Low U.S. turnout rates may also reflect the fact that a majority of states deny convicted felons voting rights while in jail, on parole, or on probation. Such restrictions deny about 1 adult in 50 the right to vote.

Low voter-turnout rates have fueled concern that Americans are becoming less connected to their communities and see less reason to get involved in politics. Nevertheless, the 2004 presidential election showed an increase in voter turnout compared with the 2000 election.

10.3 Choosing Candidates for Public Office: The Nomination Process

Approximately half a million people hold elective office in the United States. Candidates for nonpartisan offices, such as county sheriff, typically face one another in a single election. The candidate with the highest vote totals wins. For most national or state offices, however, candidates must compete for their party's nomination in a **primary election.** If they win this election, they go on to face the nominees of other parties in the **general election,** held later that year.

Primary Elections: Closed, Open, Blanket, and Nonpartisan

Primary elections, though common in the United States, are rare in the rest of the world. The idea of holding elections to choose a party's nominees was popularized during the Progressive Era in the early 1900s. Before then, nominees were often selected by party leaders who met behind closed doors. Primary elections brought the selection process out into the open and allowed party members to participate. Today, primary elections take several forms.

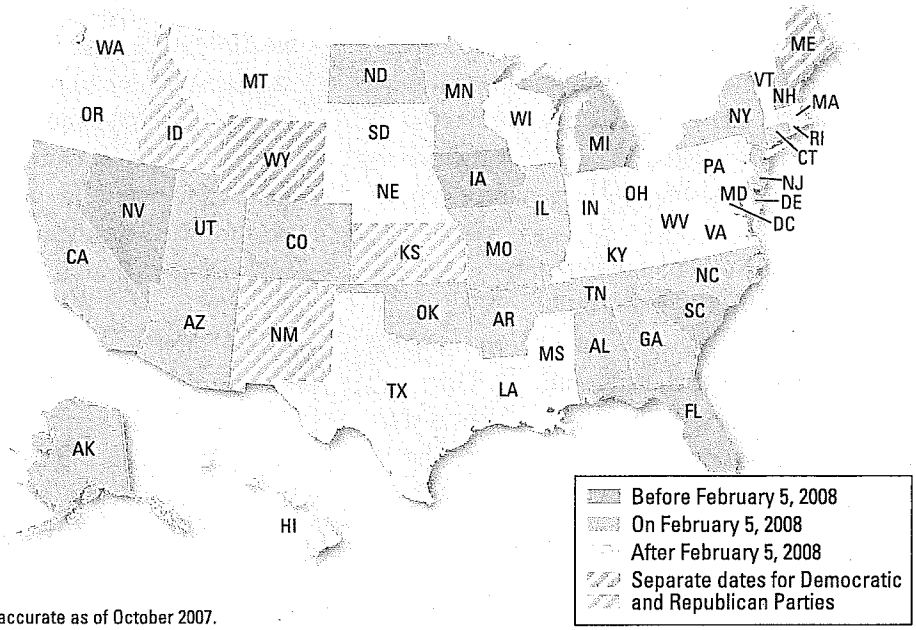
Closed primaries. States with a **closed primary** limit voting to registered party members. Independents are not allowed to participate. In some states, voters may declare their party affiliation on Election Day and vote in that party's primary. In general, party leaders prefer a closed primary, because it limits voting to the party faithful.

Open primaries. States with an **open primary** allow all voters to vote in primary elections. In this system, also known as pick-a-party primaries, voters decide which party primary to vote in on Election Day. Independent voters like this system because it allows them to participate in the primary of their choice.

The Incredible Shrinking Primary Season

In 2004, just nine states held presidential primaries or caucuses on or before the first Tuesday in February. In 2008, nearly two dozen states held their primaries on February 5, also known as Super-Duper Tuesday.

Presidential Primaries and Caucuses, 2008



Data accurate as of October 2007.

