

Glossary

Absentee voting

Absentee voting allows voters who cannot come to polling places a means to cast a ballot. A variety of circumstances, including residency abroad, illness, travel or military service, could prevent voters from coming to the polls on Election Day. Absentee ballots permit registered voters to mail in their votes. The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, a federal law, governs absentee voting in presidential elections. Absentee voting rules for all other elections are set by the states, and vary. In Oregon, all elections are conducted by mail, but voters have the option of voting in person at county polling stations.

Ballot initiative

Ballot initiatives are an example of direct democracy in the United States, in which citizens may propose legislative measures or amendments to state constitutions. Some initiatives propose the repeal of existing state laws. States vary in the number of signatures they require to place an initiative on the ballot. These initiatives (also called "propositions" in some states) are subject to approval, by a simple majority in most, but not all cases. See also **Referendum**.

Blog

Short for weblog, a blog is an unedited online journal. Candidates use blogs to tell users of their Web sites about their activities. Others use blogs to follow the development of campaign issues or events. Political blogs are created by "bloggers," individuals who post commentary and news from their own perspective. Political blogs, like blogs in general, reflect a broad spectrum of opinion.

Blue state

Blue state is a term used to refer to a U.S. state where the majority of voters usually support Democratic candidates. See also **Red state**.

Buckley v. Valeo

The legal challenge *Buckley v. Valeo* resulted in a landmark 1976 U.S. Supreme Court decision on campaign finance law that upheld the Federal Election Campaign Act's financial disclosure requirements, contribution limits and provision for public funding of presidential election campaigns. The court struck down spending limits in the law, except for the limits accepted voluntarily by presidential candidates who receive public funds. Thus, the ruling allowed for unlimited spending by congressional candidates (they do not receive public funds) and by persons or groups who campaign for or against a candidate, but who do not coordinate their activities with any candidate or campaign. The ruling also said that candidates who do not receive public money do not have to limit campaign spending of their own personal funds. See also **McCain-Feingold Law**.

Caucus

A caucus is a meeting at the local level in which registered members of a political party in a city, town or county gather to express support for a candidate. For statewide or national offices, those recommendations are combined to determine the state party nominee. The term also is applied to a group of party members that meets to plan policy. Two well-known examples of such groups are the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, whose members discuss and advance the interests of their respective constituencies.

Challenger

A challenger is a candidate running against a person who currently holds the position (the incumbent). See also **Incumbent**.

Closed primary

Candidates from the two major political parties (Democratic and Republican) compete to be their party's nominee for an office in a primary election. Closed primaries are restricted to voters registered as a member of the party holding the election. Unaffiliated voters receive ballots for other measures and nonpartisan contests that occur on the same date. See also **Primary**.

Coattails

The expression "coattails" is an allusion to the rear panels ("tails") of a man's coat. In American politics, it refers to the ability of a popular officeholder or candidate for office, on the strength of his or her own popularity, to increase the chances for victory of other candidates of the same political party. This candidate is said to carry others to victory on his or her coattails.

Convention

In presidential election years, after the conclusion of state primaries and caucuses, the political parties gather to select a presidential nominee – usually the candidate who secured the support of the most convention delegates, based on victories in primary elections. The presidential nominee usually chooses a running mate to be the candidate for vice president, but the presidential nominee can throw open the vice presidential selection process to the convention delegates without making a recommendation.

Convention bounce

An increase in a presidential candidate's popularity, as indicated by public-opinion polls, in the days immediately following his or her nomination for office at the Republican or Democratic national conventions.

Constituency

The people a government official represents make up his or her constituency. The term is sometimes used to refer only to those individuals who voted to elect the official. The president's constituency is composed of all Americans; a mayor's constituency is the people who reside in the town or city.

Debate

A structured discussion involving two or more opposing sides of an issue is a debate. In American politics in recent years, debates have come to be associated with televised programs at which candidates present their own and their party's views, in response to questions from the media or members of the audience. Debates also may be held via radio, the Internet or at a community meeting place. They can be held among those who seek elective office at all levels of government.

