

Unit 5: Political Participation

How Americans take part in politics through voting, parties, interest groups, campaigns, and the media that connects them. Covers CED topics 5.1 through 5.13.

AP U.S. Government

Political Participation

20-27% of the exam

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read this unit as the story of how citizens connect to government. Topics 5.1 and 5.2 cover the most basic act, voting, and who actually does it. Topics 5.3 through 5.5 cover the organizations that structure choice, parties and their challengers. Topics 5.6 and 5.7 cover the groups that press government between elections. Topics 5.8 through 5.11 walk through how campaigns work and who pays for them. Topics 5.12 and 5.13 cover the media, the channel through which almost all of this reaches the public.

After the first read, the most useful work is comparing related ideas. Work through pairs such as parties and interest groups, open and closed primaries, hard and soft money, and traditional and new media, because the exam often tests these distinctions. Use the trap table to review each pair, then use the six-question recall check to test what you remember.

What this unit is worth. Unit 5 is 20 to 27 percent of the AP exam, the second-largest share of any unit. Voting, parties, campaigns, and media are also where many ideas from earlier units come together, and the exam uses this unit in stimulus-based questions, quantitative analysis, and argument essays.

5.1 Voting Rights and Models of Voting Behavior

The right to vote was not granted all at once; it was won in layers. The **Fourteenth Amendment** (1868) granted citizenship to people born or naturalized in the United States and became a foundation for equal citizenship and voting-rights protections. The **Fifteenth Amendment** (1870) prohibited denying the vote on account of race. The **Seventeenth Amendment** (1913) established direct election of U.S. senators by voters rather than selection by state legislatures. The **Nineteenth Amendment** (1920) prohibited denying it on account of sex. The **Twenty-Fourth Amendment** (1964) prohibited poll taxes in federal elections. The **Twenty-Sixth Amendment** (1971) lowered the voting age to eighteen. Each amendment removed one barrier, and each one mattered because the previous promise had proved incomplete.

The Fifteenth Amendment is the clearest case of a promise versus its enforcement. After 1870, Southern states used poll taxes, literacy tests, and white-only primaries to keep Black citizens from voting despite the amendment's plain text. The barrier did not fall until Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned racial discrimination in voting and gave the federal government tools to enforce the ban. On the exam, the pattern matters. A constitutional amendment may state the right, but legislation and enforcement determine whether people can actually exercise it.

Once people can vote, the question is why they vote the way they do. Political scientists describe several **models of voting behavior**. **Rational choice voting** says people vote for what they believe serves their own interests. **Retrospective voting** says people judge the recent performance of the party in power and reward or punish it. **Prospective voting** says people vote on expectations about the future. **Party identification**, a voter's psychological attachment to a party, is the single strongest predictor of vote choice. **Straight-ticket voting**, voting for candidates from the same political party across multiple offices on a ballot, is one visible way party identification shows up in practice. Voters also weigh **issue voting**, positions on current questions, and **candidate characteristics**, the personal traits they perceive in the people running.

Trap. students treat the Fifteenth Amendment as the moment Black Americans secured the vote. It was the moment the Constitution promised it. Between the promise and the reality stood nearly a century of state-level barriers, and exam questions often focus on what later removed those barriers, including the Twenty-Fourth Amendment and the Voting Rights Act rather than the Fifteenth Amendment alone.

5.2 Voter Turnout

Voter turnout, the share of eligible voters who cast ballots, follows a reliable rhythm. It is highest in presidential elections, lower in midterm congressional elections, and lowest in local and primary contests. This drop-off makes sense when you consider that presidential races receive the most attention and money and often present clearer stakes, while down-ballot races give voters less information to work with.

Who votes is not random. The strongest **demographic predictors of turnout** are age, education, and income, with older, more educated, and wealthier citizens voting at higher rates. Engagement matters too. **Political efficacy**, the belief that one's participation can make a difference, separates voters from nonvoters even among people with similar backgrounds. Someone who believes the system responds to people like them is far more likely to show up.

