Voting and elections

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Elections are the main mechanism for expressing the public's collective desires about who should be in government and what the government should do. Elections in Britain are not as frequent or extensive as they are in the United States. There are no direct elections for the Executive as there are in a presidential system. Neither are there primary elections within the parties to decide on the choice of candidate.

In this chapter, we examine a number of issues about the functioning of elections in two democracies, looking at the electoral system, the nature and costs of the campaign, and the way in which voters behave and the influences upon their voting. In addition, we consider the use made – particularly in America – of various forms of direct democracy.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Are the benefits of the First Past The Post method of voting outweighed by the disadvantages?
- Who would gain from the introduction of some variant of proportional representation in Britain and the United States? What is the likelihood of the introduction of such a method of voting?
- Does a low turnout signify broad contentment, or apathy?
- 'In British general elections and American presidential elections, turnout has declined in recent decades'. Are there common factors which explain the decline?
- Why has turnout been falling in most countries in recent years?
- Compare the level of popular involvement in British and American elections.
- 'Americans participate more in the workings of their democracy than do British people.' Is this true?
- Which are the more important in voting behaviour today, long-term or short-term factors?
- To what extent has partisan dealignment occurred in recent decades on both sides of the Atlantic?
- Has class voting in Britain and the United States declined in recent years?
- Why is television so infatuated with personalities?

- In what ways does television set the agenda for election campaigns?
- Has there been an Americanisation of British electioneering methods and, if so, does it matter?
- Why has it been necessary to introduce legislation in Britain and the United States to control the raising and spending of public money in national elections?
- Why has 'soft money' become an issue in British and American politics?
- Does British and American experience suggest that money buys elections?
- Is state funding of parties and/or candidates a good idea?
- Why has direct democracy become more popular in recent years?
- Does American experience of direct democracy have anything to teach us on this side of the Atlantic?

All Western countries hold regular elections. Voting is the primary symbol of citizenship in a democratic society; indeed, 'one person, one vote' is one of the core principles of democracy. In established democracies, elections are generally free and fair, although doubts about the legitimacy of the outcome can arise, as in America 2000. Elections are the major way by which those who rule are made answerable to the mass of people.

Some countries hold many types of election, others few. In the United Kingdom, electors can vote in local and European elections, as well as in a general one every four or five years; the Irish, Welsh and the Scots also get the opportunity to vote for their devolved legislatures, and have had more opportunity than the English to vote in national referendums. In the United States, elections are much more common so that Americans elect people for offices which in most states would be filled by appointment. At every tier of political life, from President to Congressman on the national level, from Governor to Representative at the state level and from City Mayor to town councillor at the local level, the incumbent is chosen by election. School board contests are particularly hotly disputed. In some states, even such offices as the Municipal Judge and the Registrar of Wills, and in parts of the South the local undertaker and even dog catcher are contested. Most of these are local contests which rarely make the news outside the immediate vicinity.

It has been estimated that there are a million elected offices in the USA. Americans clearly have a great enthusiasm for the ballot box, even if they do not avail themselves of the opportunities it provides. The popularity of elections owes much to the general growth of the democratic principle since the days of the Founding Fathers. Americans have long believed that the greater the degree of popular involvement, the better the outcome is likely to be in terms of the quality of output. But beyond this is another consideration, the preference for limited government. Americans have always feared a

concentration of power in too few hands. Even when they elect officials, they do not in most cases allow them to serve for too long. It is felt desirable to subject them to continuous accountability

In consequence, the task before an American voter is greater than that for his or her British equivalent. Whereas a British election ballot paper is a straightforward affair, usually involving putting a cross on a piece of paper, an American one is rather different. The American voter may be casting a vote for the Presidency, the Senate and the House of Representatives at national level, and for a group of state and local offices which may be contested at the same time. In addition, there will probably be a number of propositions arising from state constitutional requirements or citizens' initiatives, calling for a response. In preparation for the propositions, a booklet or two may be provided containing closely printed pages outlining the proposals and the arguments advanced by proponents and opponents.

Britain has never had the same emphasis on electoral participation. The traditional view is that voters should have their chance to vote every few years and in between allow the government to get on with the job. Until the last few decades, there has not been the same degree of distrust of politicians or wariness about letting appointed people exercise responsibility.

In several countries, elections are used by those in power to give the illusion of popular participation. They can range from being a meaningless exercise in which there is no genuine voter choice to a downright fraud, because of the tampering with votes or the lack of freedom in which polling is carried out. For example, in Bosnia, in the autumn of 1996, there were more ballot papers counted than there were members of the electorate. However, the object of elections is the same, to confer legitimacy on the government. In Britain, we may only get a vote every few years, but at least there is a genuine opportunity to express an opinion on those who have presided over our fortunes and to indicate whether it is, in our view, 'time for a change'.

A democratic general election is distinguished by several characteristics. These include such features as:

- a universal franchise;
- a secret ballot;
- a time limit on office;
- the freedom to form parties;
- contests in every constituency;
- campaigns regulated by strict and fair rules.

Of course, entitlement to vote is not the same as the effective ability to vote, and in a democracy it is important to ensure that there is an effective procedure by which people can be registered. In several countries there are permanent

registers, amended at periodic intervals, as in Britain and most of Europe. Elsewhere, registers have to be created from scratch, so that in most American states it is necessary for the would-be voter to register his or her vote before polling day. This reflects the American emphasis on the mobilising effect of elections. Such an approach tends to be less efficient in ensuring eligibility, and in the USA the Motor Voter Act of 1993 was designed to make registration easier and thereby hopefully raise turnout by a few percentage points. It is significant that in the southern states, which have traditionally erected barriers to voting, there have always been lower turnouts than other parts of America.

Whatever the system, it is likely that some voters – perhaps 5-10 per cent or more – will not be registered. Of those who are registered, others will be unable to cast their vote because of illness, absence or other pressing circumstances. Some people are just unwilling to make the effort, especially if obtaining a postal vote is a complex process. Hence the remedy introduced in several countries: compulsory voting. Australia, Austria, Belgium and some Latin American states are among those which have resorted to this method, but in most cases its effectiveness is limited by the low level of fines and the difficulties in collecting those which are due.

Types of election

Some writers distinguish between different types of election, especially between the **maintaining** ones in which the party in power continues to hold the reins, and **realigning** ones in which voters opt for a change of direction and the underlying strength of the main parties is significantly changed. Sometimes, of course, voting for a different party does not fundamentally shift policy onto a new course, but in most countries it is possible to think of landmark dates when electors signalled their wish to opt for something different.

In postwar Britain, there have been elections which have produced (or promised to produce) a critical realignment, and these have included 1945, 1964, 1979 and 1997. In 2001, voters opted for 'more of the same', a maintaining election. Some presidential elections in the United States have led to a significant change of emphasis or direction, as with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, the election of Kennedy in 1960, Reagan in 1980 and Clinton in 1992. The 1984, 1988 and 1996 elections were maintaining ones.

Electoral systems

The choice of electoral system to elect a particular assembly is a question of great importance in our democracy. To a significant degree electoral systems define how the body politic operates. As Farrell points out: 'they are the cogs

which keep the wheels of democracy properly functioning'.[1] The choice of system raises issues about the nature of representative government and the purpose of elections. Indeed, the interim report of Labour's Plant Committee observed that: 'There can be nothing more fundamental in a democracy than proposals to change an electoral system'.[2]

In making that selection, much depends on what the electoral system is supposed to achieve. Obviously, it is desirable that it produces an outcome which is intelligible and acceptable to as many people as possible, so that when they vote they feel comfortable with the arrangements made and accept that the outcome on polling day is fair and legitimate. Beyond that, there are other possible functions which those interested might expect any system to fulfil, the accurate representation of the popular will and/or the production of effective, strong governments among them.

Fundamental to the issue is the question 'What is the point of voting?' Is it primarily to choose a government, or is it to choose membership of the legislature? Is the emphasis placed upon electing a strong administration which has broad (if not mathematically exact) support in the community, or is it to elect an assembly which accurately reflects prevailing opinion? On the continent the emphasis is upon choosing a representative assembly, and then from its midst finding a government which commands sufficient support – usually, a coalition government. In Britain, which has tended to pride itself upon its tradition of strong, single-party government, importance is attached to ensuring that there is an effective administration in place.

The question of ultimate purpose is an important one, for the answer which is given will help to determine the most appropriate electoral system. Broadly, variants of proportional representation might well produce a more representative parliament whose composition fairly reflects all or most shades of popular opinion. They are less likely to yield a 'strong' government.