Divided government

A situation in which the U.S. president is a member of one political party and at least one chamber of Congress (either the Senate or the House of Representatives) is controlled by the opposite party is called a divided government. This situation also can exist at the state level, with one party controlling the governorship and another controlling the state legislature. Divided government occurs frequently in the U.S. political system.

Election Assistance Commission

Established by the Help America Vote Act of 2002, the Election Assistance Commission serves primarily as a national clearinghouse and resource for information on elections. It also reviews federal election administration and procedures.

Electoral College

The president and vice president are selected through the electoral college system, which gives each state the same number of electoral votes as it has members of Congress. The District of Columbia also gets three electoral votes. Of the total 538 votes, a candidate for president must receive 270 to win.

Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA)

The 1971 law that governs the financing of federal elections, the Federal Election Campaign was amended in 1974, 1976 and 1979. The act requires candidates and political committees to disclose the sources of their funding and how they spend their money; it regulates the contributions received and expenditures made during federal election campaigns; and it governs the public funding of presidential elections.

Federal Election Commission (FEC)

The Federal Election Commission is an independent regulatory agency charged with administering and enforcing federal campaign finance law. The FEC consists of six commissioners appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate. The FEC was established by the 1974 amendment of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971.

Front-loading

The practice of scheduling state party caucuses and state primary elections earlier and earlier in advance of the general election is called front-loading. By moving their primaries to early dates, states hope to lend decisive momentum to one or two presidential candidates and thus have disproportionate influence on each party's nomination. "Rear-loading" refers to the intense activity at the end of the yearlong cycle -- just prior to the election -- which includes a series of nationally televised debates, a flurry of television ads and extensive campaign travel on the part of the presidential candidates.

Front runner

A candidate in any election or nomination process who is considered most popular or most likely to win is called the front runner.

Political Gridlock

In politics, when one side (or, in some cases, more than one side) in a political matter manages to stall things so there is no room for maneuver or compromise and nothing can be accomplished, the situation is described as gridlock.

Hard money/Soft money

Hard money and soft money are terms used to differentiate between campaign funding that is, and is not, regulated under federal campaign finance law. Hard money describes donations by individuals and groups made directly to political candidates running for federal office. Such contributions are restricted by law. Soft money refers to donations not regulated by law that can be spent only on civic activities such as voter-registration drives, party-building activities, administrative costs and in support of state and local candidates. "Soft money" contributions, by law, may not be used to support directly a candidate for federal office. The U.S. Supreme Court in 2003 upheld congressional restrictions passed in 2002 on soft money contributions. See also **McCain-Feingold Law**.

Hatch Act

The Hatch Act places restrictions on political activity by employees of the executive branch of the U.S. federal government, District of Columbia government, and state and local employees who work in connection with federally funded programs. Under the act, employees are permitted to contribute to a candidate's campaign, but are restricted from using official authority to influence an election, including soliciting or receiving political contributions, and engaging in political activity while on duty, which includes wearing political buttons. Employees may run for office in a nonpartisan election, such as many school board elections, but are prohibited from running in a partisan election.

Help America Vote Act (HAVA)

Congress passed HAVA to address voting problems encountered in the 2000 presidential election. The act encourages state and local governments to eliminate punch-card and lever voting machines. Under HAVA, states have received \$2.9 billion since 2003 to improve their elections processes. The law also established the Election Assistance Commission to provide support to the administration of federal elections, as well as election laws and programs.

Horse race

Used as a metaphor for an election campaign, "horse race" is used to describe a close contest and conveys the feeling of excitement that people experience when watching a sporting event.

Incumbent

An individual currently holding a position is the incumbent. Historically, incumbents have enjoyed a better-than-average chance of being re-elected.

Independent

A candidate or voter not affiliated with a particular political party is termed an independent.

Lame duck

The term lame duck refers to an elected official who has lost an election, or soon will be leaving office, during the period between the election and the date a successor will take over. Such an individual is in a weakened position politically due to the impending expiration of his or her term.