Rules shape turnout as well. **Structural barriers** are election rules that make voting easier or harder, including registration deadlines, polling hours and locations, and **voter ID laws** that require specified identification. Reforms have pushed the other way. The National Voter Registration Act of 1993, known as the **Motor Voter Act**, made registration available at motor-vehicle offices and public agencies, and states have added early voting, no-excuse absentee voting, and vote-by-mail. Every one of these rules is a policy choice about the tradeoff between access and administrative control, and the exam treats them neutrally as variables that move turnout up or down.

The consequence of uneven turnout is an uneven electorate. When young, poor, and less-educated citizens vote at lower rates, elected officials hear disproportionately from older, wealthier, more-educated constituents, and policy responds to the voices it hears. Because of this pattern, differences in turnout also affect whose views officials hear most often.

Trap. correlation is not destiny. Age, education, and income predict turnout, but they do not determine any individual's vote, and a question that asks why turnout differs between groups wants the structural and demographic factors, not a claim about how those groups vote. Also, American turnout runs lower than in many other democracies, a comparison the exam uses to frame questions about barriers.

5.3 Political Parties

A **political party** is an organization that seeks to win elections, control government, and influence public policy. Parties do three jobs at once. They nominate candidates and run campaigns, giving voters a manageable choice instead of a chaos of individuals. They organize government itself, through **party leadership in legislatures** that schedules votes and pursues legislative goals. And they serve as a **linkage institution**, a channel connecting people's preferences to the officials who govern.

The American party system has two dominant parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, a **two-party system** that has survived for more than a century and a half. Each party maintains a **party organization**, a network of national, state, and local institutions that recruits candidates, raises money, and turns out voters, and each publishes a **party platform**, a formal statement of its policy positions. The platform states the party's positions, and the organization works to elect candidates who support those positions.

Parties matter for governance, not just elections. By giving legislators a shared brand and a shared agenda, parties solve the coordination problem of getting hundreds of independent-minded officials to act together. A voter's **party identification** then works as a shortcut. Rather than researching every candidate's positions, many voters use the party label as a reliable guide to a candidate's general views. That shortcut is efficient, and it is also why party loyalty is so hard to dislodge.

Trap. do not confuse parties with interest groups, the subject of 5.6. Parties try to win control of government by running candidates, while interest groups try to influence whoever wins. If the organization in the question is fielding candidates, it is a party.

5.4 How and Why Political Parties Change and Adapt

Parties change over time in order to remain competitive. **Party adaptation** is the routine work of changing strategy, messaging, organization, and even policy positions in response to voters and conditions. A party that loses repeatedly does not keep doing the same thing; it recruits different candidates, emphasizes different issues, and rebuilds its **party coalition**, the groups of voters whose combined support forms its base. **Candidate recruitment**, the process of finding and supporting people to run, is one of the most consequential and least visible parts of this work.

Sometimes adaptation is not enough and the system itself shifts. A **political realignment** is a major, lasting shift in which groups support which party, usually triggered by a **critical election**. The election of 1860 built the Republican Party as a national force. The election of 1932 built the New Deal Democratic coalition that dominated for a generation. The elections around 1968 began a long regional resorting of

the parties. Realignment is rare, which is exactly why the exam treats it as a major event rather than a routine swing.

The countertrend is dealignment, in which voters weaken their ties to parties, more Americans call themselves independents, and campaigns become **candidate-centered** and focus on the individual rather than the party. A candidate-centered campaign still uses party money and party data, but it emphasizes the person rather than the organization. For the exam, keep both trends in mind. Parties work to adapt and survive, while many voters are less attached to parties than they once were.

Trap. not every wave election is a realignment. A realignment is a durable shift in coalitions that lasts for decades, not a single good or bad year. If a question asks whether an election was a realigning one, look for evidence of lasting change in who supports each party, not just who won.

