

Benjamin Ginsberg and Alan Stone, *Editors*

★ ★ ★ DO ★ ★ ★
ELECTIONS
★ MATTER? ★

SECOND EDITION



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*For
Anna and Herman Ginsberg
and Roberta Stone*

Preface to the Second Edition

During the period that the essays comprising the second edition of this book were being prepared, one of the twentieth century's most momentous events was taking place. The Soviet Empire was falling apart. East Germany, Hungary, and the other nations that the Soviet Union had dominated by force since shortly after the end of World War II were in the process of breaking away from Soviet domination. Even within the traditional boundaries of the Soviet Union, Lithuanians, Armenians, and others were resisting the Russian domination that existed even before the 1917 Communist revolution. In part, of course, the breakdown of the Soviet Empire was attributable to its woeful economic performance. But in part, it was also attributable to political causes, of which the absence of free elections was a critical one. Quite clearly, elections matter to the people of Eastern Europe. Invariably, the plea for free elections was one of the most important demands made by reformers.

Certainly elections matter, as the striking events in the Soviet bloc demonstrate. But there remains the danger of overstating or misconstruing the importance of elections in the more tranquil surroundings of the Western democracies. According to the conventional view, elections provide or reinforce the sense of legitimacy that Western regimes enjoy. They are contests in which all competent adults can participate and in which competing parties fight out policy issues before the voters as candidates present their credentials on competence, honesty, and so forth. The limelight is now especially ruthless, according to this view, since the mass media have increased their power to bring candidates to the close attention of the entire electorate. Thus, not only do presidential candidates engage in debates, answering questions they did not know in advance, but even mayoralty candidates engage in the same process. Voters can not only listen to the content of candidates' words but closely examine the nuances of their facial

expressions in the manner that juries evaluate the demeanor of witnesses on the stand. And so extensive is the reach of the media that no longer can a presidential candidate escape on a private yacht off Bimini with a lady friend and be outside the purview of television cameras. Thus, according to the conventional view of elections, the electorate is better informed today than at any time in history.

But there is another and darker view of elections that must be carefully considered. Critics of the American system countercharge that our two political parties are as alike as Tweedledum and Tweedledee and that the American people's right to choose between them every four years is essentially meaningless. Perhaps it is the fact that the issue of whether elections matter is so deeply rooted in ideology—in the realm of unexamined beliefs—that partially accounts for the fact that the issue is rarely raised. What is surprising is that political scientists—the professionals supposedly devoted to analyzing this sort of question—rarely do raise it.

The agenda for contemporary electoral research in the United States was set by the great voting studies of the 1950s, in particular the Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes study *The American Voter* and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's *Voting*. These two volumes, and the literally thousands of articles and books that followed in their wake, were mainly concerned with how voters made their decisions. The authors of *The American Voter* sought to account for variation in whether a given individual voter is going to vote and which candidate he will choose. Similarly, the authors of *Voting* aimed to determine how people come to vote as they do. Both groups acknowledged that their primary focus on *how* voters decided rested on the assumption that *what* voters decided was important. In the three decades since the publication of these seminal works, election analysts have continued to show considerably more interest in the behavior of voters than in the effects, implications, and significance of elections. At the same time, scholars concerned with political institutions and public policies have focused primarily on questions of process or the evaluation of particular policies or institutions. Few studies have bridged the gap, yet the problem is important and challenging.

What are the linkages between voting, parties, and elections, on the one hand, and policy outputs, whether in the form of legislation, administrative action, or judicial decisions, on the other? It is when one joins these topics that one is essentially asking: Do elections matter? Clearly, one cannot answer the question with a simple yes or no, but posing it in this way allows us to consider many topics of great concern—the growth of the administrative state, the increasing activism of the judiciary, and the seemingly unmanageable problem of the federal budget (which contains many items, such as pensions, about which elected officials can do little).

The essays in this second edition address these issues. Most of the essays were commissioned for the second edition and did not appear in the first, which

was published in 1986. In the first section, the authors examine the connection between candidates' media approaches and the policies that they will likely implement, the role of ideology, the crucial elements of electoral mobilization, mass participation, and elite domination of the electoral process and differences between critical elections and ordinary ones. In the second section, the essayists look at the important role played in the American electoral process by interest groups and what James Madison called factions. The essays deal with such important issues as the so-called gender gap, the political role of the Roman Catholic church, black voting, and the Protestant fundamentalist right in politics. Finally, the last section brings the problem of "do elections matter?" up-to-date by zeroing in on the 1988 election. After closely examining the contest itself, the essays compare the 1988 Canadian and American elections, the important problem of how the 1988 U.S. election and previous ones matter in foreign policy, and the role of important elite groups in the 1988 contest.