Landslide

A victory in which one candidate's votes far surpass those of other candidates is called a landslide.

Matching funds or public funding

Public money can be given to presidential candidates that "matches" funds they have raised privately from individuals. Contributions from individuals in which the aggregate amount contributed by the individual is \$250 or less are eligible to be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund. This fund includes proceeds from the voluntary check-off of \$3 per person from income tax returns of eligible taxpayers. See also **Taxpayer check-off system**.

McCain-Feingold Law

Formally titled the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, the McCain-Feingold Law is named after its two chief Senate sponsors, John McCain, a Republican from Arizona, and Russell Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin, who sought to remove "soft money" as an influence on candidates running for federal office. The law eliminated "loopholes" (or legislative oversights) that in the

past allowed the use of soft money to aid candidates running for federal office. See also **Hard money/Soft money**.

Negative ads

Negative advertisements that try to persuade voters to choose a candidate by making the opposing candidate look bad, by attacking either the opponent's character or record on the issues.

Nominee

A person selected by others for election to office is the nominee. Nominees may be selected in primary elections or caucuses. When only one candidate from a party has filed to run for a political office, that candidate becomes the party's nominee without any further selection process.

Open primary

An open primary is one in which all registered voters may vote, regardless of whether they are registered as Democrats, Republicans or Independents. See also **Primary**.

Platform

In the context of U.S. presidential politics, platform refers to a political party's formal written statement of its principles and goals, put together and issued during the presidential nomination process and subject to approval affirmed during the party's national political convention.

Plurality

A plurality is one method of identifying the winning candidate in an election. A plurality occurs when the votes received by a candidate are greater than those received by any opponent but can be less than a majority of the total vote. For example, if one candidate receives 30 percent of the votes, a second candidate also receives 30 percent and a third receives 40 percent, the third candidate could win the election by a plurality of the votes.

Political Action Committee (PAC)

PACs are political committees not related directly to a political party, but rather affiliated with corporations, labor unions or other organizations. The committees contribute money to candidates and engage in other election-related activities so as to promote specific legislative agendas. Funds are gathered by voluntary contributions from members, employees or shareholders. PACs have increased significantly in influence and number in recent years: in 1976, there were 608 PACs, and in 2006, there are about 4,600.

Poll/Polling

A public opinion poll is created when a polling firm contacts a sample group of randomly selected citizens and asks a series of standard questions. If executed properly, the poll's data reflect the range of opinions and the portion of the population that holds them in a manner

representative of the full population. Public opinion polls provide an idea of what many Americans think about various candidates and issues. See also **Push polling**.

Primary

A state-level election in which voters choose a candidate affiliated with a political party to run against a candidate who is affiliated with another political party in a later, general election. A primary may be either "open" -- allowing any registered voter in a state to vote for a candidate to represent a political party, or "closed" -- allowing only registered voters who belong to a particular political party to vote for a candidate from that party. See also **Closed primary** and **Open primary**.

Proposition

See also **Ballot initiative** and **Referendum**.

Protest vote

A vote for a third-party candidate made, not to elect that candidate, but to indicate displeasure with the candidates of the two major political parties.

Public funding

See **Matching funds**.

Push polling

A public-opinion polling technique that is used to test possible campaign themes by asking very specific questions about an issue or a candidate is call push polling. See also **Poll/Polling**.

Redistricting

The process of redrawing the geographic boundaries of congressional districts, the electoral districts within states from which members of the House of Representatives are elected, is called redistricting. Both Democrats and Republicans at the state level compete to get hold of the legal and political mechanisms of redistricting -- usually by controlling the state legislature. By doing so, they can redraw boundaries of congressional districts in ways that will lend an electoral advantage to their own party.

Red state

Red state refers to a U.S. state where the majority of voters support Republican candidates. See also **blue state**.

Referendum

A measure referred to voters by a state legislature proposing that specific legislation be approved or rejected is a referendum. The terms referendum, proposition and ballot initiative frequently are used interchangeably.

