenient the process can be, and the logistical 后勤的 difficulty of casting a legal ballot alone leads many to abstain 弃权. Before voting in the USA, a voter must register 登记 in the county 县 and state where s/he lives. In most states, this must be done well before Election Day, although more and more people are calling for “same-day registration” 当天登记 at the polling booths 投票处. Some states take away voting rights of citizens who have been convicted of a felony 重罪. Though there is little evidence, some claim that voter fraud 选民欺诈行为 is a serious problem, and in recent years voter ID 选民身份证 laws have become more common. In the social sciences, many models and theories of voting expect that a rational individual will only vote if s/he believes her/his single vote to affect the outcome of the election. Thus, for any one person to vote in a national election can be seen as irrational behavior! Despite this, Americans vote in much higher numbers for national elections than for state and local elections, despite the fact their individual votes matter a lot more in smaller elections. At the presidential level (every four years), voters will vote for a ticket of two candidates (for president and vice president) on an anonymous ballot 无记名投票 which may be electronic or printed on paper.

**Parties & Candidates:** The USA has a “two-party” political system, with the Democrats 民主党 (D, symbolized by the donkey 驴子) & Republicans 共和党 (R, symbolized by the elephant 大象) as the “major parties” which usually win elections 选举. Other parties are “third-parties” including Libertarians (L), Greens (G), Constitution Party (C), Reform Party, Socialist Party (S), Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and many others which have appeared and disappeared through history. Some candidates also run as Independents (I), without any party affiliation 党籍.

The major parties hold primary elections 初选 to decide who will be the nominee for the party in the first half of an election year (even-numbered 双号 years have elections). Candidates generally fall into types favored by “the party establishment/elite 精英” or “populist wing 平民” of the party, and candidates with extreme positions and proposals do better in the primary election than the general election. In presidential election years, the nominees 被提名者 for the Democratic and Republican tickets are presented at the party conventions 政党大会 in the summer, after the primaries. Before the conventions, the nominees vet 审查 and select their own vice-presidential running mates 竞选伙伴.

**Campaigns & Campaign Finance:** Candidates of most parties run on a “party platform” 党纲 of policy proposals and positions on “the issues” 问题 of importance to the electorate 全体选民. Every candidate runs a campaign to attract voters, and the usual winning strategy is to capture “the median voter 中间投票人” on the political spectrum 不同政治派别. For the major parties, these campaigns can cost over \$100 million. Estimates for the total cost of the 2016 election are around \$5 billion, with each costing more than the previous one. Most of the money is spent on advertisements for (supporting) or against (called “attack ads” 攻击性广告) candidates, policies, and ideas. In decades past, presidential campaigns didn't really begin until the year of the election, and while there are still some voters who don't pay attention until the weeks or days before the election, serious candidates have to sustain interest (and money) in their campaigns for increasingly long periods—even while in office--under the current environment of “constant campaigning & fundraising.”

Where does the money come from? Donors range from interest groups organized formally to lobby for their causes in all areas of political contestation, such as Political Action Committees (PACs) 政治行动委员会 and Super PACs with an enormous amount of money to contribute, often in the millions of dollars. Smaller contributions of only a few dollars up to the hundreds or thousands are also increasingly common, especially for candidates who want to show they have strong connections to “the grassroots” 草根. In the recent past, bipartisan support for campaign finance reform set strict limits on how much large corporations and Super PACs could donate to political campaigns, but under the Supreme Court decision “Citizens United” in the 2010s, those limits were deemed unconstitutional limits on “freedom of speech.”

**Debates:** Since the age of TV, major candidate nominees (and rarely third-party nominees and Independents) stage a series of three debates and one for their vice-presidential nominees on the ticket. To qualify to be on the stage, candidates must meet a minimum of 15% support in national polls 全国的民意调查. Usually this means only the D & R candidates get to debate, while all others are excluded. The debates have themes and rules which are explained and enforced by the moderator 辩论主持人.

