

American Elections

Governing a Nation

In the United States, citizens govern themselves by choosing the people who make and enforce the laws under which they live. The Founding Fathers who wrote the Constitution of the United States deliberately created a system where no person or group of people could take power and hold it against the will of the people. They established three branches of government—legislative, executive, and judicial—so that each branch would be held in check by the other two branches. In addition many functions of government are under state, not federal, control. Within a state, most of the everyday laws under which people live are controlled by local governments.

Who Gets Elected

Citizens select most of their leaders for all levels of government. They may be selected at the same election or at elections held solely for one level of government. There are approximately 85,000 state and local governments in the United States with approximately 500,000 elected officials. Below is a list of some of the positions for which citizens vote.

Federal Government

- President of the United States
- Vice President of the United States
- United States Senator (two per state)
- United States Representative in the House of Representatives

State Government

- Governor
- Lieutenant Governor
- State Attorney General (Legal Officer)
- State Comptroller (Financial Officer)
- State Senator
- State Assemblyman
- State Judges
- Individuals in charge of water districts, elections, and other duties

Local Government

- City Mayor
- City Council Members
- County Officers
- City and County Judges
- Sheriff or Police Chief
- School Board Members
- Members of local water districts, boards, and commissions

1750

1800

1850

1900

1950

2000

American Elections *(cont.)*

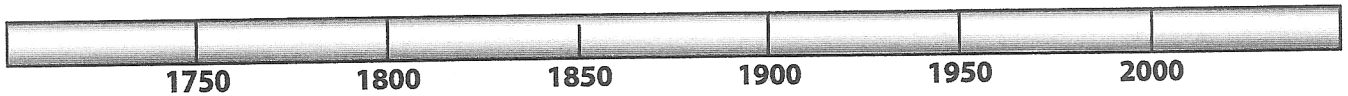
Terms of Office

Most elections are held at regularly scheduled times although special elections may be held to fill vacancies in local, state, or even national positions. Most positions have specified terms of office. A President of the United States serves four years. Presidential elections will be held in 2004, 2008, and every four years thereafter. Presidents and many other officials are elected at these general elections. United States senators serve six years in office. Only one-third of the 100 U. S. Senators are up for election in federal elections held every two years. Members of Congress serving in the House of Representatives are elected every two years. Governors usually serve four-year terms although a few states still have two-year terms. Virtually all other public officials have terms of office, usually ranging from one to four years.

Political Parties

Most federal and state offices are held by individuals who belong to one of the two main political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. Members of a party who want to hold elective office usually participate in primary elections which are held several months before a general election. Usually, only members of a party can vote in their party's primary election. Then the representatives of each party will compete against each other in the general election.