Of course governments can still be effective if they are coalitions, and the virtues of strong administrations can be over-played. Different writers reach different conclusions about what constitutes strength. For Philip Norton, a defender of the First Past The Post (FPTP) method of voting, a strong government is one which dominates the House of Commons. For Vernon Bogdanor, a government cannot be strong unless it represents the majority of the voters, on which test all postwar British governments have failed.

Types of electoral system

There are two broad categories of electoral system. It is, however, possible to combine elements of the two categories, and within both groups there are many potential variations. The two categories are:

1 **Majoritarian systems**, which are designed to leave one party with a parliamentary majority. In this category, we may include:
   - **First Past The Post (FPTP)**;
   - **the alternative vote (AV)**;
   - **the double ballot**.

2 **Proportional systems.** There are many different forms of proportional representation, all of which are designed to ensure that the number of seats allocated in the legislature is broadly in line with the number of votes won by each party in the election. Two main sub-divisions are:
   - **list systems**. Lists may be of the open variety in which the voter can express a preference between individual candidates in a party list, and the closed variety in which he or she votes for a list but is unable to influence the ranking of the candidates;
   - **single transferable vote (STV)**.

3 **Mixed systems**. These represent a compromise between majoritarian and proportional systems. For example, the **Additional Member System (AMS)** preserves elements of the FPTP mechanism yet also provides a substantial element of proportionality.

The situation in Britain and the United States

The traditional Anglo-American method is the FPTP system, by which the candidate/party with the most votes in each constituency wins the contest.

SYSTEMS IN USE IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES: A SUMMARY

UK

- General and local elections: FPTP
- European elections: closed list
- Scottish and Welsh devolved assembly elections: AMS mixed
- London mayorality: Supplementary Vote (a cross between the French Assembly double ballot and the AV)
- Northern Ireland: FPTP for Westminster elections, but STV for local, assembly and European elections

USA

National and state elections, and most local ones also, use the single member, FPTP system. In some states, a candidate in a given election must win a majority of the votes cast: Georgia requires such a run-off in the election of senators, as it does – along with Arizona – for the election of governors.

The successful candidate/party does not need to have an absolute majority of votes, but rather a plurality: the largest number of votes. This system is used in several other countries such as Canada, Chile, India and Thailand. Often it is referred to as the Simple Majority or Simple Plurality System, or more colloquially as 'winner takes all'. The latter is an appropriate nomenclature, for under this method all a person needs in order to be victorious in his or her constituency is to win more votes than any rival candidate.

The effects of using FPTP in Britain and the United States

FPTP is widely associated with two-party systems. In Britain, the system is very harsh on small parties, which are usually clearly under-represented. The Liberal Party came off particularly badly in February 1974, its 19.3 per cent of the vote yielding only 2.2 per cent of the seats. However, on occasion third parties have surmounted the obstacles it poses and managed to perform well. Helped by the concentration of its attack ('targeted' seats) and tactical voting, the Liberal Democrats did well in 1997 and 2001, significantly increasing the number of seats won.

In America, the 'winner takes all' system has worked against the development of minor parties, which usually obtain scant reward for their efforts. Plurality systems convert seats into votes in a way that damages the interests of small parties, particularly if their limited support is spread across many constituencies. The effects of the system are evident in the fortunes of the American Socialist Party. Even during its peak years of electoral support (1912–20), when it won 3–6 per cent of the national vote in presidential elections, it was barely represented in Congress. At its high point of 1912 (6 per cent), it failed to elect a single representative to Congress. The evidence suggests that it makes more sense for an existing or would-be third party to form an alliance with a major one than to struggle on its own with little hope.

In choosing legislatures, plurality systems usually deliver parliamentary majorities. In Britain, FPTP yields a majority government most of the time, only failing to do so in Britain in the mid–late 1970s. Single-party majority administrations are said by their supporters to be capable of providing effective leadership for the nation. This is widely viewed as more important than achieving a proportional result. In Britain, we know who is to form the government immediately after the election is over. There is no need for private deals to be done by politicians who bargain in smoke-filled rooms, away from the public gaze; it is the voters directly who choose which party is in office.

The American situation is distinctive, for under its presidential system no government is being formed out of either chamber in Congress. When electing Presidents, there is only one prize available. The presidency cannot be shared,

so that a proportional system would not work. In presidential elections the party with a plurality in a state receives all the electoral votes of that state, other than in Maine. In 2000, there was much disquiet about the outcome of the presidential election in America, in which George W. Bush defeated Al Gore. For the fourth time in American history, more people voted against the eventual winner than for him.

Some arguments surrounding the debate over FPTP v PR

For FPTP

1. The FPTP system is easy to understand, especially for the voter who marks an X on the ballot paper. It has the alleged merits of simplicity and familiarity and, as such, is widely accepted.
2. In parliamentary systems it usually leads to the formation of strong, stable, single-party governments with an overall majority; coalition government other than in times of emergency is virtually unknown.
3. There is a clear link between the elected representative and a constituency.

David Farrell has neatly summarised these three main themes in defence of the British system, as 'simplicity, stability and constituency representation'.[3] The enquiry led by Lord Jenkins found another 'by no means negligible' merit of the present system: the commissioners made the point that it enables the electorate sharply and cleanly to rid itself of an unwanted government in other words, it is easy to punish those responsible for their errors directly.[4] Pinto-Duschinsky made a similar point, by saying that voters should be able 'to hire and fire the executive'.[5] Voters can throw the rascals out, whereas under PR leading parties can stay in power interminably, with perhaps some reshuffling of offices. This is the essence of democracy, which depends not on mathematical fairness but on the opportunity to control who exercises power.

Apart from the positive case for FPTP, there is also the negative one which points to the disadvantages associated with PR. Among specific criticisms often made, it is suggested that:

1. PR may lead to economic, political and social collapse, as in Germany between the wars, where extremist parties were able to gain a foothold and then dramatically advance.
2. PR involves a proliferation of minor parties, and this results in instability and perpetual changes of government arising from shifting coalitions. In Israel and the Irish Republic, individuals and small parties have been able to gain representation, making it more difficult to form stable administrations. Many other countries which have PR also have more parties in the legislature than do Britain or the United States.
3. In parliamentary systems, the abandonment of FPTP would greatly increase the likelihood of perpetual coalition government. In that any 'third force' would gain a greater share of justice, this would be at the expense of the two main parties. As neither main British party has ever secured a majority of the votes cast in any election since World War Two, it is unlikely that single-party government would result.

For PR

The case for the use of a proportional scheme of voting is that it ensures that there is a

In elections to Congress, FPTP has the same effects as in Britain, only more so. There is an overwhelming preponderance of two main parties which totally dominate the Legislature. The association of FPTP and strong government is irrelevant, for the Executive is not chosen from the Legislature.

In Britain, because we have single-member constituencies, there is a close relationship between the MP and his or her constituency. One member alone

broad similarity between the number of votes obtained and the number of seats won by any political party. Unlike FPTP, a PR system:

1. Would not allow a government to exercise power on the basis of minority popular support; e.g., in Britain, Labour obtained power in 2001 with the support of only 40.7 per cent of those who voted, and with under 25 per cent of the backing of the whole electorate.
2. Would provide greater justice to small parties. In Britain, it has been the Liberals in their various guises who have suffered from FPTP, although in 1997 the Conservatives lost all representation in Scotland in spite of gaining 17 per cent of the vote. Socialist and other parties have fared badly in the United States.
3. Would in parliamentary systems yield governments with the backing of the majority of the electorate, which could claim legitimacy. They may be coalition governments, but the parties which voted for them would *in toto* have a broader appeal than is the case at present.
4. Would overcome a problem much emphasised by the Jenkins enquiry, namely that there are under FPTP 'electoral deserts', those areas more or less permanently committed to one party, in which the opposition can make little impact and get even less reward. Some two-thirds or more of the seats in the House of Commons and the House of Representatives rarely change party hands, so that supporters of the minority parties have little likelihood of ever securing the election of representatives who supports their views. Significant sections of the population are condemned to more or less permanent minority status.

Moreover, in parliamentary systems there is a positive case for coalition government. Among its alleged advantages, it is suggested that:

1. coalitions would provide the greater stability and continuity necessary for successful administration;
2. a third-party presence in government would tend to 'moderate' the tone and direction of governments, in such a way that their 'extremist' tendencies might be tempered;
3. governments would have more backing than those in Britain which have rested on the support of a minority of the people.

