4.3 Participation and democracy in US politics

Voting Behaviour.

Aspect: Short-term and recency determinants of voting behaviour; including: campaign factors such as candidates, issues and incumbency; swing states and independent voters.

Note this session should follow the deep unit on long-term determinants of voting behaviour.

Key aims, themes and concepts

- An exploration and analysis of the key short-term determinants of US voting behaviour

Assessment objectives covered

AO1

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of relevant institutions, processes, political concepts, theories and issues – through an identification of the key terms related to short-term voting behaviour.

AO2

Interpret and apply political information to identify and explain relevant similarities, differences, and connections – through an examination of the central reasons behind short-term voting behaviour.

AO3

Analyse and evaluate the areas of government and politics studied to construct arguments, make substantiated judgements and draw conclusions – through the critical analysis of the major factors behind the short-term determinants of voting behaviour and the type of voter most susceptible to this; with students and teachers constructing their own examples.

Introduction

Teachers can start the session by noting that every US election is different. The differing factors and events that occur are normally unique to that election. Teachers should therefore make themselves aware of issues and events in several presidential elections and the outcomes that produce different results. This topic also relates closely to "Long-term determinants of voting behaviour"', which is also a long topic in this series. This should be undertaken before this unit.

Main lesson

The teacher should commence the session with a general introduction explaining the difference between long and short-term determinants of voting behaviour in the US. The teacher can indicate that short-term determinants of voting behaviour can be likened to those factors that shape your choice on what activities you may wish to engage in at the weekend. They are normally determined by a variety of short term or more immediate factors such as how much money and time you have, what other commitments may pop up between now and then and any issues you feel are more important in doing than others. For example, doing my homework is more important to me than going to watch a film at the cinema. There may also be an event or family activity that occurs only of this weekend such as a birthday or anniversary. There may also be an event that suddenly occurs that requires your immediate attention such as looking for a lost phone or replacing a broken window on your car. These are referred to as recency (recent) or short-term determinants and are far less predictable than long term determinants that can be determined over the course of many months or even years in advance (and were covered in another unit).

The teacher should note that short-term determinants of US voting behaviour are important for those studying US elections because they help determine the eventual winner of a presidential election by helping persuade independent (undecided or weak partisan voters) to vote for a specific candidate.

Suggested Activity:

The first activity is a reflection on previous learning from the long unit on the long term determinants of voting behaviour – The lecturer should start the session by asking learners to complete the sentence: 'party identification/alignment is …. Each learner should then give their own definition.'

The answer should be something like: *Those voters who have developed a strong and often deep-rooted attachment to a political party. This attachment leads to predictable voting patterns.*

The teacher should also inform learners that partisan voting is often strongly resistant to change, meaning that presidential campaigns concentrate on those states where this alignment is weakest or has broken down (de-alignment). The teacher can note that ideally the presidential candidate wishes their campaign message to be effective enough to ensure that **independent voters** or those with a weaker alignment are drawn enough towards their campaign to vote for them in a November election. In an average election year about 10 per cent of those who 'truly' identify with one political party may swop to another. Some 84 % of this swopping has been identified as to being down to their view of the President's performance over a period, as being either positive of negative (according to the Pew Center May 2017).

The teacher should introduce the next suggested activity by reminding the learners that recency factors are those short term determinants that are mainly recently reflected in the voters mind. They often have no or little impact on future elections. The teacher can then pose to the students which of these influences on voting behaviour they think are recency factors.

Image/personality of the presidential candidate

Single issues or issues

New political or economic events

Political advertising

Presidential debates

Partisan de-alignment

Solely economic issues

Negative advertising

Length of selection process

Gender of candidate

Use of social media

Those in italics are 'Recency factors' the others are 'Non recency factors'.

Although some of the non recency factors, above, may appear to be recency they are not limited to just one election and will occur across many.

Suggested activity:

Learners should then seek to find examples of each of those in the italics to identify their impact on voting behaviour.

The teacher should note that some voters are attracted by a collective appeal on a variety of issues (manifesto) whilst others are attracted to vote by one all-important issue. They are referred to as single-issue votes. For the partisan aligned voters, issues can also reinforce the candidates appeal to their own core base. The teacher can give the following example on single issue/issue voting from the issues in the 2016 presidential election. It is what all voters said was "very important" to their vote for president. They may wish to get students to determine what they think was the most important (single) issue for voters in 2016?