Tossing One's Hat Into the Ring

In January 2007, Hillary Clinton became the first Democratic presidential hopeful to announce her candidacy in a video posted on the Internet. "I'm in," she said, "and I'm in to win." In contrast, Republican hopeful Mitt Romney kicked off his campaign in a speech at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Taking up a theme of optimism, he said, "I believe the best days of this country are ahead of us."

However, party leaders worry about "raiding" in open primaries. Raiding occurs when voters cross party lines to vote in the other party's primary. Usually their purpose is to help nominate a weak candidate that their own party nominee can then easily defeat in the general election.

Blanket primaries. In a **blanket primary,** voters can pick and choose one candidate for each office from any party's primary list. Today this system is used in only a few states.

Nonpartisan primaries. Primaries are sometimes used to narrow the field in nonpartisan contests, such as for school board or city council elections. If one candidate wins a majority in a **nonpartisan primary,** that person takes office. If not, the two top vote-getters face each other in the general election.

Joining the Race: Self-Announcement, Exploratory Committees, and Drafts

To participate in a primary, the person running for office must become a declared candidate. This can happen in several ways. The most common is **self-announcement,** also known as throwing your hat into the ring. Candidates simply declare their interest in seeking election to a public office. Self-announcement is usually done at a press conference or other public event. In 2007, Hillary Clinton chose to self-announce her candidacy for president on her Web site.

Before making a formal announcement, however, the candidate may form an **exploratory committee.** This is a group of advisers who evaluate the candidate's chances for election. Exploratory committees often take several weeks to test the waters and determine the level of public support for their candidate. If the committee decides that circumstances are favorable, the candidate makes a formal announcement of candidacy.

For presidential candidates, announcements are sometimes made as early as two years before the election. By announcing early, candidates give themselves extra time to raise the funds and the support they will need for the hard primary campaign ahead.

In some cases, candidates do not self-announce. Instead, they wait for a groundswell of public support for their candidacy. In effect, they allow their supporters to draft them into the race.

Establishing a Campaign Organization

To win elective office, candidates must run a well-organized campaign. In most cases, this requires a campaign organization. These organizations vary in size and complexity, depending on the race.

Running for a city council seat might require a very small, local campaign organization. This group might consist of no more than a volunteer campaign manager and a treasurer. The candidate works with

this small team to write speeches, print posters and flyers, and manage other details of the campaign.

Running for president, on the other hand, demands a large, complex organization. A presidential race requires the services of hundreds of people, from unpaid volunteers to highly paid campaign professionals. Included in this staff would be a campaign manager, a public opinion pollster, a media consultant, a fundraising specialist, accountants, lawyers, and a press secretary. A presidential campaign organization would also have offices in every state. Of course, to set up and run such an organization requires money.

Building a War Chest by Dialing for Dollars

Jesse Unruh, a California politician, once observed, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." Without money, a political campaign cannot survive for long. This is true at all levels, whether a candidate is running for a local office or for president of the United States.