There is no perfect electoral system, appropriate to every country at every time. Indeed, it is quite possible to have different types of election within a particular country, as is now happening in Britain. FPTP may well be seen as inappropriate for elections to the European Parliament, to the new Scottish or Welsh assemblies or to an elected second chamber should one ever materialise. That does not necessarily mean that there has to be a change at Westminster for the way in which we vote in general elections.

has responsibility for an area which he/she can get to know well. The MP represents all who live in it, not just those who voted for one particular party; all citizens know who to approach if they have a problem or grievance needing resolution. This is very different from what happens under some more proportional systems, in which several elected members represent a broad geographical area. This relationship between individual legislators and their constituencies is highly valued by many commentators in Britain. In America, these local relationships are very significant, for elected representatives are judged according to their ability to 'bring home the pork'.

There is little pressure for reform in America. Proportional representation (PR) could only be used in limited circumstances. As we have seen, it could not be used for the presidency and as individual states only elect one senator at a time it would not work for these elections either. Six states return only one representative and would therefore be unable to employ multimember constituencies. PR could be used for congressional districts in larger states but their average size is already around 600,000, so that a multimember constituency of five representatives would be one of 3 million. Moreover, except in small states, the geographical areas which the successful candidates would have to represent would be a very large one, destroying much hope of keeping that sense of connection with a district and making electioneering particularly exhausting and expensive.

Proportional systems are often seen as especially suitable for countries where there are marked ethnic, linguistic or religious cleavages. Significantly, they have often been recommended for use in Northern Ireland when any new assembly is proposed. Indeed, STV is used in Euro-elections and in local government in the province, precisely because it allows for the recognition of minority rights. Israel is another country with basic ethnic and religious divisions make a proportional outcome desirable. Such conditions do not apply with the same force in Britain or the United States.

Turnout in elections

A good turnout of voters is often considered to be a healthy sign in any democracy, as this appears to indicate vitality and interest. In Britain, turnouts are lower than in several other European countries, and in Euro-elections the figures have often been particularly disappointing. In America, they have traditionally been considerably worse even than the relatively low British figure.

Differing theories concerning the level of turnout

Psephologists disagree as to whether a low turnout is a good sign or otherwise. Does it indicate broad satisfaction and contentment, or fear and alienation

from the system? Often a low turnout is viewed as a sign that voters feel disillusioned with the parties, that they feel their vote will not make much difference because the parties are all 'much of a muchness'. They register this disappointment by staying at home. In 1970 there was a turnout of only 72 per cent in Britain, and this was widely interpreted as being a reflection of the widespread feeling among supporters of the Labour Party that the Wilson governments had failed to inspire them or 'deliver the goods'. When, in February 1974, the figure rose significantly to 79 per cent at the time of a miners' strike and a three day week this could be seen as a sign of excitement, for there was a really live issue on which passions were aroused.

Yet by another analysis, high turnouts can be interpreted as a sign of fear and anxiety. Peter Pulzer has suggested that people normally vote in high numbers when they are disturbed by trends in society:

> **High electoral participation, massive attendance at meetings, enthusiastic processions and heated discussions may . . . indicate fever, not robust good health. Between 1928 and 1932 participation in German parliamentary elections rose from 75 per cent to 83 per cent, while the Nazi Party's share of the vote rose from 2 per cent to 37 per cent. Increased turnout did not reflect greater civic consciousness, but panic. It represented the mobilisation of the normally a-political . . . apparently apathetic behaviour can . . . reflect widespread acceptance of the way in which disputes are handled.**[6]

Such a view challenges traditional notions. It would suggest that the impressive British turnout in February 1974 was a sign of voter anxiety about the state of the country, to the extent that many who might normally not have voted were mobilised by their anxiety about the disruption caused by social strife and the fear that the country was becoming especially difficult to govern.

More usually, it is suggested that the more or less continuous decline in turnout since 1951 suggests that the democratic enthusiasm of the postwar generation, when the two-party system was at its high water mark, has diminished, and that over a long period voters have wished a 'plague on both your houses'.

Some international comparisons

Turnout in the postwar era appears to be higher in the established democracies of Western Europe, and less so in countries which have gained their freedom more recently. In South Africa, the excitement produced by the first democratic elections inspired many people to queue up to vote. In the United States, where elections are so often held, there is no such enthusiasm. The figures for turnout in the most recently held election (prior to September 2002) in an assortment of countries are as follows (in percentages):

Austria	80.4
Denmark	89.3
Germany	80.2
India	60.0
Italy	81.2
Japan	62.5
Malta	95.4
New Zealand	74.5
Norway	74.7
South Africa	89.0
Sweden	81.4
United Kingdom	59.4
United States	51.2

Turnouts in Britain and the United States

The trend in national turnout (see table opposite) in British elections at first sight seems to be a broadly downward one, interrupted by occasional better results. It is commonplace to lament the disappointing figures for turnout in Britain, but David Denver provides a cautionary explanation.[7] He suggests that the true figures differ sharply from the real ones usually given. His research emphasises the importance of the accuracy of the Electoral Register, which – even when it is compiled – is not 100 per cent accurate. When it comes into force, it is four months out-of-date already. It continues to decline in accuracy until the next one is drawn up. When allowance is made for this factor, the impression is very different from that presented by a straight reading of the usually quoted figures. Thus the 78.7 per cent of 1959 becomes 85.0 per cent, the 72.0 per cent of 1970 becomes 75.2 per cent, and the 78.1 per cent of February 1974 becomes 78.8 per cent – the latter result perhaps being more a reflection of an up-to-date register than the public anxiety which Pulzer suggests (see p. 279). In 1992, the 'true figure' was 79.7 per cent, rather than 77.7 per cent. However, in 1997 the figure was low again, and 2001 was the worst since 1918.

Turnouts in elections for local councils, the devolved assemblies and the European Parliament are also low. Indeed, for local and European elections approximately only half the number vote as do so in a general election. The results in 1999 illustrated the poor response of the electors to what happens in the local council chambers, for only 29 per cent voted – the lowest figure recorded in living memory, and some 8 per cent down on that for four years earlier when the same seats were fought. In some urban wards in areas such as Sunderland and Wigan, only 12 per cent turned out to make their choice.

In the same year, the first elections to the new devolved bodies, the turnout in Wales was a meagre 40 per cent, in Scotland 57 per cent. The prospect of an assembly which had inspired the Scots in the referendum of 1997 no longer

seemed to be so alluring, as 4 per cent less voted than on the second occasion. In the European elections, turnout was 23.6 per cent.

Turnouts in British general and American presidential elections, 1945–2001

General elections		*Presidential elections*	
1945	72.7	1944	54.8
1950	84.0	1948	51.6
1951	82.5	1952	61.6
1955	76.8	1956	59.3
1959	78.7	1960	63.8
1964	77.1	1964	62.1
1966	75.8	1968	61.0
1970	72.0	1972	55.7
Feb. 1974	78.1	1976	54.4
Oct. 1974	72.8	1980	52.0
1979	76.0	1984	53.0
1983	72.7	1988	50.0
1987	75.3	1992	53.0
1992	77.7	1996	49.0
1997	71.4	2000	51.2
2001	59.4		

In America, too, there has been a downward pattern, but starting from a much lower base. The 1960 presidential contest had a better turnout than was usually the case, but since then the percentage voting has declined more or less continuously, as the figures above illustrate. Whereas Britain normally achieves a 70–75 per cent turnout in general elections, 50–55 per cent is now more usual in America. However, the comparison is not an entirely appropriate one, for British figures relate to the number registered who vote whereas American ones are based upon the number of Americans over the minimum voting age who actually do so. According to V. O. Key, the difference may be worth as many as six or seven percentage points.[8]

The presidential campaign certainly gets massive television exposure, for it dominates the media from the time of the first primaries through to November. This might have been expected to generate interest and excitement, but yet in the media age we are faced by decline. Among the explanations offered for the downward trend are the following:

- Difficulties of registration, especially in some states a situation now improved by the 'motor voter' bill.
- Apathy: the feeling that politicians are all the same, and that voting makes no fundamental difference. This might be particularly the case in a country that has never had a significant left-wing party so that there has never been a major dispute over the distribution of income and the scope of government.

