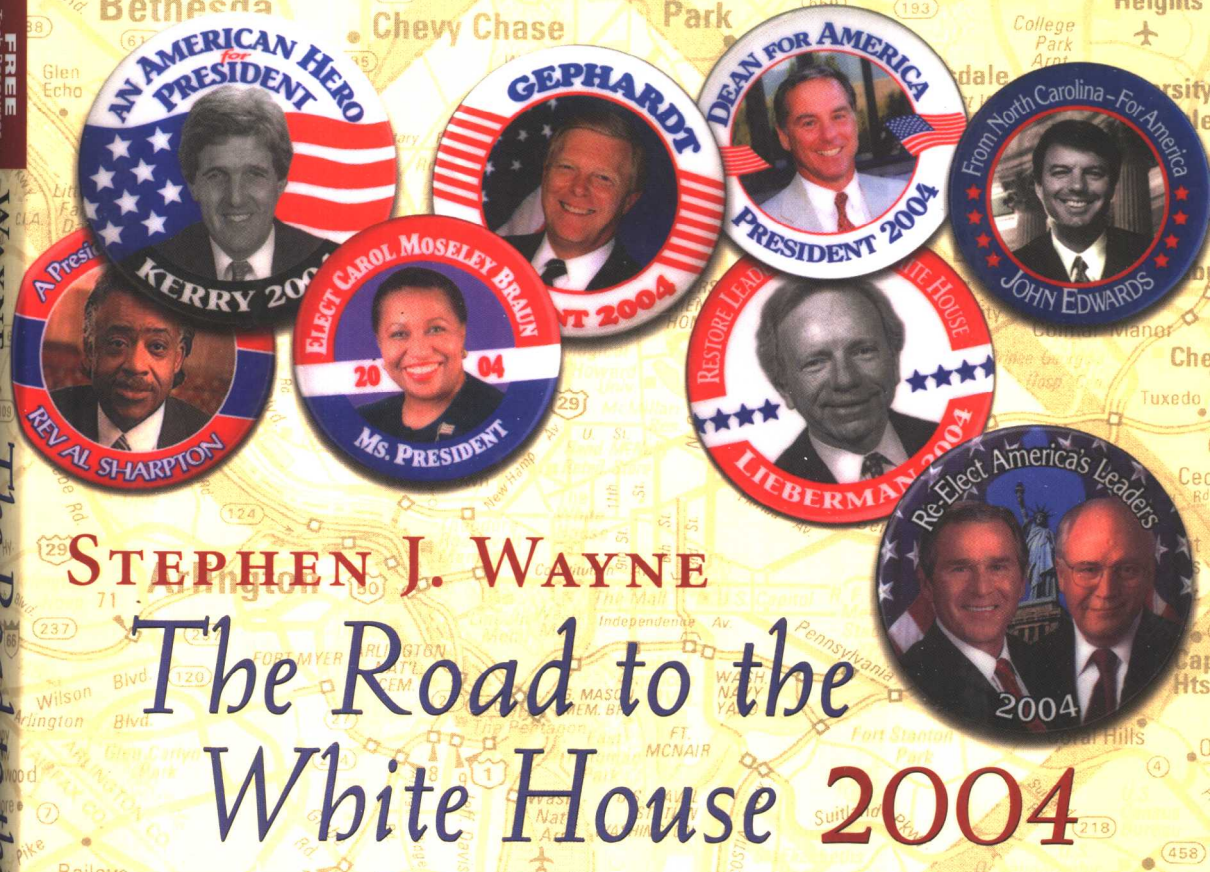




STEPHEN J. WAYNE

The Road to the White House 2004

THE POLITICS OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



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The Politics of Presidential Elections

Stephen J. Wayne

Georgetown University



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PREFACE

We are just beginning another presidential election cycle. It follows the longest and one of the most controversial elections in U.S. history, an election marked by strident rhetoric, multiple promises, exaggerated claims, personal attacks, all replete with positive and negative political imagery, and a very, very close vote in which the candidate who received the most popular votes did not receive the most electoral votes. Did the campaign matter? Did the system work?