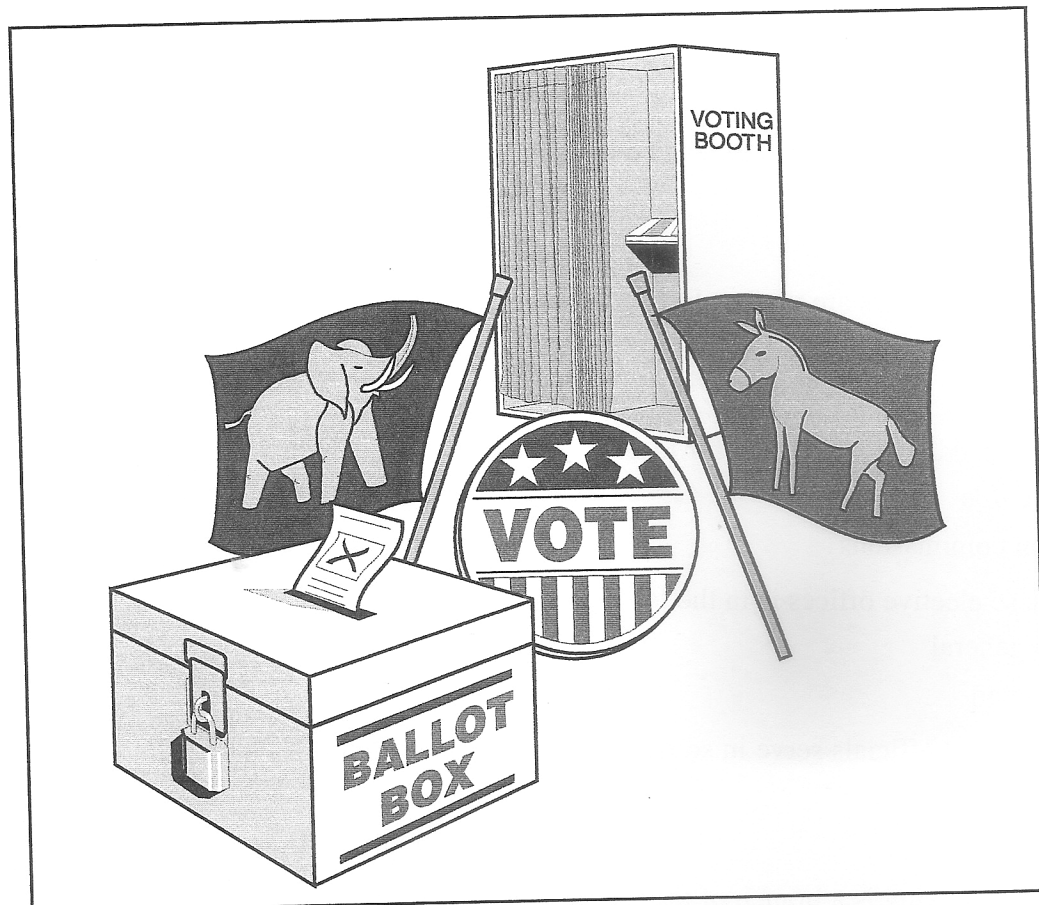
American Elections *(cont.)*

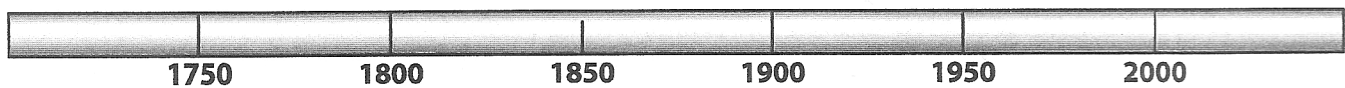
Third Parties/Independents

Sometimes members of a third party will also compete for an office. Some individuals may form their own party or join a group unhappy with the two main national parties. Occasionally, a candidate of these third parties will win. Even if they don't win, they may affect the election. The third party candidacy of Ross Perot received 19% of the popular vote in the 1992 presidential election. His campaign may have helped Bill Clinton defeat George Bush in that election. Of the 50 states, often one or two are led by governors who ran as independent or third party candidates.

Nonpartisan Elections

Many local elections are not partisan which means that individuals do not have to declare a party affiliation and may not belong to either major party. People select leaders based on the reputation of the person running and their positions on local issues. Many city and county offices are nonpartisan races as are most school board elections. School boards determine the educational policy of the local school system. Other local boards and commissions, such as water districts and sanitation commissions, are also nonpartisan offices. So are many local and state judicial offices.





Reading Comprehension Quiz *(cont.)*

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Directions: Read pages 13 through 15 about American elections. Answer these questions based on the information in the selection. Circle the correct answer in each question below. Underline the sentence in the selection where the answer is found.

- Which of these elective offices is in the federal government?
A. governor
B. United States senator
C. mayor
D. comptroller
- Which of these elective offices is in the state government?
A. president
B. United States senator
C. mayor
D. comptroller
- Approximateley how many state and local governments exist in the United States?
A. 500,000
B. 55,000
C. 85,000
D. 100
- Which of these candidates has no party affiliation?
A. Democratic
B. nonpartisan
C. Independent
D. Republican
- In which year will a presidential election be held?
A. 2006
B. 2005
C. 2008
D. 2007
- How many U. S. senators are up for election in a federal election?
A. one-third
B. all 100
C. none
D. six
- Who determines educational policy for local schools?
A. school boards
B. sanitation commissions
C. U. S. senators
D. city councils
- Which of these elective offices is in the local government?
A. attorney general
B. congressman
C. mayor
D. comptroller
- How many elected officials serve in some government in the United States?
A. 85,000
B. 500,000
C. 3 million
D. 100 million
- Which of the following is a branch of the federal government?
A. judicial
B. executive
C. commission
D. both A and B