- The lack of inspiring leaders among presidential candidates. In 1996, some Americans unimpressed by Clinton's behaviour nonetheless found the alternative of Bob Dole not to their liking. Neither was the choice in 2000 impressive enough to encourage them to vote.
- The nature of electioneering: negative campaigning may be a 'turn-off'. In the 1994 elections, it was suggested that one of the most toxic campaigns in living memory had left many people 'switched off' from politicians. American voters appear to have become more disengaged from political strategy, as the style of advertising increasingly antagonises them.
- The composition of the electorate: some significant groups are less willing to turn out, e.g., blacks and the unemployed. Maidment and McGrew elaborated: 'Those categories of voters who have low turnout rates, such as those aged under 24, members of ethnic minorities and those who do not identify with parties, are a growing percentage of the electorate, which explains the steady decline in the rate of turnout."[9]

Turnout is even worse in congressional elections in the years when there is no presidential contest: It is usually under 40 per cent, but in the 1998 mid-term contests it was 36 per cent, 3 per cent down from 1994. Voters were seemingly turned off by the Lewinsky affair, by Clinton's behaviour and the way in which the Republicans relentlessly pursued the issue. There is disillusion with Washington politicians and the political system in general. This cynicism is said by many journalists to have been a factor in the falling turnouts of the last generation.

Turnout varies from state to state, in large part a reflection of the different registration procedures employed across the country. In the North-west and in the Upper Great Plains, it has always been easier to register. In sparsely populated North Dakota, there is no registration at all, and Maine, Minnesota, Oregon and Wisconsin allow registration on polling day. These five states regularly feature in the list of those with the highest turnouts.

Some reflections on trends in turnout

As the right to vote has been extended across the world's democracies, so in some countries a smaller proportion of the potential voters have chosen to exercise that right than did so in the past. The pattern initially affected local elections more than national ones, but in recent years contests at the national level have produced some low figures – even in countries which previously had higher turnouts. In the USA, 80 per cent voted in the 1896 presidential election, whereas barely more than half did so in 1996. In the United Kingdom, the figures remain similar to those recorded in the interwar era, but rather less than those attained in the 1950s, when there was a surge of enthusiasm for the political process.

The average turnout in postwar elections in Britain has been 75.2 per cent and in the United States 55.5 per cent, a difference of 19.7 per cent. The gap narrowed in the last elections (2000 and 2001, 8.2 per cent). Both countries have poor turnouts in comparison with other democracies. One explanation that has been advanced is that whilst the British and Americans vote on a weekday (Thursday and Tuesday, respectively), continental countries with high turnouts normally opt for a Sunday, when it is easier for working people to get to the polls.

Despite living in a culture which has traditionally encouraged participation from its citizenry, America has woefully low rates of turnout. However, the US government at all levels asks Americans to vote frequently and for a wide range of elective offices, whereas the typical European voter does so much less frequently. Possibly it is no coincidence that the one European country which also has a poor turnout rate – Switzerland (46 per cent in 1991) – also calls upon its peoples to vote two or three times a year in referendums.

It is easy to assume that higher levels of voting are a sign of the health of a democracy, on the basis that those who get elected represent a broader segment of the population. But it is possible to argue that non-voting may amount to general satisfaction with the conduct of public affairs – most people are relatively content. This 'contentment' theory finds little support from Hames and Rae, who point out that 'if this were true, then the happiest Americans would be the poor, racial minorities and young people who have the lowest level of turnout, whereas affluent elderly whites who are most likely to vote, are truly miserable'.[10]

Their idea assumes that different groups in society fail to vote for the same reasons. It could be that there are some groups which genuinely feel alienated from a system which they feel no longer represents their interests, and do not vote. Equally, many groups who do not feel so alienated may also feel that the issues do not warrant positive action to go out and exercise their democratic rights. In Britain, in 2001, there were doubtless many voters who felt disengaged from the political world, including many young voters who felt that the political battle seems increasingly irrelevant, sterile and out of date. Older people who did not vote may have failed to do so either because – as traditional Labour supporters – they felt disappointed or even disillusioned with a government that they felt had let them down, or because in the absence of a clear and convincing alternative it seemed wise to leave ministers to get on with the job of improving the public services, which they had barely started. They seemed to be on the right lines, but needed time to get things right.

Finally, there is one other thought. Turnouts were much higher in the early postwar years. There were then really serious issues on which politicians disagreed: matters of peace and war, and of the fairest means by which to

Popular participation in the political process

In established democracies across the world, levels of popular participation are generally low. Of those who do engage in any activity, it is usually only to cast a vote in a national election. As we have seen, turnouts are in decline. Figures for party membership tell a similar story.

Political participation covers a wide range of activities, from becoming interested in and knowledgeable about politics to active engagement in activities that directly impact upon the political process. Most voters participate to only a limited degree, perhaps by discussing political issues with friends and family at election time, or following the coverage provided by television and newspapers. Some are more involved and write letters to officials or elected representatives, attend meetings, rallies or public hearings and join pressure groups. A few campaign in elections and seek political office. For many, voting is their only activity and, as we have seen, this is a declining activity on both sides of the Atlantic.

political participation
Individual or group involvement in activities intended to influence the structure, personnel and policies of government. Voting is the most common form of influence.

In the 1970s, Milbrath and Goel[11] analysed patterns of participation in democracies by categorising the American population as gladiators, who fight the political battle (5–7 per cent), spectators, who watch the contest but do little other than vote (60 per cent), and apathetics, who are detached from politics (around 33–35 per cent). They used the language of contests in Ancient Rome, when the few (gladiators) performed for the enjoyment of the many (spectators), whilst some were uninterested in even watching the show. Further studies have attempted to refine the distinctions, by pointing out that the large middle group contains people whose behaviour spans many possibilities. Some vote but do nothing else, others contact officials or representatives but are otherwise inactive and some do nothing but take part in protest marches. Whether or not a person engages in direct action doesn't necessarily tell us whether or not he or she votes. Activity is, in Harrop and Hague's phrase, 'multi-dimensional'.[12]

One recent study found 'a populace in the United States [that] is highly participatory in most forms of political activity (giving money to political organisations, contacting government officials, etc.) and even more so in non-political public affairs (from a vast variety of organisational memberships to charitable giving and volunteer action)'.[13] Over the two years previous to the study, 46 per cent had attended a meeting or hearing, 45 per cent contacted an elected official, 34 per cent contributed time or money to a political campaign and 27 per cent participated in a police-sponsored community-watch programme. In the age of the Internet, 34 per cent had visited a web site for government information.

Even of those who do nothing more active than cast a vote, they may engage in more passive activities. Ninety per cent of the electorate watch some coverage of the election campaigns, two-thirds read about the campaigns in a newspaper and a third talk to others and try to influence their opinions. At election time, many volunteers are willing to distribute buttons and stickers or decorate their cars, and many are willing to donate money – often via the Internet. Moreover, the spirit of volunteerism is alive and well, and many involve themselves in social and to a lesser extent political movements. Such research tends to support the idea that Americans are relatively willing to participate in public affairs, though few are willing to engage in active political work on behalf of a candidate or party.

A comparative study of five democracies (Germany, Great Britain, Japan, The Netherlands and the United States) found that Americans were more willing to engage in political activities than residents of the other countries.[14] They held a lead on issues such as signing political petitions, attending public meetings, contacting officials or politicians, and writing to newspapers. They also scored highly on volunteering and giving money to non-political public-affairs programmes.

America has a culture that values participation. When it comes to voting or standing for election, America provides more opportunities for participation than Britain. Apart from the frequency of elections for a vast array of public positions, many states hold initiatives and referendums (see pp. 296–7), some in New England also having town meetings. In Britain, only a very small minority of the population actively engage in political affairs and the indications are that the proportion is diminishing rather than increasing. Voting and party membership figures are sharply down in comparison with the early postwar years: levels of political knowledge are low, with many young people leaving school without the information, skills and attitudes which are necessary for citizens to contribute actively to democratic life. In a major study, Parry *et al.* concluded that 23.2 per cent of the population was involved in a variety of political activities beyond voting, 51 per cent limited their involvement to voting in elections and the remaining 25.8 per cent were almost inactive.[15] The political participation of the vast majority is either minimal or almost non-existent.

In Britain and America, the more active participants in the political process tend to be well-educated, middle-class, middle-income, middle-aged and white members of the electorate. Those who work in community organisations are more likely to engage in activities, as are those who have an allegiance to a political party. Lack of participation does not necessarily imply apathy, though it may indicate a feeling that the effort involved will have no impact on the outcome of events. Some people are too busy with work and family responsibilities to find time to follow events closely, attend meetings or join groups. In America, those traditionally reluctant to participate have sometimes in the past been deterred by threats of intimidation. Whereas many African-Americans in the South a few decades ago engaged in sit-ins, boycotts and acts of civil disobedience in a bid to obtain the full rights of citizenship, others were afraid that such forms of activity might endanger their livelihood.