Your answers may depend on how satisfied you were with the process and with the outcome, and there were many who objected to both. But despite the Florida vote controversy and the way it was resolved, a new president and vice president were sworn into office on Inauguration day; they were seen as legitimate by the vast majority of the American people; and government continued to function in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the land. It was the fifty-fourth time that the American electorate has chosen its president in a peaceful manner. The electoral system worked although not perfectly.

Moreover, the campaign affected the outcome. The election of 2000 was not one that was ordained by the political environment, predetermined by conditions, or dictated by the events. If it had been, Gore would have won, at least that is what was predicted by political scientists who created empirical models based on past voting behavior, current economic and international conditions, and public approval of President Clinton's job performance. Bush's Electoral College victory suggests that the personal and policy appeals of the candidates, their parties, and nonparty groups combined with the strategies they pursued and the tactics they used had some impact on the electorate's decision.

Hopefully, many of you followed the last election closely. It was probably easier to follow than to understand. You may have read about it in newspapers, viewed campaign events, such as the national nominating conventions and the political debates, on television, heard about them on the radio, or accessed the parties' or candidates' Web sites; you may have even seen one of them in person although that is usually rarer. But regardless of what you observed, it was only a portion of the campaign, and as seen through your eyes, a subjective perception at that. Candidates, their advisers, media representatives, and other groups have

their own perspectives and judgments that they wish to convey to influence our decision on election day.

There is more, however, to presidential elections than meets the eye. Campaign planners work hard to design strategies to maximize their candidate's appeal and enlarge their vote. They understand the intricacies of the process. They know how the system works, who its likely participants are, and where they should concentrate their campaign resources. They understand the requirements of finance legislation—how to comply with it, get around it, and take advantage of it. They appreciate the psychological and social motivations of voters and have a feel for which appeals are likely to be most effective and why most of the time. They are aware of party rules and the ways to build a winning coalition during the nomination period. They can sense the rhythm of conventions and know when events should be scheduled, how they should be presented, and what it will take to placate the various factions that comprise their party's electoral coalition. They know how to organize, plan, and conduct a general election campaign. They do long-range planning and run day-to-day war rooms. They know about polls and focus groups, media spin and message manipulation, issue advocacy, confrontational advertising, and grassroots activities, all aimed toward informing the electorate, generating momentum, and turning out the vote. They employ the latest technology to reach and convince the electorate of the merits of their cause, the qualifications of their candidates, and the inclusiveness of their party. They also have experts who read the mood, predict the outcome, and explain the results of the election in a way that enhances their political position and governing potential. They may not need to read this book.

On the other hand, people who want to get behind the scenes of presidential campaigns, who want to know why particular strategies are being adopted, why certain tactics are utilized (and others are not), whether these strategies and tactics are likely to achieve the desired results, and at what cost, why particular appeals are made, to whom, and with what impact, how the candidates try to influence the news media and how the news media try to cover the campaign and break through the imagery and sound bites that the candidates and their handlers present, why the election turns out the way it does, and what it augurs for the direction of public policy and the new administration's ability to govern should benefit from the information contained in this book.

OUTLINE

The Road to the White House, 2004: The Politics of Presidential Elections is a straightforward, “nuts-and-bolts” discussion of how the system is designed and works. It is primarily concerned with facts, not opinions; with practice, not theory; with implications, not speculations. It summarizes the state of the art and science of presidential electoral politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The book is organized into four main parts. The first discusses the arena in which presidential elections occur. Its three chapters examine the electoral system, campaign finance, and the political environment. Chapter 1 provides a his-

torical overview of nominations as well as elections with a special section devoted to the Florida vote controversy in 2000 and its implications for future presidential elections. Chapter 2 examines recent developments in campaign finance, particularly the explosion of revenues and expenditures, the new attempt at regulation, the McCain-Feingold bill and its legal challenges, and the likely impact of this reform on the 2003–2004 election cycle. In the third chapter, the continuities and changes in the political environment serve as the principal focus. Here too, we attempt to provide a perspective on the trends within and between the major parties and the effect that these trends have had and may continue to have on electoral outcomes.

