

LESSON

4

CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT

The Electoral System

Key Ideas

- U.S. politics are dominated by the Democratic and Republican parties.
- Political parties hold primaries to select candidates for the general election.
- Political campaigns are very expensive, and many people believe that we must reform our campaign finance laws.

GED® TEST TIP

When you are asked a question about a circle graph, remember that it represents a whole, or 100%.

At the national level in particular, two **political parties** dominate the political arena in the United States: the **Democrats** and the **Republicans**. These parties represent different ideas about the role of government in our nation. In each election season, the parties and candidates work to promote their views, or **platforms**—their positions on issues like tax reform, Social Security, education spending, environmental protection, and so on.

The political parties have developed large organizations for raising money and getting their candidates elected. Each party runs its own **primary** election, in which candidates within the party compete with each other for the party's **nomination**. After the primary elections, the winners from each party's primary face off in the general election. In presidential elections, the primary season ends with a party **convention**, where delegates from each state gather to select the party's candidate. Citizens vote in a general election, and the results are tallied by state. Following the general election, electors from each state cast their state's votes in the **Electoral College**. The electors generally must cast their votes for the candidate who won the general election in their state. The candidate who wins the greatest number of electoral votes becomes president.

Although Democrats and Republicans are by far the largest political parties, there are small parties as well. At times, a "third-party candidate" like Ralph Nader or Ross Perot attracts enough support to influence the outcome of the national election. Even when small parties offer interesting new ideas or solutions to problems, they have great difficulty attracting money and public attention because the Democratic and Republican parties are so well established.

Although many voters consider themselves to be either Republicans or Democrats, many others are **independent**. Candidates and their political parties rely heavily on **opinion polls** to find out what voters think; they try to tailor their campaign messages to appeal to large numbers of voters. Groups of voters who might "swing" an election one way or another are particularly important targets for political campaigns. Sometimes opposing candidates participate in public **debates**.

Political campaigns can be very expensive, and the higher the office, the more expensive the campaign. To reach the public, candidates pay for mailings, TV ads, and events, including personal appearances; they need campaign staff and offices; they must pay for travel expenses. As a result, fundraising has become a very important part of running for office.

In recent decades, Americans have become more and more concerned about the high cost of running for office. Many Americans believe that a candidate should not have to be wealthy to begin with, or be overly obligated to contributors, in order to gain political office. We now have laws that restrict the size of campaign contributions. We also have restrictions on how **Political Action Committees** (PACs) operate. However, many people believe that more reforms are needed.

PRACTICE 4

Questions 1 through 3 are based on the information on page 450.

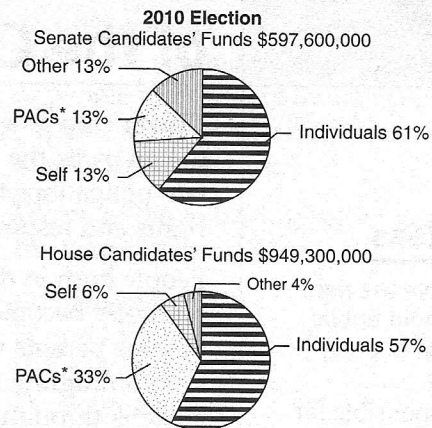
- Which of the following is necessary for a candidate to win the presidency?
 - earning a majority of primary wins
 - receiving a majority of the popular vote
 - receiving a majority in the Electoral College
 - having no third-party opponent

- An exit poll is one that surveys people as they leave a voting location. Instead of waiting for votes to be counted, the media often announce the winners of elections based on exit polls.

Which of the following is an important drawback of using exit polls?

- Exit polls may be inaccurate if the people polled are not representative of the political unit as a whole or if the election is very close.
 - Exit polls allow the media to present election results during prime time on election night instead of waiting until later in the evening.
 - Exit polls have undue influence on the way politicians running for office conduct their campaigns.
 - Exit polls are likely to be unreliable when there is a wide margin between the candidates.
- Which of the following is an example of a primary election?
 - A Democrat and a Republican oppose one another in a race for the U.S. Senate.
 - A Republican and an independent candidate oppose one another in a race for the state senate.
 - Once presidential candidates are chosen, they select their running mates.
 - Two city council members are on a ballot to determine which one will run for mayor as a Democrat.

Questions 4 and 5 refer to the following graphs.



*PACs are Political Action Committees – groups that raise money for candidates.

Source: Federal Election Commission.

- How do the campaign funding sources of Senate and House candidates compare?
 - Individual donations provided a larger percentage of funds raised by House candidates than of those raised by Senate candidates.
 - In total, individuals contributed a greater dollar amount to House candidates than they did to Senate candidates.
 - Political parties provided a greater percentage of the funds raised by House candidates than they did of funds raised by Senate candidates.
 - On average, Senate candidates received a greater percentage of their funds from PACs than did House candidates.
- Which of the following statements is supported by the graphs?
 - In 2010, self-funding was a larger source of funds for Senate candidates than it was for House candidates.
 - In 2010, individual donations were the largest source of funds for Senate candidates but not for House candidates.
 - In 2010, PACs were the largest source of funds for House candidates but not for Senate candidates.
 - Fundraising accounts for most of the work on a congressional campaign.

Answers and explanations start on page 684.