The reluctance of young people to get involved may reflect the fact that they tend to lead more unsettled lives or experience changes in their lifestyles. They may be attending college, adjusting to work, starting a family or trying to carve out the means of financial self-support. Moreover, older people are sometimes more affected by the issues which often arouse civic activity. As parents, homeowners and taxpayers, they may find more reason to get involved because their own or family interests are much at stake.

Practising politicians and those who write about politics often urge greater commitment to and participation in public affairs, bemoaning the lack of interest which they portray as indicative of apathy. There is an opposing view, argued by Lipset and others which suggests that participation is low because the majority of people are broadly satisfied with the political system as it is and the way things are for them.[16] They do not feel inspired to engage more actively simply because they are suffering no real hardship and what happens at election time is unlikely to change their lifestyle seriously for the worse. Increased activity – should it ever recur – would perhaps indicate that the fundamental cohesion of society is under stress.

organise society. Today, many of the great issues have gone. We live in a post-materialist age in which the majority of people now live a much better life than their predecessors of fifty years ago. Increasingly what matters are quality of life issues such as minority rights and the environment, and pressure groups represent these as well as, or better than, political parties. The descendants of the committed voters of yesteryear are perhaps today's pressure-group campaigners, who feel that involvement in community issues makes more sense than the conventional world of party politics, in which the parties no longer represent any real clash of ideas.

Voting behaviour

The scientific study of voting habits (psephology) was one of the early areas of academic interest in the study of political behaviour. The subject lends itself to various forms of academic theorising, much of it based upon the findings of samples of opinion and various forms of statistical analysis. Early studies were *The American Voter* in the USA, and the Butler and Stokes' volume on *Political Change in Britain*. These and other works illustrated how voting was influenced by long- and short-term influences. In particular, they showed that voting was connected with long-term loyalty to a particular party (party identification) and was reinforced by membership of particular groups, based on class, membership or otherwise of trade unions, gender and religion. In America, the deep-seated association with party was often stressed, whereas in Western Europe more attention was paid to loyalty to some social grouping; as Hague and Harrop explain, their 'social identity anchored their party choice'.[17] Either way, be it identification with a party or with a group, the outcome was that voting behaviour was – in Punnett's phrase – 'habitual and ingrained'.[18]

Since those early days, theories of voting behaviour have undergone substantial change. Social changes have occurred in all developed countries, and these mean that old nostrums have had to be reconsidered in the light of experience. The old certainties have vanished, and voting is now less predictable than in the past. In an age of greater volatility, short-term influences are likely to be more significant, and parties cannot count on traditional loyalties to provide them with mass support.

As a broad generalisation applicable to most Western democracies, voting behaviour has departed from class and party alignments. The key factors usually identified today are issues (in particular, the state of the economy), competence in government and the personal appeal of individual leaders. As a result of the performance of the leader, the handling of events and the effectiveness of its campaigning, the party creates an image in the mind of the voter. A reputation for competence and credibility is essential; without them, it is hard to convince people that the party deserves their vote.

Voting is no longer a matter of lifelong commitment. Voters judge governments more by the results of their labours, usually rewarding them for economic prosperity and punishing them when times are hard.

Determinants of voting behaviour: short- and long-term factors

Short-term influences relate to a particular election, and any conclusions based upon them lack more general validity. The most important of them are:

- the state of the economy;
- the personality and performance of political leaders;
- the nature of the campaign;
- the mass media;
- events in office, especially those leading up to the election.

Long-term influences upon voting include:

- party identification and loyalty;
- social class;
- other long-term factors relating to the social structure, which include age, gender, occupation, race and religion.

Broadly, the long-term factors have declined in their importance in British and American politics and the short-term ones have assumed an increased significance. The breakdown of traditional associations has been of considerable importance for the main parties which can no longer count on the support they once took for granted.

Traditional sources of party support in Britain and the United States

The two main parties in Britain and America still appeal more strongly to particular groups in the electorate. In spite of its losses in 1997 and particularly 2001, Labour still has a core of support among working-class voters of the industrial North, Central Scotland and the Welsh valleys, but it is also strong among many of those professionals who work in the public sector and among ethnic minorities. The Democrats still have the backing of many less well-rewarded Americans, among them poor whites, blacks, Hispanics and Jews, as well as that of the liberal intelligentsia in the northern towns and cities; they have also scored well among Catholics. The Conservatives have always gained the backing of a solid section of the middle classes (although that support is declining) and business interests, although many working people are attracted by the 'tough' attitudes it has long adopted on issues such as immigration and race relations, and law and order, and by its strongly patriotic stance. The Republicans have tended to draw their support from the better off, business and professional classes, and especially among rural, small-town and suburban Protestants.

Recent trends

Stability rather than change was once the established pattern in voting behaviour, and many voters were reluctant or unwilling to deviate from

their regular habits. In recent years, partisan **dealignment** has occurred, and this means that there has been a weakening of the old loyalties.

dealignment
The process by which voters from a particular social class no longer support the party which has traditionally claimed to support the interests of that class.

Social class was once a key determinant of voting, with the working classes in any country tending to vote for the more progressive party and the better-off inclining to the political Right. Class identification has always been weaker in America than in Britain. Many Americans are unsure about the class to which they belong, and tend to regard the matter as relatively unimportant. Many describe themselves as members of the middle class, but those who might by commentators be defined as middle or upper class are often keen to point out that they are working Americans. This means that any analysis of American voting behaviour in class terms presents special difficulties. However, whatever the qualifications, class was still important until the 1980s, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Today, the importance of class has declined. There were always many voters in Britain, the rest of Western Europe and America who deviated from class voting, but that number substantially increased in the 1980s as right-wing administrations such as those of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan managed to increase their appeal – particularly among the more skilled working people who had aspirations to upgrade their lifestyles and prospects. With changes in the pattern of industry and a weakening of trade unions, class structures and allegiances were undermined. In most advanced countries, sections of the population have become better off and the manual working class has diminished in size.

In these circumstances, the personality of the candidate has assumed greater importance, the more so as party identification has become less firm and voters are able to learn and see so much more, via the mass media about those who would lead them. So too has the importance of issues and of the election campaign become more significant as there are today more votes 'up for grabs'.

The broad trends in voting behaviour in recent years are that:

- Party identification means less today than was once the case. The hold of the parties was eroded in the 1970s and 1980s, and especially in the latter decade Ronald Reagan was able to make decisive inroads into the more skilled white vote and among Democrat support in the South. Margaret Thatcher had the same appeal to C2s, who liked her policies of lower direct taxation and trade union reform. In both countries, many voters no longer feel the need to vote for their traditional party; they make their mind up according to the issues of the day and the candidates on offer.

- Voting has become more candidate-centred. In a television age, voters know much more about the candidates, and considerations of perceived competence, integrity and visual appeal matter more than ever before. In presidential debates, these qualities can be easily assessed by the electorate, but television presents many other opportunities for voters to learn more about the personalities and qualities of those who aspire to lead them.
- Policy issues may play a greater role than in the past. Even for educated and informed voters, it is not easy to know exactly what policies the parties stand for, and it was long thought that few people decided their vote according to what they thought the two parties believed about key issues. In *The American Voter*, the authors dismissed policy voting as something relevant to only a tiny percentage of Americans.[19] More recent studies have suggested that voters use policy positions to assess candidates; today, those who stand for office are regularly grilled about how they respond to particular issues and events.
- Parties of the Left have seen the need to widen the social basis of their appeal. Bill Clinton saw the need to attract the support of working Americans (see pp. 200–1), and Labour leaders from Neil Kinnock to Tony Blair have recognised the need to have a broader social base. Tony Blair has deliberately tried to pitch a claim to the voters of Middle England.

Election campaigning

Campaigns and campaigning are an integral part of the democratic process. The task of those who run campaigns is to ensure that the electorate is well-informed about the personalities and issues involved. In particular, campaign managers wish to see that there is a maximum turnout on the day. British election campaigns are much shorter than American ones. Even though there is much speculation and a pre-election atmosphere in the third or fourth year of the lifetime of a Parliament, the campaign proper lasts only three to four weeks. Campaigns for all elective offices in America are longer, but this is especially true of presidential ones.