Part II describes the distinct yet related stages of the presidential nomination: the race to win delegates during the competitive phase of primaries and caucuses; the interregnum that follows after the nominees have been effectively determined but before the national nominating conventions are held, and then finally the purpose, organization, operation, and influence of the conventions as the candidates move into the general election itself. Chapter 4 examines reforms in the delegate selection process and their impact on the nomination strategy of the candidates. Chapter 5 carries this discussion from the end of the contested phase of the nominating process through the conventions themselves, the official launch of the presidential campaign.

Part III discusses the general election campaign. In Chapter 6, the organization, strategy, and tactics of presidential campaigns are assessed in the light of the new technologies used to identify the interests of voters, design and target appeals to them, and measure their effect as the election progresses. Chapter 7 turns to media politics, how the press covers the campaign and how the candidates try to affect as well as counter that coverage through paid advertising and scripted public performances. The chapter evaluates the impact that media-driven forces can have on electoral voting behavior.

The fourth part of the book looks at the election and beyond it. Chapter 8 discusses and evaluates the presidential vote: What does it mean? Is there a mandate? How does the election affect the president's ability to govern? Chapter 9 considers problems in the electoral system and possible reforms to alleviate these problems. It examines some of the major difficulties that have affected the political system from party rules to finance issues to media coverage and to the Electoral College itself. This chapter also looks at proposals being discussed or actions recently implemented for improving the electoral system, for making it more equitable to the citizenry, more responsive to popular choice and less prone to human error and personal discretion, and more likely to guide and facilitate those in government in their policy-making responsibilities.

PURPOSE

Elections link the people with their public officials, a vital democratic role. However, that link is far from perfect. Voting is individualized, yet governing is a collective undertaking. Everyone does not participate in elections, but government

makes rules for all the people. Presidential candidates regularly over promise and under deliver. They create unrealistic expectations that are impossible to achieve, certainly not by themselves in a system of shared powers and divided government. People become disillusioned, apathetic, and cynical.

How can we improve elections? How can we encourage more of the citizenry to participate? How can we persuade the most qualified to run? How can we level the electoral playing field? How can we ensure that the mood of the voters will be reflected in the results of the election and that those results will be accurately interpreted by newly elected public officials? In other words, how can we make sure that elections achieve their principal democratic goals—select the most qualified representatives, provide them with a blueprint for governing, and make sure that we hold them individually and collectively accountable for their decisions and actions in government?

Without information on how the system works, we can do none of the above. We cannot cajole the citizenry to meet their civic responsibilities and vote; we cannot recruit the best and the brightest to run; we cannot improve the people-government-public policy connection for which elections are the critical link. In the case of presidential politics, ignorance is definitely not bliss nor is the norm always or usually the ideal.

The road to the White House is long and arduous. In fact, it has become more difficult to travel than in the past. Yet, surprisingly, given all the criticism, there continue to be many travelers. Evaluating their journey is essential to rendering an intelligent judgment on election day. However, more is at stake than simply choosing the occupant of the Oval Office. The system itself is on trial in every presidential election. That is why it is so important to understand and appreciate the intricacies of the process. Only an informed citizenry can determine whether the nation is being well served by the way we go about choosing our president.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen J. Wayne is a Professor of Government at Georgetown University. A Washington-based expert on the American presidency, he has authored or edited nine books, several in multiple editions, and over one hundred articles, chapters, and book reviews. In addition to *The Road to the White House*, he has coauthored *Presidential Leadership* (with George Edwards) and *The Politics of American Democracy* (with G. Calvin Mackenzie and Richard L. Cole), all published by Wadsworth. His most recent books include *Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?* and *The Election of the Century and What It Tells Us about the Future of American Politics* (with Clyde Wilcox).

A much-quoted source for journalists covering the White House, he frequently appears on television and radio news programs and consults for television documentaries. He has testified before Congress on presidential elections, appeared before both Democratic and Republican advisory committees on the presidential nomination process, directed a presidential transition project for the National Academy of Public Administration, and participated in the 2000 White House transition project conducted by the Presidency Research Group. Professor Wayne lectures widely throughout the United States and abroad on the contemporary presidency and presidential elections.

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THE ELECTORAL ARENA