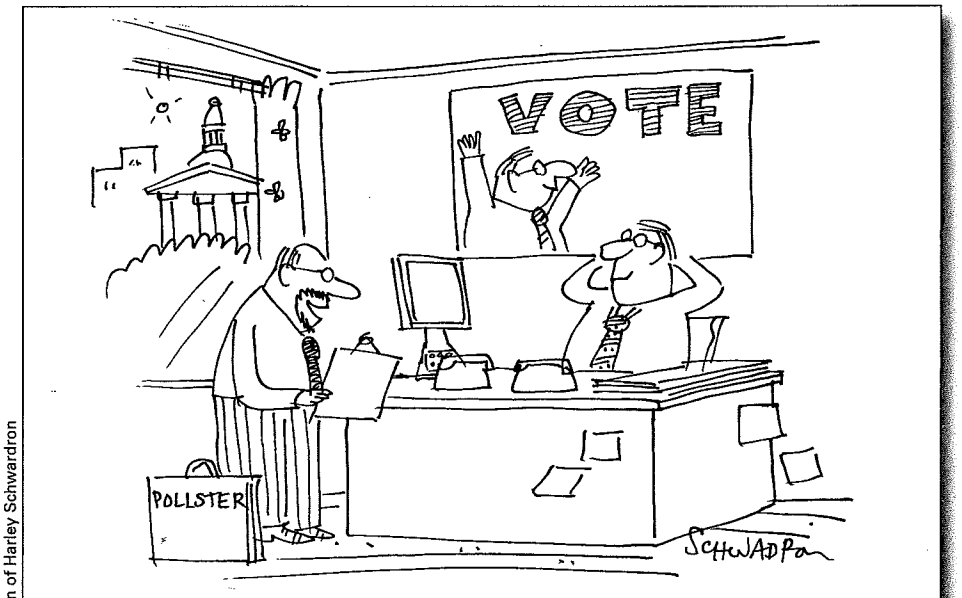
At the start of a campaign, candidates typically spend a great deal of time and energy raising money the old-fashioned way. They "dial for dollars," getting on the phone to ask associates and supporters for money. They hold fundraisers, such as $1,000-a-plate dinners, to solicit contributions from major donors. They also organize direct-mail campaigns and set up Web sites designed to attract funds from large numbers of small donors. If a candidate's fund-raising efforts are successful, the campaign will build up a **war chest,** or funds that can be used to move the campaign forward.

During presidential primary campaigns, the candidate with the largest war chest is often hailed as the front-runner. During the 2000 election, for example, George W. Bush raised a record amount of money early in the campaign and became the leading Republican candidate. A year before the first presidential primaries in 2008, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were declared front-runners in the race for the Democratic nomination, based on their early success at raising record amounts of campaign funds.

Developing Campaign Strategies and Themes

In most states, the road to nomination in partisan races is the primary election. But some states use a different method: the party **caucus.** A caucus is a closed meeting of people from one political party who will select candidates or delegates.

In a caucus state, small groups of party members meet in their communities to discuss the various candidates. Each caucus then chooses delegates to represent its views at the party's state convention. Approximately a dozen states hold caucuses. The best known are the Iowa caucuses, which take place early in presidential election years. The Iowa caucuses are watched closely, because they provide the



"15% like you as a conservative, 15% like you liberal, and 70% don't care . . . So my advice is to reinvent yourself as the 'I don't care' candidate."

In choosing a campaign theme and message, candidates often consult polls and pollsters. This cartoon takes aim at the kind of advice pollsters may give.

first indications of how well each candidate is doing at winning the support of average voters.

To prepare for caucuses and primaries, candidates must develop a campaign strategy. If this plan of action works well and the candidate wins the nomination, some of that strategy may carry over to the general election. Key elements of a strategy include tone, theme, and targeting.