Election campaigns have never been the same since the televising of politics began in the late 1950s. New styles of campaigning have developed, so that in recent years there have been innovative polling techniques, the wider use of focus groups, the introduction of professional advisers, and an emphasis on the training of candidates. This greater professionalism of campaigns has been fairly general in all political systems, as has the increasing emphasis on the qualities of the candidate rather than the party. In this world of more **candidate-centred campaigning**, professional consultants have acquired a new importance. For years major parties have brought in outside agencies to advise them, but now they maintain a core of their own image and marketing

specialists, who are either employed permanently at headquarters or are easily available.

candidate-centred campaigning
A campaign in which the emphasis is on the role and activity of the individual candidate, rather than on the party he or she represents. Consultants (see p. 257 and below) and volunteers coordinate campaign activities, develop strategies and raise funds, although parties are likely to be involved.

Skilful use of the media has become something of an art form in modern elections, and campaigns are often based around opportunities for media coverage, particularly on television. (see pp. 256–60 for further information on the use of the media and their impact on election campaigns). Like the cinema, television is a medium of entertainment, so parties, politicians (and in particular their advisers) have seen the need to attune performances to its demands. Whereas the Victorian Prime Minister Gladstone set out to convince his audience by a reasoned statement of his views, the emphasis in political campaigning is now increasingly upon broad themes rather than policies, emotion rather than rational debate. There is a danger that sound-bites may replace genuine discussion.

Media **consultants** are always on the look-out for opportunities to maximise free television coverage. Election advertising is expensive, whether the money is spent on American-style paid advertisements or on poster hoardings. So rallies and speeches addressed to large meetings are often scheduled to ensure that they gain as much exposure as possible on news bulletins. Today, meetings are often revivalist gatherings, staged occasions such as the Sheffield Rally (a triumphalist gathering in 1992, very reminiscent of the American convention), to which entrance is carefully controlled and in which everything is done to make it a media success.

consultants
Consultants have been increasingly used over the last three decades. Most of them specialise in some aspect of election campaigning such as fund-raising or polling, although others are involved in all aspects of the electoral process from advising on personal appearance, voice projection, the management of pseudo-events and even policy positions. They tend to work for one party, with whom they have political sympathies. In America, the influence of these communications experts is all-pervasive, and their numbers have grown dramatically. Their use has now spread to many democracies, including Britain. They are all in the business of 'selling politicians'.

In presidential states such as the United States, the marketing of politics has been particularly well developed. Electioneering has always been more candidate-centred, parties having been less entrenched in the political system. Not surprisingly, many new techniques of electioneering have been brought in to Britain from across the Atlantic, leading to accusations about the 'Americanisation of elections'. Britain has in many ways learnt from the American experience. In recent years, there has been an increasing British obsession with walkabouts, photo-opportunities and other pseudo-events created for the media. As in other countries, parties have adjusted to the changes needed in the methods and to the changed environment in which they now operate.

British elections are still more party-centred than American ones, the party rather than the candidate being the focus of attention. It is the party which coordinates the campaign, raising and allocating the spending of funds and developing policies and strategies. However, party managers recognise that television is a medium which thrives on personalities, and they like to field politicians who flourish in media discussions and on chat-shows. Butler and Kavanagh recognised the importance of television in particular, in their summary of the impact of the media on the 1997 election:

> **More than ever, election campaigns are managed and orchestrated. Each party attempts to shape the agenda so that the media reflects its views on favourite issues . . . An election campaign is increasingly seen by those in charge as an exercise in marketing and many of the skills of selling goods and services to customers are now applied to the electorate.**[20]

Party broadcasts instead of political advertisements, free air-time, vigilant journalists, and politicians more prepared to answer questions about their proposals, help to differentiate British from US experience in certain respects, and are some kind of protection against our adopting the worst aspects of American electioneering methods into Britain. But even the party broadcasts themselves have to some degree 'gone American' in style and form.

The role of money

The role of money in modern elections is very important. Indeed, some would say that it always has been. In nineteenth-century Britain, the old rotten and pocket boroughs were a byword for corruption, and a person's vote was highly prized. In 1895 in America, a Republican senator observed that 'there are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is'. Today, financing campaigns is a particularly expensive proposition, especially in America where the charges for television advertising and the fees charged by pollsters and other election strategists are very high. The sources of campaign funding and the ways in which money is spent are hot political issues.

There are several reasons why individuals and organisations give money to political parties. It may derive from the benevolence of a benefactor, it may be given out of idealistic support for a particular individual, idea or set of party principles, or it may be offered in the hope of securing some goal of personal or group benefit. What is important is that, whatever the motive of the donor, elected representatives and parties – once holding public office – do not feel unduly beholden to those who have financed their campaign, at the expense of the general public who they are there to represent. This is the widespread fear about the role of finance in politics today, that money given is 'interested money' in that those who donate it are looking for favours from the people they back.

Controls over spending in Britain and America

In Britain, controls over electoral expenses have traditionally operated at the local rather than the national level. Each candidate is required to appoint an agent who has to authorise spending and file a statement showing the total sum spent and how the money was allocated. The formula used allows each candidate to spend between £5000–£6000. In comparison with what candidates can spend in America, this is a very small sum, a reflection of the shorter campaigns (no primaries are held) and the lack of paid political advertising; they also benefit from a free postal delivery to each voter. Most candidates spend considerably less than the permitted limit.

At the national level, there were no controls until those laid down for the 2001 general election. Again the amounts are considerably smaller than applies in America, for the reasons given above. Instead of paid time on radio and television, parties get an allocated number of free broadcasts and a great deal of free news coverage. Their spending is on newspaper advertising, posters and pamphlets, as well as on the personal appearances and news conferences of the party leaders.

In recent years, central expenditure has risen sharply because the parties have conducted more professional campaigns, and employ public-relations specialists – and other political consultants – to assist them in their task. By international standards, the amounts are not vast, but one feature which has aroused frequent comment in the past is the fact that the Conservatives could easily outspend their opponents. This happened in 1997, but not in 2001. For this election, the parties were subjected to a national cap on spending as one means of limiting their necessity to raise as much money (and therefore in the eyes of the Neill Committee weakening the case for state finance). The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (2000) meant that the election campaign would cost no more than in 1997. There was a ceiling of £14.5m per party on national spending. In fact this figure was not reached by Labour or the Conservatives, who each spent less than four years earlier. Provisional figures by Butler and Kavanagh suggest that whereas Labour spending was around £12–13m, the Conservatives on this occasion spent only £9m.[21]

The new arrangements have not ended the controversy surrounding party finance. For the 2000 election, the parties sought and received large donations from wealthy businessmen such as Lords Hamlyn and Sainsbury, who both contributed generously (£2m each) to Labour funds. Lord Irvine caused some controversy by staging a fund-raising dinner for Labour-supporting lawyers, a move seen by some commentators as inappropriate because as Lord Chancellor he would be making future judicial appointments which might involve some of them.

The whole issue of spending on elections is of course related to the issues surrounding party funding and the desirability or otherwise of state aid. These are discussed under Party finance on pp. 207–11.

America

The role of money in American elections has long been controversial, as have been the sources of funding. The concern pre-dates Watergate, and was originally caused by anxiety about the large increase in campaign spending which resulted from the use of political advertisements on television. In the 1960s, some states were introducing limits on campaign finance. The first federal legislation was in 1971, but it was the illegal activities of the pro-Nixon Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP), which provided for a tightening up of the law, that led to demands for a further tightening. As a result of the 1974 Federal Election Reform Act, much tighter controls were introduced.

Two main themes were tackled in the second measure: the importance of tough limits on contributions and the need for public funding of election campaigning. The new legislation tightened up the rules for disclosure of campaign income, and restricted the influence of wealthy individuals. Strict limits were imposed. Donations of more than $100 had to be disclosed. Individuals could pay up to $1000 towards a single campaign, with primaries and general elections being counted as separate entities; a maximum expenditure of $25,000 per year was permitted. There was no overall limit on the amount which PACs could provide in a single year or on the number of candidates they could support, but they were restricted to $5000 a candidate per campaign. PACs were thus placed at an advantage over other donors, so that, as Grant has pointed out, 'the law effectively increased candidates' reliance on them'.[22]

The law has been used to regulate the raising and spending of money, but there remains a significant difference in the actual provisions of the law and current practice. There are ways in which the regulations can be evaded, particularly by the collection of so-called '**soft money**'. An amendment to FECA in 1979 allowed parties to raise and spend money to be used on party-building and get-out-the-vote activities, a purpose which is not easy to distinguish from supporting party candidates. As the amount of spending on these activities has significantly increased of late, there are grounds for suspicion about the ways in which money is used.

soft money

Money contributed in ways and for purposes (such as registration and mass-mailing) which do not infringe the law, as opposed to 'hard money' contributions which are strictly regulated. Soft money is collected at state and local level, but is often used for national purposes.

