

continue in office for the
their places is, as it unquestionably ought to be, that of good behavior.

Toward Critical Thinking

1. Why were the "form" of elections or qualifications for voting of little apparent concern to the Framers?
2. Does the campaign process produce a Congress in tune with the American people? Would term limits (which would limit members to a fixed number of terms) result in more meaningful elections and give voters greater opportunity to reveal their wishes?

64

THE RESPONSIBLE ELECTORATE

V. O. Key Jr.



Key notes that much can be read from the election returns—both from isolated elections and in the patterns that have emerged historically. Some elections represent a new order, such as the election of 1936. Political scientists refer to this election as a realigning election because it signaled a dramatic change in voter allegiances. Other elections, while possibly providing a mandate for a particular candidate, are not nearly so dramatic. Elections also legitimize the government says Key—a point also noted by Madison in *Federalist No. 39* (Reading 63).

ELECTIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Presidential elections constitute decisions of fundamental significance in the American democratic process. The trooping of millions of voters to the polls symbolizes self-rule and legitimizes the authority of governments. But beyond such mystical functions of the electoral process, elections are pivotal decisions which in turn control many lesser determinations made in the name of the people. Our explorations have been in quest of some

SOURCE: Pages 589–590 from *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, 5th Ed. by V.O. Key, Jr. Copyright 1942, 1947, 1952, 1958, 1964, by The Thomas Y. Crowell Company. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

understanding of what the electorate does decide or of its role in the democratic process. Obviously the voters decide which party is to govern. That choice tends to bring in its train predictable consequences in direction if not in detail of governmental action, given the contrasting composition and policy orientations of the competing party leaderships. But what beyond the choices of governors do elections decide? Nothing, it may be said. Or a theorist with rationalistic inclinations may picture the party platform as a program of action which the winners are, by their solemn compact with the majority, bound to execute. Neither of these views satisfactorily reflects the reality. Considered in the framework of the flow of events and of the available alternatives it seems clear that elections decide more than simply who shall govern. Yet the scope and nature of the decision may not be apparent until some time after the election. Nor can it be contended that the voters in the prevailing majority invariably sense the broad meaning of their collective action.

Some elections, it has been argued, express clearly a lack of satisfaction with the performance of the crowd that has been in charge. The possibility of so efficacious an expression of discontent underlies the discipline of a democratic people over its government. Elected officials must live under the threat of defeat or disavowal. Other elections may be plausibly interpreted as a vote of confidence. More commonly the electorate may bring in a mixed verdict; some voters are happy with the course of affairs and others are deeply dissatisfied. Even these confused elections may, in their situational context, be meaningful decisions. Thus the election of 1896 rejected the upsurge of western silver-agrarian radicalism and gave popular blessing to a coalition which governed until at least 1912. The election of 1936 ratified a sharp turn in public policy and successive Democratic victories clinched the reforms of the New Deal. The terms of the electoral decision of 1952 brought Republican acquiescence in the new order. A series of elections may fix the contours that guide the broad flow of public policy. Specific elections may give an unmistakable mandate for a change of direction. Others may approve a newly instituted order of affairs. Still others may record a majority support for the status quo but the rumblings of the minority may be a portent of a growth of discontent.

Retrospective judgments by the electorate seem far more explicit than do its instructions for future action. An approval of the continuation of the prevailing course of action may be clear enough. Or a rejection of past performance may be resounding. Yet the most acute ear attuned to the voice of the people can sense only the vaguest guidance for innovation to cope with the questions that must be met day by day as an administration governs. The efficacy of self-government thus depends on party or governmental leadership with the initiative and imagination necessary to meet the public problems that develop and with the courage to assume the political risks involved. The vocabulary of the voice of the people consists mainly of the words yes and no; and at times one cannot be certain which word is being uttered. On occasion it seems that assiduous but myopic dedication to the doctrine of self-rule brings governmental stagnation or paralysis as timorous politicians listen vainly for positive instructions from the voice of the people. Popular government demands that politicians be accountable but it does not relieve them of the duty of initiative.

These explorations provide a general conception of the limits and nature of the role of the electorate. As one attempts to see national elections in their place in the governing process—in their relation to the party system, in their bearing on the operations of government—it is well to ponder about the mores, the understandings, the customs, the conditions that make feasible these interpositions by the mass of the people in affairs of state.

For a political order to withstand periodic electoral clashes, the electorate itself must possess appropriate expectations and inner restraints. Party leaderships in their relationships to the electorate and to each other must keep party warfare within tolerable limits. Governing officials must be bound by an intricate set of norms which, if they do not absolutely limit governmental action, fix procedures and forms of action that maximize acceptance of authority and thereby make contemplation of the consequences of elections bearable, if not invariably comforting.

Toward Critical Thinking

1. What kinds of elections can be taken as mandates for change?
2. V. O. Key Jr. posits that the "electorate itself must possess appropriate expectations and inner constraints." What does he mean by this statement?

65

THE POLITICS OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

Gary C. Jacobson



The Framers originally envisioned a Congress—especially the House of Representatives—as a body representative of the common man. Members would serve a few terms, remain close to the citizenry that elected them, and then give up their seats to take up their jobs back home. Later, members came to see a seat in the House as a stepping stone to another office—often back home. By the 1960s, however, came the rise of House careerists, those who saw their election to the House as the first step in a long House career where longevity and the seniority system would reward them and their district with prestige and pork (the terms used to describe the riches that members of Congress often can procure for their district in the form of public works programs, grants, and so on). Parties were on the decline as discussed elsewhere and candidate-centered campaigns rose, giving tremendous help to House incumbents. In this reading, Gary C. Jacobson traces the causes of the incumbency advantage.