

US-4 Consider the strengths and weaknesses of elections within the United States.

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Plan

Strengths

- Very democratic
Pre-primaries and primaries are the first great test and ensure that potential Presidents are able to undertake the pressures that come with a presidency and are serious about becoming President.
- Many different stages in the election process such as pre-primaries which are at least a year before primaries, primary elections and caucuses Jan- Feb, National Motivation Convention August- Sept, General Election = 1st Monday in Nov and finally voting day.
- See notes for more information on primaries and caucuses.
- Pre-primaries and primaries give candidates a better chance of attaining funds and gathering support prior to the actual election. Also allows them to be held under scrutiny earlier and for longer.
- Super Tuesday gives them the opportunity to gain support for their region in order to gain support for their region in order to be selected as a candidate.
- Selection processes to elect a candidate – many selection processes overall = very democratic. An example of people getting an insight into what their president could be like. Many drop out and crack under pressure, Obama nearly dropped out during primaries.
- Reforms for the nomination of presidents:
Increased level of participation from ordinary voters. In 1968, the last year of the unreformed system, only 11.7 million Americans took part in the nomination process. By 1988 the figure was 35 million and 2008 54 million.
Significant increase in the choice of candidates. In 1968 only a choice of 5 candidates, 3 Democrats and 2 Republicans. In 2008, 15 candidates – 8 Dems and 7 Reps.
The process is available to outsiders – politicians who do not initially have a national reputation such as Jimmy Carter (1976), Bill Clinton (1992) and Barack Obama (2008).

Weaknesses

- Criticisms of new nomination process:
Widespread voter apathy and boredom – people not as interested in voting when there is a re-election. 17.5% voted in 1996 for Clinton and 17.2% in 2004 for Bush.
The process is too long – Senator John Kerry announced his candidacy 423 days before the first primary.
The process is very expensive with Al Gore raising \$33.8 million and received a further \$15.3 million in matching funds for the 2000 primaries.
The process is too dominated by the media, especially TV. In the pre-reform era, decisions about candidates were made by a small group of professional politicians rather than ordinary voters having to rely on the media for information, which can often be biased eg a newspaper with a political angle.
Primaries can develop into bitter personal battles. In the 2000 Republican primaries, a McCain commercial accused Bush of lying and likened Bush to President Clinton
- Presidential primaries are considered the only way to becoming a nominee of a major party. This never used to be the case in the 1950s and 60s where controlled candidate selections through State Party Conventions were done.

Electoral College

- 'Filters the people's will' and elects the president indirectly (1787).
- During the general election candidates for the two main parties travel around parts of the USA to persuade voters to support them in November.
- Voters are voting for electors from their state, then selecting a President on their behalf.

Strengths

- Over 700 alternatives have been put forward but none have ever been used.
- Would take constitutional amendments and that would need super-majorities which would prove difficult.
- Majority winner like Britain's FPTP. Difficult because given the constitutional requirements that place methods of holding elections in the hands of the state themselves. There are four time zones across the USA so organising an election to provide a clear winner would not be easy.
- Produces clear results and stability. Elects a President with a clear majority and mandate.

Weaknesses

- Faithless electors – many states make it compulsory for electors to vote according to popular vote in the state but not all do. Not taking the opportunity to prevent voter apathy and get clearer votes.
- Candidates winning the national popular vote may lose the EC, as Gore did in 2000.

Is the structure of the elections really necessary? What does it all boil down to?

Why Obama won in 2008:

- The Two Term Itch
Only twice since the civil war have Americans elected a President from the same party as a President who has just completed two full terms. This was the case for Bush.
- The Candidate themselves
Bush's popularity ratings went down and exit polls in 2008 showed that only 27% approved of Bush whereas before he had 91% following the 11th September 2001 when the twin towers attack occurred. Shows that despite all the hard work that goes into elections, the electorate still take into consideration how their president dealt with previous issues and how they think they will fare in current issues, often making up their minds for them rather than how they appear on televised debates.
- The economy
Only 1% of voters said the economy was excellent whilst 49% described it as poor showing that often presidents can win elections through a major issue and how well they have addressed it rather than other factors.

Initial impression

Strengths = well organised and democratic with the insurance of a determined, strong and qualified president.

Weakness = Not all of these trimmings necessary? People seem to use the media and all their campaigning as a strong guideline but seem more interested in retrospective voting where they consider the President's previous endeavours and what they can envisage him doing in the future. Also they seem to be more interested in issue voting for their current affairs. Putting so much time and effort unnecessary?

ESSAY:

There are many strengths and weaknesses to be considered when discussing the strengths and weaknesses of electoral systems in the USA. The USA takes the winner-takes-all system, what we use officially and what we know as the First Past the Post System in Britain. The problems arise in such electoral systems include proportionality issues and wasted votes. However, the real strengths and weaknesses lie not with the idea of the winner-takes-all situation as that is something unlikely to

change due to the rigid nature of the Constitution, but rather with regards to how the US utilise their electoral system and the strengths and weaknesses of it through using the presidential elections as a guideline for the argument. In this essay I will address in particular the strengths and weaknesses of primaries and caucuses, the electoral college and how useful the effort that goes into elections that is permitted by their electoral system is with regards to the outcome of the elections and what voters use to help them come to a conclusion with regards to whom to vote for.