What unites all of the essays in this second edition is the same view that informed the first edition. The underlying question "do elections matter?" continues to be a vitally important one. It is our hope that this second edition will make as valuable and instructive a contribution to readers' thinking about politics as the first one did.

Contents

	<i>Tables and Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
	<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1	<i>DO ELECTIONS MATTER?</i>	3
1.1	Candidate Appeals and the Meaning of Elections <i>Richard Joslyn</i>	9
1.2	Who Is Right and Who Is Left? Activist Coalitions in the Reagan Era <i>John C. Green and James L. Guth</i>	32
1.3	Electoral Decay and the Power of the American State <i>Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter</i>	57
1.4	When Elections Really Matter: Realignments and Changes in Public Policy <i>David W. Brady and Joseph Stewart, Jr.</i>	79
1.5	The Impact of the Voting Rights Act on Southern Welfare Systems <i>M. Elizabeth Sanders and Richard F. Bense</i>	96
2	<i>FACTIONS, INTEREST GROUPS, AND THE MEANING OF ELECTIONS</i>	115
2.1	The Gender Gap in American Elections: Lingering Illusions and Political Realities <i>Daniel Wirls</i>	117

2.2	The Catholic Hierarchy and Presidential Politics	<i>Timothy A. Byrnes</i>	134
2.3	The Democratic Party and the Conflict over Racial Policy	<i>Robert Weissberg</i>	150
2.4	The New Religious Right and the 1980 Congressional Elections	<i>Loch Johnson and Charles S. Bullock III</i>	171
3	<i>DID THE 1988 ELECTION MATTER?</i>		189
3.1	The 1988 Presidential Election: A Campaign That Counted	<i>Richard Murray</i>	191
3.2	Where Do Elections Matter More—Canada or the United States?	<i>Alan Stone and Kenneth Woodside</i>	207
3.3	Elections and Foreign Policy	<i>Joseph L. Noguee</i>	221
3.4	An Unbearable Lightness of Being—Party and Industry in the 1988 Democratic Primary	<i>Thomas Ferguson</i>	237
	<i>Index</i>		255

Tables and Figures

Tables

Joslyn

1	Content of Televised Political Spot Advertisements	27
2	Content of Televised Presidential Debates	27

Green and Guth

1	Reagan-Era Political Activists: Attitudinal Dimensions	36
2	Reagan-Era Political Activists: Mean Issue Scores	38
3	Reagan-Era Political Activists: Self-Identified Ideology and Partisanship	40
4	Reagan-Era Political Activists: Region, Age, Gender, and Religion	44
5	Reagan-Era Political Activists: Income, Occupation, and Education	46

Brady and Stewart

1	Partisan Platform Differences on Major Issues during Three Realignment Eras	87
2	House Member and Committee Turnover and Length of Undivided Partisan Control of Government during Three Realignment Eras	88
3	Percentage of Party Votes during Prerealignment and Realignment Eras	89
4	Correlation between Party Voting and the Cross-Cutting Issue in Three Realignment Eras	90

Sanders and Bensel

1	Food Programs in Selected Plantation Black-Belt and White Rural Counties of Mississippi	100
2	Agriculture and Welfare Policy in the Mississippi Black Belt	101
3	Mean AFDC Enrollment in States Covered by Voting Rights Act	102
4	Estimated Percentage of Black Voting-Age Population Registered	103
5	AFDC Rates and Black Political Success by Degree of Local Home Rule, 1972	105
6	AFDC Recipients by Degree of Black Mobilization in County	106
7	Correlations between Black Percentage of the Population, Percentage of Families with Below-Poverty Incomes, and County AFDC Recipient Ratios for States Covered by Voting Rights Act, 1964-1978	108

Wirls

1	Party Identification Gap: 1980-1986	122
2	Party Identification among Whites: 1980-1989	123
3	The Presidential Vote: 1976-1988	124
4	The Vote for House of Representatives: 1982-1988	125
5	Republican Presidential Vote by Family Income	127