Single-member district

Single-member district describes the current arrangement for electing national and state legislators in the United States in which one candidate is elected in each legislative district; the winner is the candidate with the most votes. The "single-member" system allows only one party to win in any given district. Under the proportional system popular in Europe, much larger districts are used and several members are elected at one time, based on the proportion of votes their parties receive.

Soft money

See **Hard money/soft money**.

Sound bite

A sound bite is a brief, very quotable remark by a candidate for office that is repeated on radio and television news programs.

Spin doctor

A media adviser or political consultant employed by a campaign to ensure that a candidate receives the best possible publicity in any given situation is called a spin doctor. When these media advisers practice their craft, they are said to be "spinning" or putting "spin" on a situation or event to present it as favorably as possible to their side.

Straw poll/vote

An unofficial vote that is used either to predict the outcome of an official vote, or to measure the relative strength of candidates for office in a future election is called straw poll or straw vote. A good showing in a straw vote can give a candidate a boost, but does not necessarily predict later success.

Swing voters

Voters not loyal to a particular political party sometimes can determine the outcome of an election by "swinging" one way or the other on an issue or candidate, often reversing their choices in a subsequent election.

Super Tuesday

Widespread use of the phrase "Super Tuesday" dates from 1988, when a group of Southern states banded together to hold the first large and effective regional group of primaries in order to boost the importance of Southern states in the presidential nomination process and lessen the impact of early votes in the New Hampshire primary and Iowa caucus. Today, the meaning of the phrase is blurred, a reflection of the fact that during the presidential primary season there may be several groups of state primaries in various regions falling on one or more Tuesdays. These groupings are important because the weight of such a large, simultaneous vote tends to make or break would-be presidential nominees since so many convention delegates are selected at once.

Super-Duper Tuesday

A phrase coined for the 2008 election, when many states, in an attempt to have more influence on the outcome of the race, have moved their primaries or caucuses to earlier in the year. This resulted in at least 20 states choosing to hold their primaries or caucuses on Tuesday, February 5, 2008, giving that day the name "Super-Duper Tuesday."

Taxpayer check-off system

The taxpayer check-off system allows U.S. taxpayers to contribute \$3 of their annual federal income tax payment to a public fund for financing presidential elections. To contribute, taxpayers simply check a box on their tax return that says that they want to participate in this system. Making the contribution does not raise or lower an individual's taxes; it simply deposits \$3 of the tax payment into the presidential election campaign fund. See also **Matching funds**.

Term limits

Term limits involve restricting the number of years an officeholder or lawmaker may serve in a particular office. There is a term limit for the U.S. president, who may serve no more than two consecutive terms, or eight years total. There are no term limits for those who serve in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives. Some state and local offices also are subject to terms limits.

Third party

Any political party that is not one of the two parties that dominated U.S. politics in the 20th century -- the Republican Party and the Democratic Party -- and that receives a base of support and plays a role in influencing the outcome of an election is referred to as a third party.

Ticket splitting

Voting for candidates of different political parties in the same election, for instance, voting for a Democrat for president and a Republican for senator, is called splitting the ticket. Because these voters support candidates from more than one political party, they are said to "split" their votes.

Town meeting

A town meeting is an informal gathering of an officeholder or candidate for office with a group of people, often local, in which the audience raises questions directly to the officeholder or candidate.

Tracking survey

A type of public-opinion poll that allows candidates to follow, or "track" voters' sentiments over the course of a campaign is called a tracking survey. For the initial survey, the pollster interviews the same number of voters on three consecutive nights -- for example, 400 voters a night, for a total sample of 1,200 people. On the fourth night, the pollster interviews 400 more voters, adds their responses to the poll data, and drops the responses from the first night. Continuing in this way, the sample rolls along at a constant 1,200 responses drawn from the previous three nights.

Over time, the campaign can analyze the data from the entire survey and observe the effect of certain events on voters' attitudes. See also **Poll/Polling**.

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