Pre-primaries, primaries and caucuses

Strengths

With regards to the strengths of the electoral systems, the use of pre-primaries, primaries and caucuses within the current electoral system help withhold democracy and ensure the USA gets a fully qualified and passionate leader as their next President. Pre-primaries are a smaller election in which politicians announce their candidacy at least a year before the primaries begin¹. This shows strengths towards the US electoral system due to the high amounts of organisation and democracy that this demonstrates as candidates for the presidency must be sure of what they want and must give their states time to put them forward. It is democratic due to the fact that because the electoral process begins so early on, the president has to be prepared to put themselves under a lot of pressure and a gruelling amount of work in order to achieve the presidency. This increasing pressure before the elections have even properly started shows how much pressure and how much effort they must include in order to get ahead in the elections as Barack Obama nearly dropped out of the elections during the primaries due to the increasing amounts of pressure². This shows how the USA's electoral system is seen to be strong as it is tough on the presidential candidates, rendering them democratic.

Another strength of pre-primaries and consequently the electoral system is due to the vast amount of time they are given before they must address the election officially. This allows potential candidates to raise the money required to show an impressive campaign and have a stronger chance of gathering support prior to the actual election. This shows how the electoral system and election process can be fair as well as tough, adding touches of discipline with fairness so that it is not impossible for candidates to complete the race for the presidency.

Primary elections and Caucuses are held at the beginning of the year between January and February. Primaries can either be closed or open although the majority appear to be closed. A closed primary is when "voters may only vote in the primary of the political party in which they are registered. For example a voter who registered as a Republican can only vote in the Republican party"³. The use of primaries shows strengths with regards to the electoral process as there is still the strict and organised test to the candidates being arranged continually and regularly up to the general election on the first Monday in November and on voting day⁴, but there is also an element of fairness and the pressure is lessened with regards to the majority of primaries being closed, meaning that new candidates are not immediately thrown open to too much pressure by being held under an opposing party's natural supporter's scrutiny as well as their own natural voter's scrutiny.

Caucuses are 'meetings open to all registered voters of the party, at which delegates to the party's national convention are selected'⁵. Caucuses allow candidates to 'court' supporters of other candidates should they be congregating in the undecided voters group at the National Party

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/preprimary>

² Class Notes

³ <http://usgovinfo.about.com/cs/politicalsystem/a/delegateprocess.htm>

⁴ Class Notes

⁵ <http://usgovinfo.about.com/cs/politicalsystem/a/delegateprocess.htm>

Convention⁶. This highlights a strength of the USA's electoral system and how they elect President's through their use of their system as it allows potential Presidents of the future to try and gain further support, showing that the elections are fair and are sure to be made so that it is certainly not impossible to be successful in a presidential election but really rather achievable should one endeavour to go to the effort. This again also highlights how the electoral system in the USA appears to be challenging and competitive but not impossible.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses of pre-primaries, primaries and caucuses include too much pressure being put upon candidates to be successful immediately and many candidates simply cannot take the pressure such as Senator Joe Bidden who dropped out of the presidential election before even reaching the primaries in 1987. Should he have continued Delaware born Bidden could have been in the running to achieve a presidency for the Democratic Party in the 1988 election⁷. This shows that due to the frequent and continuous tests to the candidates, many potential presidents feel daunted by the prospect of the presidency showing that the race could be too tough and only those who are unusually driven for perhaps unsavoury reasons such as being determined to be in contact with such a vast amount of power like that of the President stay in the running, thus showing that the electoral system could be too tough too early on in the election period.

Another way in which the electoral system can profess weakness through the presidential election is with regards to how early the election is set up. Each event in the electoral calendar such as primaries and the National Party Convention (NPC) can cost candidates vast amounts of money which many may not be popular enough to be given or simply cannot afford to spend. This shows that the electoral system is not exactly fair due to the fact that the likelihood of getting a less-wealthy President is now highly unlikely. This is due to the high cost of elections since the introduction of 'soft money'⁸ with elections, in this case the 2006 mid-term elections, going up by \$1 billion⁹, thus insinuating that electioneering is only a game for the rich now. This shows that the weakness of elections is established through the high cost of them as it unlikely that one would receive a President who wasn't wealthy ever since Kennedy changed the way in which US elections would work as they are now largely to do with showmanship and wealth rather than policy¹⁰.

The Electoral College

Strengths

The Electoral College (EC) is an "institution established by the Founding Fathers to elect the President indirectly. The EC never meets. Instead, the presidential electors who make up the EC meet in their state capitals to cast votes for the president and vice-president"¹¹. Even in the definition of the Electoral College, it already seems to be an asset to the US electoral system due to its high level of democracy through allowing the public through the presidential electors, to also elect a vice-president as the idea of the EC is to 'filter the people's will' and are still electing the President and vice-president even if it is indirect¹².