Weissberg

1	Racial Composition of Democratic Party	152
2	Racial Composition of Democratic Loyalists	153
3	Support for Federal Intervention in School Integration among White Democrats	154
4	Perceptions of Democratic Party's Stand on Busing vis-à-vis Own Busing Stand, White Democrats	155
5	White Democrats' Views on Busing, 1984	156
6	Support for Government Aid to Minorities among White Democrats	157
7	Perception of Democratic Party's Stand on Aid to Minorities vis-à-vis Own Position, White Democrats	157
8	Historical Trend, Party Identification of Southern Whites	165
9	Historical Trend, Presidential Vote of Southern Whites	165
10	White and Black Democrats' Views on Race Policy, 1988	166

Johnson and Bullock

1	Candidate Targeting as Measure of Cohesion between New Religious Right and New Right	174
2	Relationship between 1980 Religious Right Ratings for U.S. House Members and Selected Independent Variables	177
3	Defeat Rates in the 1980 General Election among CV and NCPAC Targets Compared with Other Democratic Incumbents	180
4	Legislators Who Opposed NRR Policy Stands before the 1980 Election but Supported Them in 1981	182

Murray

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Party Identification and Democratic Presidential Vote Margin | 194 |
| 2 | Favorability Ratings of George Bush and Michael Dukakis, April–August 1988 | 199 |

Stone and Woodside

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Canadian Election Results | 216 |
|---|---------------------------|-----|

Ferguson

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Party and Industry in the 1988 Election | 242 |
| 2 | Industries where Particular Democrats Did Well | 243 |

Figures**Joslyn**

- | | | |
|---|---|----|
| 1 | Prospective Policy-Choice Appeals | 20 |
| 2 | Retrospective Policy-Satisfaction Appeals | 21 |
| 3 | Benevolent Leader Appeals | 23 |
| 4 | Ritualistic Appeals | 25 |

Ginsberg and Shefter

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | The Growth of House and Senate Staffs | 61 |
| 2 | Foreign Ownership of U.S. Assets, 1970–1986 | 69 |
| 3 | Occupational Strata and Voting Turnout, 1984 | 74 |

Sanders and Bense

- | | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | AFDC Recipients as Percentage of Total Population, 1964 | 109 |
| 2 | AFDC Recipients as Percentage of Total Population, 1978 | 109 |

Weissberg

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Perceived Distance from Democratic Candidate on Racial Issue and Vote, 1968–1984 | 160 |
| 2 | Perceived Distance of White Democrats from Dukakis on Government Aid for Blacks and Their Vote for Him, 1988 | 168 |

Johnson and Bullock

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 1 | Schematic Depiction of Key Elements in the Right-Wing Coalition Affiliated with the Republican Party | 173 |
|---|--|-----|

Murray

- | | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | Comparison of Annual Mean Approval Ratings of Presidents Eisenhower (1953–1961) and Reagan (1981–1989) | 197 |
| 2 | Tracking the Race, July 1988 to November 1988. Mean Percent for Bush and Dukakis in National Voter Surveys, Aggregated by Time Period | 201 |

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1

DO ELECTIONS MATTER?

Elections are generally considered to be the principal means through which citizens can influence their leaders. Certainly this applies to democratic elections, which permit citizens to select and depose public officials routinely. But this electoral sanction, however effective it may be, is hardly the only way citizens can reward or punish officials for their actions. Spontaneous or privately organized forms of political activity, or even the threat of their occurrence, can also induce those in power to heed their subjects' wishes; even the most rigid autocrats can be influenced by the possibility that their actions may provoke popular disobedience, clandestine movements, or riot and insurrection. To be sure, the likelihood that an autocrat will be removed from power is generally less than the chance that an elected official will suffer defeat at the polls. Elections differ from other mechanisms of popular influence over officials' conduct in at least four respects:

1. Elections formalize, and thus fundamentally alter, the character of popular influence over government actions. The advent of democratic elections means that citizens' capacity to influence their rulers' conduct has become at least partially independent of rulers' military and administrative power. Even if rulers have the capacity to compel obedience, popular influence is not necessarily effaced.

2. Elections help to equalize citizens' capacities to influence rulers' conduct. In the absence of such an institutional mechanism, popular influence can be derived only from private activities and personal resources whose distribution in any population is certain to be unequal. The capacity to influence officials' actions will therefore vary—with wealth, social position, or even the propensity to riot. Elections, by introducing a formal, public means of influencing official conduct, can compensate for private inequalities in political resources.