5.5 Third-Party Politics

A **third party** is any party other than the two majors, and the American system is stacked against them. The **structural barriers** are mechanical. **Winner-take-all** elections give all of a jurisdiction's prize to the top vote-getter, so a party with 20 percent support everywhere wins nothing anywhere. **Single-member districts** elect one representative per district, which punishes divided opposition. Ballot-access laws, debate thresholds, and the Electoral College add further hurdles. The system does not hate third parties; it is simply designed in a way that makes two winners the natural outcome.

Third parties still matter through two mechanisms. The **spoiler effect** occurs when a third-party candidate draws enough votes from a similar constituency to change which major-party candidate wins. **Major-party co-optation** occurs when a major party adopts the third party's issues, absorbing its appeal and leaving it with nothing distinctive to offer. Both mechanisms help explain why third parties matter even though they rarely win. They can affect who wins and they can push issues into the discussion that the major parties later adopt.

Trap. the exam does not ask you to judge whether voting third-party is wise. It asks you to explain the structural reasons third parties struggle and the mechanisms by which they influence outcomes anyway. An option that treats a third party's low vote share as proof of irrelevance misses the spoiler and co-optation effects the unit teaches.

5.6 Interest Groups Influencing Policymaking

An **interest group** is an organized group that seeks to influence public policy on behalf of shared interests. The second half of the definition is important. Unlike a party, an interest group does not try to win control of government. It tries to influence the officials who are in charge. Business associations, labor unions, professional organizations, public-interest advocates, and **single-issue groups** focused on one policy area all fit the definition.

Groups differ in the **resources** they can use, including money, membership size, expertise, organization, and **access**, which means the ability to communicate directly and frequently with policymakers. A trade association may have money and expertise but few voters; a mass-membership group may have voters

but little money. How much influence a group has often depends on the situation. Expertise can be useful when a committee is drafting legislation, while a large membership can matter more to elected officials who are thinking about votes.

Groups form where the stakes are concentrated. When a policy's benefits fall on a small, organized group and its costs are spread thinly across the public, the beneficiaries organize and the public does not, which is one reason narrow interests can have more influence than their numbers alone might suggest. On the exam, you are not asked to judge whether this pattern is good or bad. You are asked to recognize why it happens and to predict which groups are likely to organize.

Trap. the party-versus-group distinction is the most tested contrast in the unit. Fielding candidates and seeking to govern means party. Lobbying, advertising, and mobilizing around issues without running candidates means interest group. When the question names an organization, check whether it is trying to win offices or to influence policy outcomes.

5.7 Groups Influencing Policy Outcomes

Interest groups influence policy through a toolkit of strategies. **Lobbying** is direct contact with officials to press a position. Groups file **amicus curiae briefs**, friend-of-the-court filings that offer arguments to judges in cases they are not party to. They help with **drafting legislation**, writing the actual statutory language lawmakers consider. Groups also mobilize supporters. **Membership mobilization** turns a group's own members into callers, donors, and voters, while **grassroots mobilization** activates ordinary citizens more broadly, through canvassing, rallies, and protests. **Social movements** and **protest movements** are collective action at its largest scale, seeking change through sustained public pressure.

Every group faces the **collective action problem**. Individuals may ask why they should contribute when they can benefit from the group's victories without joining or paying. The **free rider** benefits from the group's work without joining or paying. Groups solve this with **selective benefits**, goods available only to members. Material benefits include discounts and services; solidary benefits include friendship and status; purposive benefits include the satisfaction of advancing a cause. Groups offer these benefits to give people a reason to join, pay dues, and stay involved.

- Lobbying: direct efforts to influence officials, built on expertise and access.
- Amicus curiae briefs: influencing courts by informing judges, not by being a party to the case.
- Drafting legislation: supplying the language, which gives the drafter quiet influence over the details.
- Mobilization: turning members and the public into pressure through calls, canvassing, donations, and protest.