The use of the presidential electors also demonstrates the strength of the US electoral systems through the fact that those who are making these key decisions with regards to choosing who will

⁶ <http://usgovinfo.about.com/cs/politicalsystem/a/delegateprocess.htm>

⁷ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_\(United_States\)_presidential_candidates,_2008#Withdrawn_during_the_primary_elections](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_(United_States)_presidential_candidates,_2008#Withdrawn_during_the_primary_elections)

⁸ 'US Government & Politics 3rd Edition', Bennett

⁹ 'US Government & Politics 3rd Edition', Bennett

¹⁰ Andrew Marr – Kennedy elections video.

¹¹ 'US Comparative Government & Politics 2nd edition' – Anthony J. Bennett

¹² Electoral College Power point

become America's next president and vice-president are qualified and are likely to know those who are up for election on a more intimate level than those who are simply in the electorate and can therefore be trusted to make a sensible and balanced decision.

Although there are many criticisms for the Electoral College (EC), over 700 alternatives have been put forward to replace the EC and yet it is still here today¹³. This shows strength of the electoral system in America as many people show a degree of 'apathy'¹⁴ with regards to how they feel about their current electoral system and therefore do not feel the need for it to be reformed or changed in any way.

The type of electoral system used within the EC is that of First Past the Post (FPTP) and is a strength in itself due to the fact that it provides clear and stable results¹⁵ and is also the only logical way of providing a result with regards to what the EC decide due to the fact that there are four different time zones throughout the continent and would therefore take too long to organise an election with a different electoral system that would also be successful.

Weaknesses

However, those that win the Electoral College votes and candidates that win the presidential election can often be different, showing a lack of alignment and effectiveness. This was the case at least, for Al Gore in 2000 where he won a great proportion of the popular vote but did not go on to win the presidential election or the EC votes¹⁶. This shows a weakness with regards to the EC and the electoral system in general in the US as it questions the reliability and usefulness of the Electoral College other than to elect the vice-president, as although the public get to have a large say in who wins the election, the EC could appear to have more influence as proved by the Al Gore situation.

There is also a problem with regards to 'faithless electors'¹⁷ as many states make it compulsory partake in the popular vote in the state, however not all states take this initiative. Not taking the opportunity to prevent voter apathy and get clearer votes is a clear weakness as not everybody has had a say in who should be the President and could therefore be considered undemocratic to an extent, despite it being the voter's choice to vote. This therefore shows a weakness in the EC and the electoral system as the results shown are not necessarily parallel with what the electorate think as many do not vote at all.

How necessary is the need for primaries, pre-primaries, caucuses, the National Party Convention and the Electoral College?

It is seen by many members of the public that there are too many stages in the election process for a President and that it could be seen as 'too much' and unnecessary. Not only does it cost vast amounts of time and money but many members of the public become bored with the constant issues arising with regards to the election process and start to become indifferent and lose interest in important stages of the election process such as primaries and the National Party Convention (NPC)¹⁸.

It can also be considered that the reasons behind members of the electorate's vote are superficial due to the increasing importance of image since the revolution of televised debates and the media

¹³ Electoral College Power-point

¹⁴ Coleen Harris

¹⁵ Electoral College Power-point

¹⁶ 'US Government & Politics 3rd edition' – Anthony J. Bennett

¹⁷ 'US Government & Politics 3rd edition' – Anthony J. Bennett

¹⁸ Class Notes

which changed the face of the electoral system ever since the Kennedy vs Nixon campaign in the 60s¹⁹.

Issue voting is also becoming an increasingly popular trend in voting when the poll is put to the electorate. This is shown through the reasons put forward as to why Obama won the 2008 election. When an exit poll was released only 1% said they thought the economy was excellent whilst an alarming 49% thought described it as poor²⁰. These results, in alignment with an opinion poll on Bush where only 27% approved of their former President²¹ show that should a President fail to deliver on important issues such as the economy, no matter how charismatic they may seem, a President may still suffer a loss when election time comes around.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that the electoral system provides well organised stages for candidates for the presidency to do well in and gain funds and support. The current US electoral system also appears to be highly democratic and seems to turn out well-informed, well-qualified and determined Presidents. Despite it appearing tough and highly competitive for presidential candidates, it is also fair and does give candidates a chance to grasp success.

However, some stages within the electoral system appear to be somewhat unnecessary and create indifferent and bored members of the electorate which puts the electoral system in danger of inciting voter apathy. This is because ever since the television revolution, many electors look to the media and how they view a candidate as an ample reason to vote for someone. They also appear to cling to retrospective voting, where they judge a President on their past performance if they are aiming to be re-elected for a second term and also on how well they feel they will deliver on certain issues important to the electorate. Therefore, perhaps the electoral system needs to be reformed to accommodate the new interests of the electorate and to complement their voting style, which therefore would mean that more televised debates would be required rather than voting platforms within the election process that could potentially bore voters.

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¹⁹ Andrew Marr video.

²⁰ 'US Government & Politics 3rd edition' – Anthony J. Bennett

²¹ 'US Government & Politics 3rd edition' – Anthony J. Bennett