

The American Political System

Background

- ▶ The Declaration of Independence 1776
- ▶ The War of Independence 1776-1783
- ▶ The American Constitution 1789
- ▶ Federal government and state govmts.
- ▶ Division of power
- ▶ Checks and balances

State and Federal System

- ▶ Historically state and local government came first.
- ▶ The states have their own legislative, executive and judicial institutions
- ▶ State and local government control important areas like:
 - Highways
 - State income tax
 - Public schools and universities
 - Police and fire departments
 - Regulate business and supervise commercial affairs
- ▶ The Federal system of government controls:
 - Foreign policy, defense and monetary policy
 - Areas that cannot be regulated locally and statewise: interstate commerce, interstate crime, interstate environmental problems etc.

The Legislative Branch: Congress

Passes legislation and appropriates money

- ▶ The House of Representatives
 - ▶ 435 members
 - according to the size of the state
 - ▶ 2-year term
- ▶ The Senate
 - ▶ 100 members -two from each state
 - ▶ 6-year term

The Executive Branch: The Presidency

- ▶ 4-year term - max two 4-year terms
- ▶ Protects the Constitution
- ▶ Proposes legislation
- ▶ Enforces the laws made by Congress
- ▶ Commander in Chief of the armed forces
- ▶ Appoints judges to Supreme Court (with the consent of the Senate)

The Executive Branch: The Cabinet

- ▶ No mention of it in the Constitution
- ▶ Subordinate to the President
- ▶ Cabinet members recruited broadly, not necessarily party insiders

The Supreme Court

- ▶ 9 members
- ▶ Life term appointment
- ▶ Interprets and guards the Constitution
- ▶ Interprets the law
- ▶ Decisions of the Supreme Court are final
- ▶ In general it plays a conservative role, maintaining legal tradition

Checks and Balances

Congress:

Power of the purse

Can override presidential veto
(2/3 majority)

Power of impeachment

Senate approves treaties and
the president's appointments

Supreme Court:

Power to declare laws and
presidential actions
unconstitutional

The President:

Power to veto

Issues executive orders

Commander-in-chief

Appoints Federal Judges

Grants Pardons for offenses
against the US

Elections and Political Parties

- ▶ Winner-take-all-election system
- ▶ The Electoral College
- ▶ Two party system- both appealing to the middle of the political spectrum
- ▶ Balancing the ticket (President and Vice president)
- ▶ Voting patterns: splitting the ticket
- ▶ Voting for individuals rather than party slate

The Electoral College

- ▶ Representatives of the people in presidential elections
- ▶ 534 electors, corresponding to the numbers of Representatives and Senators
- ▶ 270 electoral votes guarantee the Presidency
- ▶ Each state votes as a single block (minus Nebraska and Maine) winner takes all
- ▶ Importance of Swing States and the big states

Democrats and Republicans And Their Voters

- ▶ Democrats supported by majority of black voters (Clinton 83%)
- ▶ Urban ethnics
- ▶ Blue collar workers
- ▶ Catholics
- ▶ More women voters
- ▶ Northeast, upper midwest, northwest, Hawaii
- ▶ Protestant voters
- ▶ Business community
- ▶ White collar workers
- ▶ Religious fundamentalists

Democrats and Republicans and Their Policies

▶ Democrats

- Support welfare programs
- Keynesian economics and job creating programs
- Social security, Medicare and Medicaid
- Civil Rights legislation
- Women's right to abortion

▶ Republicans

- Limiting federal regulation of business
- Reduction in welfare spending
- Anti-abortion