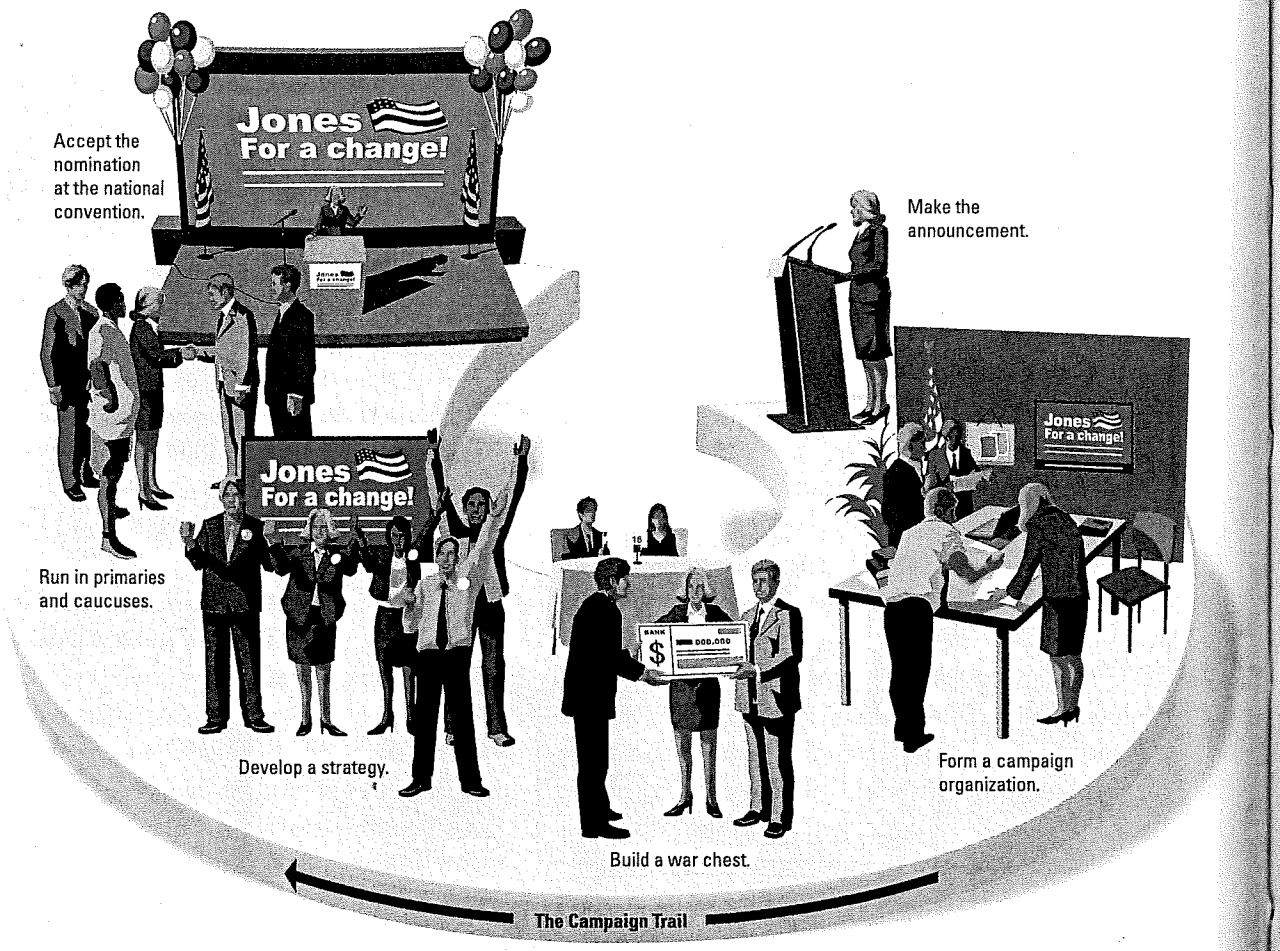
Tone. Candidates must decide whether to adopt a positive or a negative tone for their campaigns. This means determining how much time and money to spend stressing the positive things about their candidacy and how much to spend criticizing their opponents.

Theme. Every candidate needs a theme—a simple, appealing idea that gets repeated over and over. A theme helps distinguish a candidate from his or her opponents in the primaries. It is also critical in the general election, when candidates from different parties compete. When running for reelection in 1984, Ronald Reagan emphasized optimism, as expressed in his slogan, "It's morning again in America." In 1992, Bill Clinton organized his campaign around the theme of change. His campaign ads began, "I'm Bill Clinton, and I think you deserve a change."

Targeting. Candidates must also decide whether to target specific groups of voters. Is there any group—blue-collar workers, women, the middle class, the elderly—that is particularly unhappy with the status quo? If so, that group is a likely target for specially designed appeals from candidates.