Given the new technology and methods of electioneering, the costs of presidential elections have risen dramatically in recent years. An

individual is – in most cases – unlikely to be able to meet those costs on his or her own. The difficulty is all the greater if the candidate is not an incumbent congress member, for incumbents find it easier to raise money from affluent individuals and from PACs, which prefer to contribute to sitting tenants than to challengers. Figures from the Federal Election Commission suggest that in the 2000 contest, Al Gore spent $117.1 on his primary and general election campaigns, George Bush $168.4.

It is not just presidential elections which are hugely expensive. Congressional candidates can spend as much as they can raise and there are no limits on how much a candidate can spend from personal funds. Obviously, richer candidates benefit from this, which leads to the criticism that only wealthy people can succeed in American politics. In 1994, Michael Huffington spent $28m on trying, without success, to unseat the Democrat incumbent, who herself spent $8m. In 2000, Jon Corzine, running successfully in the New Jersey Democratic primary for the senatorial election, spent $33m, more than Huffington had spent on the entire Senate race. In both cases, much of the money was spent on advertising. It is the frequency with which advertisements are repeated which makes election campaigns so expensive, for what happens is that at present candidates with greater means available can outgun their opponents simply by reiterating the message over and over again.

Referendums and their value

Those who advocate a referendum – with or without an initiative – are concerned with the way in which decisions are taken. They want to see more direct public involvement, so that those in power act in accordance with the express wishes of the electorate. Referendums, initiatives and the recall are methods of direct democracy, enabling the voters to decide issues for themselves.

Forms of direct democracy: some definitions

The **referendum** has been defined by Magleby as a 'vote of the people on a proposed law, policy or public expenditure'.[23] In other words, it is a vote on a single issue, allowing people to respond in a simple 'yes'/'no' fashion to the question asked. In many countries, the vote will be on a constitutional matter, such as a change in the system of holding elections.

An **initiative** is a device via which an individual or group may propose legislation by securing the signatures of a required number of qualified voters (usually around 10 per cent in American states). In most countries that have referendums, there is also provision for the right of popular initiative as well.

A **recall** allows a specified number of voters to demand a vote on whether an elected official should be 'recalled' or removed from office. Fifteen American states have provision for the recall, but it has very rarely been employed.

The growth of interest in referendums world-wide

Referendums, usually then called plebiscites, were used by some twentieth-century dictators. They used the trappings of democracy to conceal their real intention, which was to boost their authority by creating the impression of legitimacy. This is why Prime Minister Attlee (1945–51) was disparaging about them, portraying them as 'devices alien to our traditions', the instruments of 'demagogues and dictators'. They have also featured in democratic regimes with authoritarian overtones, such as the Fifth French Republic in the days of Charles de Gaulle. However, such overtones have largely disappeared, and initiatives and referendums are now used with increasing regularity in countries and states which have impeccable democratic credentials.

In recent years referendums have been much more widely used in most parts of the world. Hague and Harrop have calculated that of the 728 referendums held in the world between 1900 and 1993, 65 per cent occurred after 1960.[24] A growing number of American states have used them to decide on contentious moral issues from the use of cannabis for treatment of the sick to the right to 'death with dignity' via euthanasia, on social issues such as the rights of minorities to health reform and on constitutional issues such as term limits for those who serve in positions of political power. Some member states of the European Union have used them to confirm their membership or to ratify some important constitutional development. In Switzerland, they are built into the regular machinery of government, and are held on a three-monthly basis.

In some countries, the outcome of referendums is binding, in others it is advisory. In Britain, with its commitment to the idea of parliamentary sovereignty, only Parliament can cast a decisive vote on any issue, but it is unlikely that a majority of legislators would make a habit of casting their parliamentary vote in defiance of the popular will as expressed in a referendum. The Swedes did so in 1955, when the people voted to continue to drive on the left and the government of the day ignored the outcome. (They were slow to follow the voters' wishes expressed in 1980 to decommission nuclear power stations; the process did not begin for twenty years.) British governments have accepted that to consult and then to ignore the verdict is worse than never to have sought an opinion. In 1975, Prime Minister Wilson accepted that a majority of even a single vote against so doing would be enough to take Britain out of the European Community. In other words, both governments and MPs accept that they should treat the popular verdict as mandatory, in the sense that it is morally and politically binding.

Referendums in Britain and the United States

Britain has until recently had very little experience of voting on a single issue, even though the case has often been canvassed in the twentieth century. The

Conservatives held a referendum on the border issue in Northern Ireland in 1973, and Labour allowed the Scots and the Welsh to vote on whether they wanted devolution in 1979. Yet the only occasion when all of the voters have been allowed to vote on a key national issues was four years earlier, when they were asked whether or not they wished the country to remain in the European Economic Community. There have been local votes on the future status of schools and the ownership of council estates, as well as in a few cases on the issue of whether to cut the level of Council Tax or to cut services provided. In Wales the issue of 'local option' (the Sunday opening of pubs) was decided in this way.

Since May 1997 referendums have already been used to resolve the issue of devolution, and the future shape of London's government. Also, in concurrent votes, the voters of the six counties and of the Irish Republic signified their approval of the Good Friday Agreement. Ministers have held out the possibility of a vote on electoral reform at some time in the near future, and should there be a decision for Britain to join the single currency then this too will be submitted to the people for popular backing.

Experience of national referendums in the United Kingdom 1973–2002

Year	*Topic*	*Turnout and outcome*
1973	Border poll in Northern Ireland: electorate askedif they wished to remain a part of the UKor join the Republic of Ireland.	61% Massive majority to remain in UK
1975	UK's membership of EEC: electorate asked if they wished to stay in the Community or withdraw from it.	64% Two-thirds majority to stay in (43% of whole electorate)
1979	Devolution to Scotland and Wales: each electorate was asked if it wanted a devolved assembly.	Scotland 62.8% Narrow majority in favour Wales 58.3% majority against
1997	Devolution to Scotland and Wales: each electorate was asked if it wanted a devolved assembly.	Scotland 60.1% Strong majority for Wales 50.1% Very narrow majority for
1998	Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland: voters north and south of border asked to endorse the package.	81% Overwhelming majority in favour

In America, there has never been a national referendum, but most of the states have provision for some form of direct legislation. In about one-third of them, it has become an accepted feature over the last two decades. In almost all cases, the facility has been available for much longer, and although some states have recently considered incorporating it into their constitutional arrangements only Mississippi has actually done so. It is in the western states

that direct legislation is most widely used; few states in the South and North-east employ it, New England still using the town meeting (see p. 301) to resolve many issues.

American direct democracy has its roots in the Progressive era before World War One. Reformers wanted to open up and cleanse politics in state legislatures, which were often excessively beholden to powerful interests and sometimes downright corrupt. Initiatives and referendums fell out of fashion for several decades, but acquired renewed appeal in the 1970s, became more widespread in the 1980s, and in the 1990s became so popular that there were some 400 of them. Today, initiatives outnumber referendums by approximately five to one. Recent topics on which the people have voted include term limits on how long a person can serve in a state legislature or on Capitol Hill, fiscal policy (especially concerning taxes), utilities policy, business policy, environmental policy and issues of minority rights such as the treatment of the disabled and of gays. An innovatory one was the Death with Dignity vote in Oregon by which voters backed euthanasia, a decision subsequently challenged in the courts.

California has shown the greatest enthusiasm for direct democracy. In 1978, Proposition 13 limited the extent of property taxes and by so doing gave an early indication of the strength of feeling of many Americans about the levels of taxation imposed upon them; in 1988 (Proposition 98), the voters decided to specify that at least 40 per cent of state expenditure must be spent on education, the effect being to protect school budgets, at the expense of higher education and welfare provision. Sixteen years on, Proposition 187 in the same state denied all but emergency services to illegal immigrants.

Activists in pressure groups have come to see the initiative in particular as a means of moving their concerns up the political agenda, and as part of their growing professionalism have brought in consultants to offer expertise in handling initiative campaigns. In other words, organising direct democracy has become a growth industry, and it has been encouraged by the media, who like to provide coverage of the causes and those who advocate them. Campaigners are often colourful characters, and the stories often have a human or self-interest aspect, of broad appeal.

