

The U.S. Electoral Environment: Rules, Practices, and Norms

Use this outline to help organize your understanding of the electoral environment of both presidential and Congressional campaigns in the United States. Why is understanding the electoral environment important? In short, the environment – how the process is structured – affects the behavior of parties, candidates, supporters, media, and in the end, voters. It has profound effects on who participates, who does not, the nature of their participation, how well they do, outcomes, and more.

1. *Foundations: The Structure of Elections and Tenure of Office.* Found in the Constitution and federal statutes; includes:

- Fixed Terms of Office: Elected officials know exactly when the next election will be held, and this never changes.
- Short Terms of Office (House of Representatives): Two years is one of the shortest terms worldwide for a legislative body.
- Length of the Campaign Season: In contrast with other countries, there is no set time that the campaign begins.
- Non-concurrent Elections: Again, unlike in most countries, terms of office for federal officials are staggered such that we do not elect a single ticket of officials representing national, state, and local officials.

2A. *Choosing: The Recruitment Stage.* What guides entry into the race?

- Political Parties: No formal rules give parties the power to recruit or select their candidates (again - unlike in other countries); they are marginal to the recruitment process at the presidential level; at the Congressional level, they are increasingly important, but not necessary.
- Ballot Access: How do you get your name on the ballot? Rules vary from state to state; generally, petitions and a filing fee are required, but in many states the number of signatures required is prohibitive.

2B. *Choosing: The Winnowing Stage.* How is the field of aspirants narrowed to one candidate from each party?

- Primaries: Voters decide in primary elections, variously held from mid-winter through fall of the election year.

2C. *Choosing: The Selection Stage.* This section refers to the rules governing the final selection - commonly referred to as the electoral system.

- Size of the Electoral District, I: Varies according to the office being sought; some Congressional (House or Senate) districts are larger and/or more populated than others.
- Size of the Electoral District, II: A second aspect is the size of the district from which we choose our presidents: Technically the president represents the entire country (and must campaign as such), but in reality we select presidents from 50 plus 1 separate districts, each with great variation in population base.
- Number of Winners from Each Electoral District: Only one winner is chosen from each electoral district at the national level (excepting, of course, the Senate, but senators from the same state never run in the same year).
- Winning Margin: Candidates for most elective offices in the US (and all at the national level) are required to win only a plurality of the votes cast; the exception here, of course, is the Electoral College, where a majority is required.

3. *The Media Environment.* It is important here to remember what the Constitution says about the relationship between the government and the press. In short, the US media is organized and governed (for both suppliers and consumers) on a commercial basis. Most of the following derive from this fact.

- Unlimited Media Access: Referred to as paid media, there are very few rules governing the airing of advertising by candidates, parties, and their various supporters; this is decidedly not the case in most other countries (which usually also grant parties and presidential candidates free air time).
- News Coverage: Often referred to as "unpaid media"; news organizations decide how to cover (who, when, the focus, how much coverage, more) the campaign. Because of the need for news organizations to make money, this has a profound effect on the campaign in general and on individual candidacies in particular.

3. *The Media Environment (Continued).*

- Overlapping Markets: This refers to the reality that electoral districts do not always coincide with media markets - in other words, the reach of various TV stations. The classic example here is that New York City stations reach much of New Jersey and Connecticut.
- Polling: Unlike in many countries, polling is unrestricted in the US (in France, for example, polls cannot be conducted for two weeks prior to the election).

4. *Technology*. Campaigns have always employed the latest in communications and transportation technology. It is now a requirement that a serious candidate for national office be technologically savvy, or have the sense to hire people who are, if only because the opposition probably is.

- Television: It would be hard to overestimate the effects that television, as a medium of communication, has had on modern political campaigns, especially presidential campaigns.
- The Science of Campaigning: Campaign professionals are as much a part of politics as marketing is part of the business world; this affects virtually every aspect of the campaign.
- Air Travel: A presidential aspirant must have access to an aircraft in order to conduct a national campaign.

5. *Finance*. There are a slew of regulations governing the raising and spending of that money in the US. A few important points in this respect include:

- Expensive: Campaigns cost enormous amounts of money; this is unlikely to change, and, by itself, is (probably) not necessarily cause for alarm (that borders on opinion on my part).
- Self Financed: Unlike in most countries, candidates are, for the most part, responsible for funding (or finding the funding for) their own campaigns. Parties or the government do not finance campaigns (again, different in other countries).
- Small Donations: Most donations must be in the form of small (under \$2,000) donations.
- Transparent: The system of financing political campaigns in the US is the most transparent in the world - bar none.

6. *The Electorate*. This refers to partisan identification, voting patterns, political culture and other beliefs.

- Heterogenous: We are an extremely diverse society; a variety of differences cleave the electorate, based on the economic base, urban-rural-suburban split, and political culture of the region, as well as education, socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, religion (if any), marital status, occupation, and gender of individuals.
- Unimodal: Most Americans are, in short, more moderate than not; to say this differently, few of us are extreme in our beliefs.
- Fairly Partisan: Roughly 90% of Americans (depending on who is measuring and how it is being measured) identify, if only vaguely and weakly, with one party or another. In other words, few of us are truly "independent"; most of us at least "lean" toward one of the two major parties.
- Fiercely Independent (Anti-Party): Having said that, most Americans take great pride in being that "independent" voter - voting for the "best" candidate, rather voting the party line (we also value that in our candidates).
- Other Cultural Characteristics: There is a strong "anti-politician" sentiment in the US (unlike, again, in most countries); more, we have a certain idea of what type of person is qualified to hold elective office that in many respects differs from other countries (a prime example is the idea that the "common person" is best suited for many offices).