Trap. an amicus curiae brief is filed by someone who is not a party to the case. The term means friend of the court. An option that describes the brief as the legal argument of one side's lawyers confuses it with ordinary litigation. Similarly, lobbying is direct contact with officials; organizing citizens to contact officials is grassroots work, an indirect strategy.

5.8 Electing a President

Presidential nominations run through the states. Parties choose their nominees with **primary elections** and caucuses. In a **closed primary**, only voters registered with the party may participate; in an **open primary**, participation is not limited to registered party members, subject to state rules. A **caucus** is a meeting of party members rather than a secret-ballot election. Winners collect delegates, and the **party convention** formally nominates the candidate and adopts the platform. States have steadily moved their contests earlier, front-loading the calendar so that the nomination is often decided long before the convention meets.

The general election runs through the **Electoral College**. Each state gets electors equal to its House seats plus its two senators, 538 in all, and 270 wins the presidency. In most states, **winner-take-all allocation** gives every elector to the statewide popular-vote winner, no matter how narrow the margin. Campaigns therefore concentrate on **battleground states**, where the outcome is close enough to be contestable, and largely ignore states whose outcome is a foregone conclusion. Voters in a safe state and voters in a swing state cast equal ballots that carry unequal campaign attention.

Exam questions often focus on these features of the system. Because electors are allocated by state rather than by national vote, the **Electoral College winner can differ from the national popular-vote winner**, as happened most recently in 2000 and 2016. Defenders argue the system forces candidates to build broad geographic coalitions and preserves a federal element in presidential selection. Critics argue it distorts representation by making most votes strategically irrelevant. The exam presents both positions and focuses on whether you understand how the system works.

Trap. the people do not directly elect the president; the electors do, and in most states the electors go winner-take-all to the statewide winner. Any option that treats the national popular vote as decisive, or that assumes electors mirror it, fails the mechanics the unit teaches.

5.9 Congressional Elections

Incumbency is a central factor in congressional elections. The **incumbency advantage** is the set of advantages that sitting officeholders have, including name recognition, fundraising networks, a record to run on, staff and casework that help constituents, and often a district drawn to favor their party. The advantage shows up in reelection rates that routinely exceed 90 percent in the House. It is an advantage, not a guarantee, and wave years do sweep incumbents out.

The most predictable pattern in congressional elections is the **midterm election** penalty. In midterms, held halfway through a president's term, the president's party almost always loses House seats. This pattern reflects retrospective voting. Midterms often become a referendum on the president's performance, and voters from the party out of power tend to be more motivated while some of the president's supporters stay home. Higher **presidential election turnout** also means the midterm electorate is smaller and different, which compounds the effect.

House and Senate contests differ by design. House members serve two-year terms in districts, which keeps them close to constituents but also exposes them to national tides and to redistricting after each census. Senators serve six-year terms statewide, which insulates them from any single election cycle and

forces them to answer to an entire state rather than a carved-up district. Parties manage all of this through **candidate recruitment** and **campaign management**, and a popular presidential candidate can create a **coattail effect**, lifting same-party candidates down the ballot.

Trap. students overstate the midterm rule into a law of nature. It is a strong historical tendency driven by turnout and referendum dynamics, not a constitutional requirement. If a question asks why the president's party usually loses seats in midterms, the answer is voter behavior, not institutional design.

5.10 Modern Campaigns

Modern campaigns are **candidate-centered** and are built around the individual candidate rather than the party. The professionalization of politics created the **campaign consultant** class, specialists in strategy, messaging, polling, media, and organization who sell their services to candidates the way agencies sell to brands. **Campaign strategy** coordinates targeting, messages, resources, and timing, and **campaign costs** have risen as advertising, staff, data, and travel all professionalized.

Campaigns now use much more data to organize outreach. **Voter data management** and **microtargeting** let campaigns use detailed voter files to send tailored messages to narrow groups of voters, with different ads for different households based on their predicted concerns. **Social media campaigning** and **digital outreach** let campaigns speak directly to supporters, raise money in small increments, and mobilize volunteers without going through traditional media gatekeepers. **Canvassing** and **phone banking** are forms of direct voter contact that campaigns still use to increase turnout.