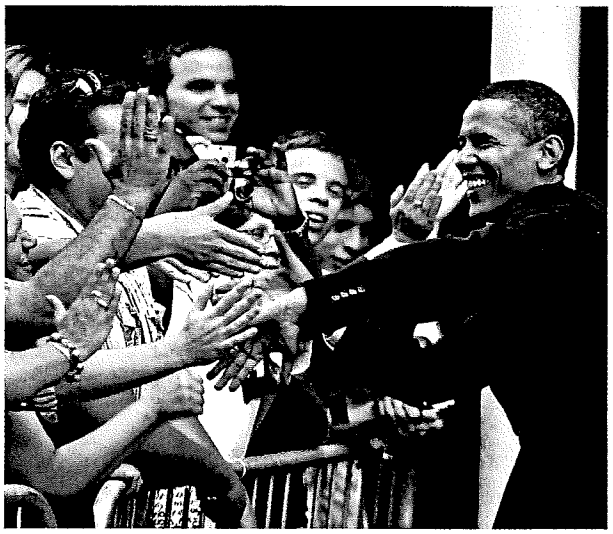
The Route to Nomination

To win elective office, candidates must first win their party's nomination. The process is similar for both congressional and presidential candidates. Presidential nominees, however, have the added step of the national convention.



Wholesale and Retail Politics

Early in the primary season, presidential candidates, like Democratic hopeful Barack Obama, have time to meet and greet voters individually. As the season wears on, retail politics gives way to wholesale methods, designed to reach large numbers of voters. One popular forum is the televised debate. Here, Republican candidates for president debate during the 2007–2008 primary season.



Another aspect of campaign strategy is how to present the candidate's political views during the primaries as opposed to during the general election. For the primaries, candidates tend to couch their message in terms that will appeal to the **party base**. The party base consists of party activists, who are more likely to vote in primary elections than are less-committed centrists. This base also holds more extreme views than the average middle-of-the-road voter. As a result, candidates often emphasize more liberal or conservative views in the primaries than they would in a general election campaign.

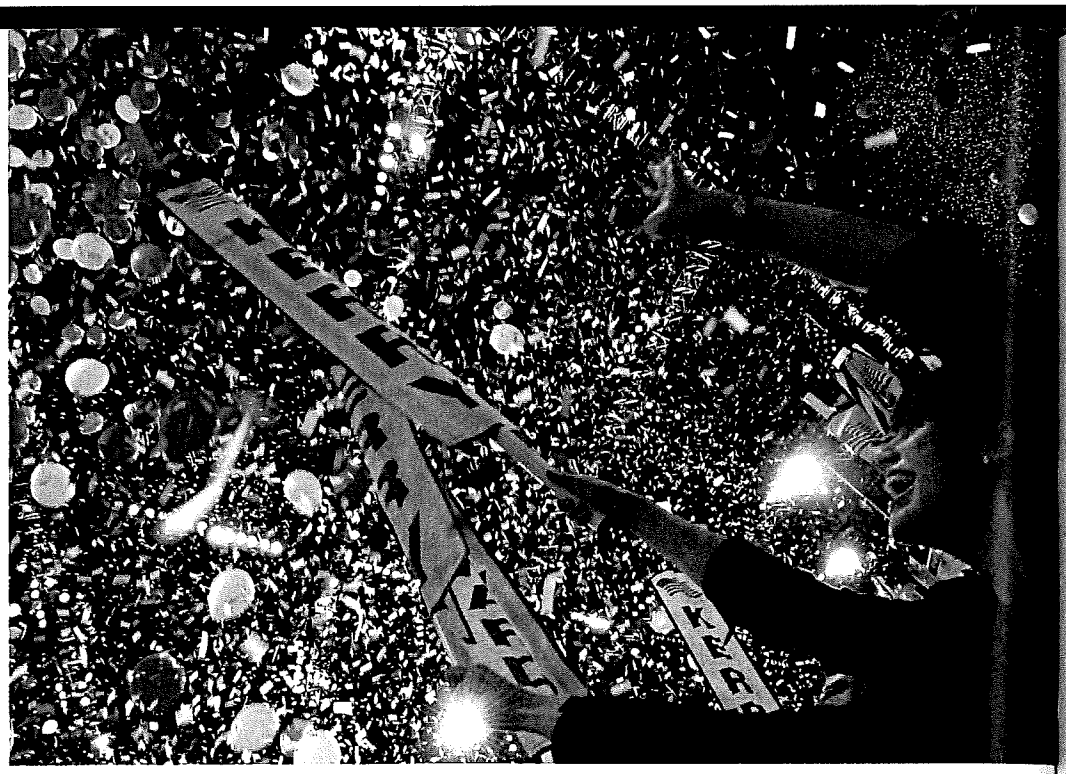
Reaching the Voters: Retail Politics, Wholesale Politics, and Microtargeting