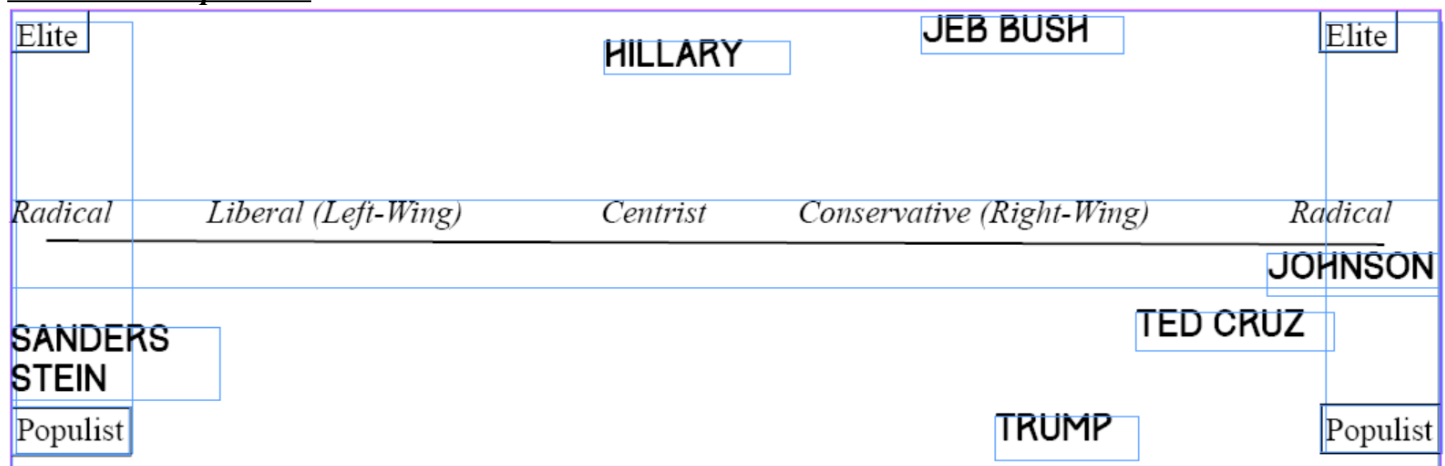
**Election Day:** The U.S. presidential elections and off-year (non-presidential/congressional) elections are held on the first Tues. in Nov. Polling stations open and close at various times throughout the country, and it's important to note that Tues. is always a workday for most Americans. Poll workers are mostly volunteers and tend to be retired, since they don't have to miss any work to do the job. Although almost all citizens are eligible 合意的 to register and cast a ballot, voter turnout 投票率 in the USA is low compared to

most countries, with usually less than half of those eligible showing up on Election Day. This usually means that the “winners” of any given election only had about *one third* of the country *or less* actually vote for them.

***Who Wins & Who Loses?:*** After everyone votes, the votes are counted, and the results are reported by the news media, often in real time 实时. At the presidential level, the winner is the candidate who receives 270 or more delegates in the Electoral College 选举团. Whoever receives the most individual votes nationwide wins the Popular Vote 人民的投票. Usually the winner of the Electoral College and the Popular Vote are the same ticket, but in 2000 the winner of the Popular Vote (Al Gore) lost the Electoral College and the presidency to George W. Bush by the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court 最高法院 in a very messy and controversial election. After winning, the president-elect 总统当选人 gives a victory speech and is inaugurated 就职典礼 in mid-Jan. 20th of the next year. The loser of the presidential election gives a concession speech 认输演说, in which s/he accepts the results and asks those who voted for him or her to support the president-elect and work together for the betterment of the nation. This show of “loyal opposition 安分的在野党,” accepting the popular will 民意, is an essential part of a “consolidated” democracy 巩固的民主.

***Other Vocabulary:*** ·absentee ballot ·barnstorming ·“Blue State” Vs. “Swing State” Vs. “Red State” ·call a state (for Sb.) ·canvassing ·contest (campaign in a state or other voting district) ·dark horse/longshot (candidate) ·down-ballot (candidates & elections) ·Duverger's Law ·exit polls ·the favorite ·First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) VS. proportional representation (PR) ·“gotcha” media/question ·grassroots campaign ·ground game ·hold office ·horse-race media coverage ·(the) incumbent/officeholder ·“lame duck” (president) ·(the) lesser evil ·majority VS. plurality ·“October surprise” ·one- VS. two- VS. multi-party systems ·“paper trail” ·pivot (i.e. answer the question you *want*, *not* the question you're asked) ·projected winner (of a state or other voting district, as predicted by news media) ·recount ·spoiler ·“straw poll” ·stump speech ·term limits ·tiebreaker ·Tweedle-dee & Tweedle-dum ·voting machine ·wedge issues ·zinger

***The Political Spectrum:***



In the most opinionated section of this handout, see above for a graphic approximation of the political spectrum in the U.S. and where presidential candidates' platforms and support bases place them. Note that U.S. liberals generally support things like labor, abortion rights, a dove-like foreign policy, higher education/social spending, and progressive taxation. U.S. conservatives generally support a small government and low taxation/spending, except for high military spending to support a hawkish foreign policy. Conservatives may also have strong positions on “social issues” against abortion, be pro-religion, and worry that welfare spending creates a “moral hazard.” Conservatives generally favor lower income and other taxes, even a “flat tax,” especially on those who are in the highest income brackets.

Candidates draw their support, regardless of their position on the left or right of the spectrum, from high and low levels of society and party membership. Candidates with strong “grassroots” support among common people (often explicitly against elites) are often labeled “populist”. Candidates with strong support from wealthy donors within society and their parties are considered elite. Radical candidates on either side of the spectrum generally run on platforms calling for big, structural changes, while centrist candidates favor moderate reforms 改革 or a continuation of (a well-liked) “status quo 现状.”

All third parties, with Libertarians and Greens being the most popular (though still not well-known), are still considered radical and outside “the mainstream.” Both L & G favor a reduction of the military budget, though perhaps for different reasons. Libertarians favor extreme individual freedom and free, unregulated markets in controversial matters as drug policy and prostitution. Greens, unsurprisingly, put environmental conservation and social justice at the top of their political platform, even at the expense of economic growth, which virtually all other parties place second after national security.