The arguments surrounding the use of direct democracy

The case for

1 The basic case is that a democracy rests upon the people's will; a vote on a single issue is the most direct and accurate way of getting their verdict. Such an exercise in direct democracy has an intrinsic appeal, for the idea of 'letting the people have their say' appears to gel with the usual understanding of what

democratic government involves. America, with its use of the initiative, capitalises on this idea.

2 General elections in Britain and statewide elections in America have their limitations as a means of consultation, in that they only occur every few years so that for many people their political involvement occurs only very infrequently. They have no chance to register their changing opinions and are excluded from the process for much of the time. Referendums offer the possibility of more regular participation and help maintain interest in the political process. Also, general elections are usually won on a minority basis which casts doubt upon any claims that the government of the day is acting with popular backing in pursuing its policies. Moreover, elections are essentially an overall verdict on the performance of the government, and do not show the strength and extent of feeling on particular issues.

3 Referendums are also useful for the government in that they can strengthen its authority as it seeks to deal with difficult issues. France and Australia have provision to resolve a political impasse by using such direct questioning, and there are occasions when a government – faced with a difficult, divisive issue on which feelings cross party lines – may wish to reinforce its own stance and improve its negotiating position.

4 Referendums are a particularly useful expedient for those issues on which government seems to be divided; they help to resolve the impasse.

5 Referendums resolve questions in such a way that there is a final solution to an issue which will not go away. Critics of a particular policy are more likely to accept the result if they know that it is the public view.

6 Where the initiative is used, citizens have an opportunity to raise issues and criticisms which politicians might be reluctant to take up and which otherwise might not be aired.

7 Initiatives and the recall are means of overcoming the obstructionism of out-of-touch legislators and therefore make reform more likely.

The case against

Many of the points raised by critics have more force in Britain than in America. In Britain there has been much more unease about its use than has been the case in America which allows initiatives on moral and social issues, as well as political ones.

1 Britain is a representative, not a direct democracy. It does not require that people vote on every single item, rather that they elect MPs who being close to the centre of the argument and able to inform themselves fully on the issue, then vote on our behalf. If we then do not like how they exercise that choice,

we can deny them our vote at the next election. If elected representatives pass the question back to voters for their determination, then they shirk the responsibility which representative government clearly places upon them.

2 The questions asked can be very complicated for the electorate. Some issues are so complex, and require such knowledge and understanding, that a worthwhile judgement is difficult for the average voter to make. Making a general assessment of the performance of the government at an election is arguably much easier than deciding on the merits of a single European currency. Sometimes information is very technical and people may lack sufficient information to form a fair and balanced opinion on a topic.

3 The result of a referendum can get muddled up with other issues. Thus in 1979 opinion polls suggested that the majority of Scots favoured devolution, but there was a background of governmental unpopularity. It is significant that the Conservatives campaigned for a 'no' vote and argued that this was a vote against the Labour Government's plans and not against the principle of devolution; indeed, they promised to bring forward proposals of their own!

4 If the principle of giving people a referendum on constitutional issues is conceded, then it is not easy to resist the desire for one on social issues. It is hard to see the logic by which, in a parliamentary system, you can pick and choose your forays into populism and hope to retain respect. Many people would like a vote on capital punishment, and judging by opinion polls the verdict would be strongly in favour of its return, despite the fact that there is much evidence to show that it has virtually no deterrent effect. Surely ministers and MPs have a duty to give a lead on such issues? They have the chance to hear expert evidence – in this case that of criminologists and from other countries – and can educate the public accordingly. Sometimes, a government might quite properly defy public opinion in the long-term interest of society. Political leadership does not consist of slavishly following public opinion, but in shaping it.

5 In addition, there are certain technical problems with a referendum. The wording of the question can be a problem. It has often been said that 'he who frames the question determines the outcome'. In Chile, the notorious General Pinochet gained 75 per cent acquiescence for the proposition: 'In the face of international aggression unleashed against the government of the fatherland, I support President Pinochet in his defence of the dignity of Chile'.

6 Timing can be another difficulty. For instance, any vote on hanging held in the aftermath of some horrific killing could be unduly swayed by emotional considerations. There is a danger that the circumstances in which it takes place could affect the result. Moreover, the referendum only tells what the public

are thinking at a particular time, on a particular day. Logically, further votes are necessary to ensure that ministers are acting in line with the public mood.

7 The status of referendums is also a difficulty. If a referendum is advisory, as in our system it must be (for Parliament makes the law), could one really expect MPs to support reintroduction of the death penalty against their deeply held beliefs? Yet if MPs ignored the popular verdict, the situation would be that people would have been invited to declare their preference and the House of Commons would have exercised its undoubted right to decide differently. This would only further damage people's faith in the parliamentary system.

8 [Applicable more especially to America, with its widespread use of initiatives.] Proposals can be ill-thought-out and badly drafted, their ambiguities leading to lawsuits and court interpretation and eventually requiring the passage of corrective measures. Moreover, they encourage voters to think in terms of single-issue politics rather than debate the issues involved in the context of broad principles which might govern all policy areas. They work to the advantage of illiberal majorities, which can legitimise their discriminatory feelings against minorities; the losers are often minorities such as gays and immigrants.

9 [A general point, widely applicable.] Campaigns can be expensive, so that well-funded groups are at an advantage. In particular, wealthy business interests are likely to have far more money to deploy than environmental or social groups with which they may be in conflict. In Britain, the pro-Europeans in the 1975 referendum were backed by powerful pro-business vested interests. On one issue concerning increases in automobile insurance, 250 Californian insurance companies raised over $43m in contributions, but with over $8.6 billion in automobile insurange premiums at stake such efforts are not surprising.[25] In New Jersey, gambling interests spent heavily on advertisements that painted an unduly rosy picture of the benefits of introducing gambling into the state.

The case considered

The case is not clear-cut, and many who warm to the idea of votes on constitutional issues are reluctant to see the public vote on issues such as abortion, capital punishment and gay sex. Much clearly depends on the view taken of legislatures and of the collective wisdom of the electorate to determine difficult issues. Those of more liberal persuasion have often expressed some suspicion of initiatives and referendums, seeing them as an instrument of conservatism. In Switzerland, the voters have consistently voted to reject membership of the United Nations and elsewhere they have often been seen as a means of defending the status quo.

The motives of those who call for a vote might be doubted. It can be for the wrong reasons, such as the self-interest of big business companies. Or again, the demand for a referendum can be the political refuge of the politician whose purpose may be to dodge a damaging internal party division. Usually, referendums are advocated by those who think that their side can win. Often, support for direct democracy has little to do with the merits of democratic consultation and popular participation. Lord Jenkins, whose interest in the rights of voters and politicians has already been mentioned, summed up the point about the proper usage of referendums when he spoke in the debates on the passage of the Maastricht Bill in 1993. They should be used 'as part of a clearly thought out constitutional scheme and not just as a by-product or a tactical ploy by those who have tried and failed to defeat this Bill in every possible way'.

OTHER FORMS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Town meetings

In the six states of New England, local governments rely on a very democratic form of governance, the town meeting. Every year, residents gather to vote on a range of issues such as the local budget, tax levies, marriage for gay couples and the purchase of a new pickup truck to clear the snow-bound streets. Having made their decisions, they then elect town officials from amongst their midst, whose task is to implement the decisions and conduct council business over the coming year.

As a means of discerning the majority will via debate and voting, the method has much to commend it, although this method of direct democracy is more suited to thinly populated areas than to giant metropolitan ones. Even in parts of New England, it is has run into difficulties in recent years. There are complaints of low attendance, with the same few dozen people appearing every year and 'calling the shots'. In Maine, 80 out of 7600 residents of Farmington turned out in 2000, in Skowhegan the figure was 60 out of 9,000. Voter apathy, changing working hours and a fast-forward lifestyle are seen as the enemies of popular involvement, which flourished in days when there were few other attractions than a travelling circus. Maine and other states has made greater use of citizen-initiated referendums over the last decade.

Teledemocracy

As yet, the hi-tech age has not significantly impacted on the democratic process, other than in the use of voting machines and punch cards to record votes. But in North Carolina the cable has long been used to broadcast discussion of civic issues to many towns and cities. A taped government meeting is relayed for an hour, followed by a second hour of panel discussion involving officials and appropriate experts. Citizens can then interact directly with the panel during a call-in. The idea has been extended to allow voters to call in and cast a vote for or against particular proposals. As computers become ever more widely available, the method can be easily used as a means of conducting direct democracy from the comfort of the armchair.