Candidates for public office try to reach voters in various ways, both during the primaries and in the run-up to the general election. Political scientists have identified three general approaches: **retail politics, wholesale politics,** and **microtargeting.**

Retail politics. This meet-and-greet style of campaigning relies on direct, personal contact with voters. Candidates take part in parades, dinners, and other local events. They stand outside factories and shopping malls to shake hands and kiss babies. During these face-to-face encounters with voters, candidates try to present themselves as leaders who are in touch with ordinary people.

Wholesale politics. Many voters can be reached only by large-scale mail or media campaigns. Candidates may develop direct-mail campaigns, in which thousands of letters are sent to voters asking for their support. Even more common is the use of both paid and free media. Candidates and their staff prepare television ads and take part in televised town hall meetings and debates. These broadcasts can reach millions of people at a time. The Internet is also being used to reach voters on a large scale.

Microtargeting. This campaign approach uses databases to target narrow groups of voters and then reach them with carefully crafted messages. According to the *Washington Post,* candidates who adopt this technique "use the latest data-mining technology to vacuum every last scrap of information about voters." Armed with that data, they "churn out custom-tailored messages designed to herd their supporters to the polls." These messages present the candidate's position on issues of importance to each targeted group. For example, a candidate might target a message on social security to senior citizens.



National conventions are held after the primary season ends. They used to be part of the nominating process. Today, party gatherings are occasions for raising party spirit and cheering the party's nominee.

Locking Up the Nomination

A few months before the presidential election, the Democratic and Republican parties each hold a national convention in a major American city. In the past, party conventions were a critical step in the nomination process. Party delegates would argue over the candidates, sometimes going through several ballots before picking a nominee. On occasion, an underdog would emerge from the pack to challenge, and even overtake, the leading candidate.

Today, however, presidential nominees are chosen through the primary and caucus process. The winner then announces his or her choice for vice president. The national convention has, as a result, evolved into a ritual to formally announce the party nominees and present them to the nation. The nominees also work with party leaders to frame a platform, laying out the party's position on major issues. In addition, the convention helps unite the party and excite the party base.

The Other Way to Run for Office: Nomination by Petition

Not all candidates for public office go through the usual nomination process. For independent or third-party candidates, there is another way to get on the ballot: by petition. The petition process involves collecting signatures of a specific number of qualified voters in support of one's candidacy. The number of signatures needed depends on the office being sought.

The laws governing nomination by petition differ from state to state. In 2004, a candidate running for president needed just 200 valid signatures to be put on the ballot in Washington state. In contrast, North Carolina required a candidate to gather the number of signatures equal to 2 percent of the votes cast in the previous presidential election, or approximately 100,000 signatures.

These variations can make it difficult for independent and third-party candidates to get on the ballot in all 50 states. In 2000, for example, Ralph Nader, the presidential nominee for the Green Party, appeared on the ballot in 43 states. Four years later, Nader was able to qualify for the ballot in only 34 states.

10.4 Campaigning in General Elections

Once the primary season ends, the candidates who have won their party's nomination shift gears to campaign in the general election. Although the Constitution calls for regularly scheduled elections, it does not specify when they should be held. Congress has set the date for presidential and midterm elections as the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years. This is different from parliamentary systems, in which the prime minister can call a national election at any time.