3. Although they formalize and equalize the possibility of popular influence, elections, by institutionalizing popular influence, also create new and subtle means for its manipulation. Consider, for example, the mechanism of electoral rules and procedures, which specify how individual choices, or votes, will be translated into collective decisions. These "rules of the game" are everywhere subject to definition and redefinition and can be adjusted, for example, to diminish or even preclude the possibility of electoral influence. Examples of authoritarian elections without choice are, of course, numerous, but even where competition and choice are built into the system, election laws can play an important role in preserving an established distribution of power.

4. Elections substitute participation in leadership selection for what might otherwise amount to direct popular intervention in, or resistance to, public policymaking and implementation. Whereas rioters may literally force a government to adopt or abandon a policy, voters are usually limited to the occasional selection of a certain number of public officials—and the link between leadership selection and policy selection may be tenuous at best.

In sum, while elections may institutionalize mass political influence, the implications of this are not simple and straightforward. Elections formalize and equalize mass influence, but they can at the same time constrain and delimit the effects of mass intervention into political life.

Those who assert that even free, competitive elections are of relatively limited consequence make four basic arguments which, for the sake of brevity, we will label (1) the administrative argument, (2) the elite argument, (3) the interest-group argument, and (4) the state-management argument. Each of the arguments makes a different point, but all four share a common referent—the growth of the state. It is against the background of the state's sheer size and vast array of activities that we must examine the arguments urging that free elections are of limited consequence.

1. *The administrative argument.* How can elections matter if most public decisions are made by unelected officials—that is, administrators, bureaucrats, and judges? Is it not the courts that have largely shaped civil rights policy and education policy? Is it not true that in the famous AT&T breakup decision, a single judge, together with professional administrators in the Justice Department, largely transformed the structure of the telecommunications industry? In one area after another—consumer affairs, monetary policy, environmental regulation, agriculture, natural resources, transportation, and communication—the vital decisions are made by administrators. (It should not be surprising that in a poll of European businessmen the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, and *not* an elected official, was named the second most important American political figure after the president.) Moreover, the complexity of the subjects with which courts and administrators deal requires that the statutes that administrators are appointed to enforce and that judges have to interpret must be broad and discretionary, allowing considerable latitude for application and interpretation.

In principle, of course, administrative agencies are empowered only to implement the laws promulgated by Congress, and courts are expected only to determine exactly what the lawmakers meant. In practice, however, administrative agencies make important policy decisions every day, and judges, in the face of legislative ambiguity, are relatively free to choose from among a variety of statutory interpretations. Public administration by bureaucrats and judges has become, in effect, the permanent government, substantially independent of members of Congress and presidents who come and go. Congress, of course has the ultimate authority to change the law and to create, restructure, and destroy agencies; and the president, as chief of state, commands the bureaucracy. But in practice, the vast number of public decisions and the size of government preclude close supervision. Both Congress and the president lack the information, time, and expertise to oversee the daily operations of the bureaucracy and the judiciary.

In summary, those who make the administrative argument assert that the day-to-day management of national affairs is now principally in the hands of a number of semi-autonomous administrative agencies and judges, who operate with only sporadic interference from their elected overseers.

2. *The elite argument.* How can elections matter if candidates for public office are beholden to powerful groups, whether because the latter make large campaign contributions or because they command positions of great social and economic influence? Will not the preferences of such groups outweigh those of voters when it comes time for the elected official to make policy decisions? Some identify the elites who “pull the string” as big Wall Street bankers, oil companies, or other narrow and powerful cliques intent on serving their selfish interests through government; in its more vicious forms this view takes on a paranoid cast, with assertions that international bankers, agents of Moscow, Jews, or the Vatican, etc., etc. secretly direct government officials. The belief that some sort of elite is in control is not unique to any part of the American political spectrum, and although the alleged culprits vary enormously, the view of the dynamic of politics is essentially the same: candidates for office make private, surreptitious commitments to powerful groups—commitments that are not acknowledged during an election campaign; indeed, election rhetoric is mainly intended to assure popular commitment to the electoral process and continuing loyalty to the system. But once the successful candidate assumes office, his or her *primary* (though not necessarily exclusive) loyalties are to the needs of the special interests.

While one must reject the paranoid version of this perspective on politics (on the simple ground that it has no empirical support), the more moderate version certainly raises important issues, some of which are considered in the essays in this collection. There is plenty of evidence that campaign contributions can exert backstage influence on public officials, but this does not necessarily make them puppets. After all, it was not the rich and powerful who championed the many environmental, workplace safety, and consumer protection statutes that have