According to the Pew Research Center September 2015 The most important single issue according to voters was, in descending order of importance:

1. Economy

2. Health Care

3. Terrorism

4. Federal budget deficit

5. Foreign Policy

6. Immigration

7. Environment

8. Abortion

The teacher should note that economic issues are normally at the top of voter concerns but other issues vary – for example crime or drugs does not appear in the top 8 for this election. The teacher can then provide some additional information on how single issues can influence campaign strategy. For example, according to polling by the Pew Center for the 2016 Presidential elections the majority of Republican (GOP) voters (56%) said they would be more likely to support a candidate who wanted to end federal funding for Planned Parenthood (birth control). At the other end just 18% would be less likely to support such a candidate. Therefore Trump's own Republican policy was targeted as agreeing with the majority of prospective GOP voters views. At the same time about 6 in 10 potential Democratic voters (61%) said they would be more likely to support a candidate who offers policies similar to the Obama administration. In contrast just 12% would be less likely to support such a candidate, although some 26% say this would not be a major factor in their vote. Therefore in the election Clinton pledged the continuation of Obama's presidential legacy on most policy ideals.This type of electioneering is referred to as policy determination by opinion polling or focus group. Although Presidential candidate may still continue to develop policies that are not fully aligned with their support base the polling ensures that these other policies are given a much lower profile. The teacher should note that for some voters a single issue is the most important in determining a candidate, such as the economy, for others it is a series of issues such as health care, terrorism and gun control.

The teacher should then get the learners to give their own examples from the list, some examples are included below:

Image/personality of the presidential candidate – in 2016 both presidential candidates were deeply unpopular with the electorate – did people therefore choose the candidate they hated least?

New political or economic events – e.g. Clinton having her emails examined by the FBI in the 2016 presidential campaign, did she lose from this?

Political advertising- e.g. promoting a negative or positive view of the candidate especially more recently with the use of Social media.

Presidential debates – e.g. deeming to win these was essential until Trump's performances in 2016 – how did he then go on to win?

Partisan de-alignment – for example those of democrats in the rust belt states in 2016.

Suggested activity:

discuss with the learners what types of voters there might be besides those with a strong party loyalty (partisan) to Democrats or Republicans? The Candidates need to ensure that they capture the votes of:

1. **Swing/independent voters** – those voters who are de-aligned and lack strong party identification.

2. **Weak partisanship** – those voters who are aligned to another party but can be persuaded to swop party of this election, perhaps on a single issue basis.

3. **New or first time voters** – those voters that are either voting for the first time because they have come of age, are immigrants or those who are eligible but for some reasons have not voted before.

In turn, candidates also concentrate on winning those states in which the electorate's vote is more evenly balanced and more likely to be persuaded to endorse them. These are called **Swing States** (in the UK we call them marginal constituencies). In these States the candidates will seek to ensure that the voters noted above support them. The teacher can note that candidates spend most of their campaigning time and resource in these states.

Suggested activity:

Learners can be asked to examine a Swing state from the 2016 Presidential election and explore some of the reasons it may have transferred from Democrat to Republican or vice versa.

Conclusions

The teacher should reflect on short-term factors in Presidential campaigning and provide examples of how they are hard to gauge in advance. They may also note that social media and the ability of the internet to stimulate concern about a specific issue or event can drive the candidates off their own agenda's as they seek to react to a recent event. The teacher should also discuss with the learners the importance of **incumbency** in elections. This is the case across the US political system. They should note that over the last three decades few incumbent presidents fail to serve their second term, if they stand again. They should discuss with the learners the reasons why they may believe this to be the case (e.g. factors such as names recognition, track record and experience, greater access to campaign finance, longer time to prepare for the election, known electoral quantity etc).

Key terms introduced or developed in this session

Single issues or issues, Partisan de-alignment, single issues, issues, incumbency, swing states, recency factors.

Links to other parts of the WJEC specification

A2 Unit 4, 4.3.2 Long-term determinants of voting behaviour

A2 Unit 4, 4.3.3 Democrats and Republicans