This has led to what is often called the permanent campaign, a long **election cycle** in which governing and campaigning overlap. Fundraising continues for much of an official's time in office because the next election is always approaching. That can mean more communication with voters, but it also means officials spend a lot of time raising money and testing messages instead of legislating.

Trap. candidate-centered does not mean party-irrelevant. Parties still recruit candidates, fund campaigns, and provide data and organization. The difference is mainly one of emphasis. The candidate's personal brand is more prominent, while the party provides support behind the scenes. An option that claims parties no longer matter in modern campaigns overreads the trend.

5.11 Campaign Finance

Campaign money comes in two legal categories. **Hard money** is contributions given directly to candidates, parties, or committees under federal law. These contributions are regulated, disclosed, and subject to donation limits. **Soft money** was money raised outside those limits, historically by parties for party-building activities. The **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002** (BCRA) banned soft money at the national party level and restricted certain election advertising, an attempt to close the loopholes that had swallowed the limits.

The required case is **Citizens United v. FEC** (2010). The Court held that independent political spending by corporations and unions is protected speech under the First Amendment. The Court treated spending money to communicate a political message as a form of expression and said the government

may not ban that spending based on the speaker's corporate identity. The decision opened the door to **Super PACs**, independent-expenditure-only committees that may raise unlimited funds but may not contribute directly to candidates or coordinate their spending with campaigns.

These activities are treated differently under the law. Candidates raise limited hard-money **campaign contributions**. Outside groups make **independent expenditures**, spending for or against candidates without coordinating with them. The **Federal Election Commission (FEC)** administers and enforces the rules. The **Stand by Your Ad provision** requires federal candidates to appear in their own broadcast ads and state that they approve the message.

The underlying debate is the recurring clash between **free speech and electoral fairness**. One side argues that restricting political spending restricts political expression itself, and that more speech, even well-funded speech, serves democracy. The other side argues that unlimited spending risks corruption and drowns out ordinary voices, and that fairness requires limits. The exam presents both sides of the debate and expects you to apply the legal categories to new situations.

Trap. Citizens United did not legalize unlimited direct contributions to candidates. It protected independent expenditures, spending by outside groups without coordination. Direct contributions remain limited. If an option says a corporation can now give unlimited money straight to a candidate's campaign, it has confused independent spending with contributing, and the question is testing exactly that confusion.

5.12 The Media

The **media** is a **linkage institution** that connects citizens to government by carrying political information, debates, and coverage of leaders. Almost everything voters know about politics arrives through some medium, which means the media has an important influence on what the public sees and hears about politics. The media influences politics in several specific ways. **Agenda setting** is the media's influence over which issues get public and political attention. **Watchdog journalism** and **investigative journalism** scrutinize officials and expose misconduct. Straight **election coverage** reports on candidates, campaigns, and results.

How the media covers politics shapes what citizens learn. **Horse-race journalism** frames elections as contests, who is ahead, who is gaining, who stumbled, rather than as choices about policy and qualifications. This kind of coverage can hold attention, but it gives voters more information about who is ahead than about the policies and qualifications at stake. **Media bias**, perceived or actual slant in what gets covered and how it is framed, is a constant complaint, and **media ownership**, who controls the outlets, feeds debates about whether coverage reflects the public interest or the owner's.

The media's influence has limits. Agenda setting is the stronger effect, because the media has a large influence on which issues people consider important. Persuasion is weaker, since it is harder for coverage to change what people already think about those issues. Voters filter coverage through party identification and prior beliefs, which is why the same broadcast can reinforce opposite conclusions in different households.

Trap. agenda setting is not mind control. It means the media influences which issues the public considers important, not that it dictates opinions. An option that says media coverage determines how people vote overstates the effect. The exam expects you to identify agenda setting as an influence on which issues seem important, rather than as a direct change in opinions.

5.13 Changing Media

The media environment has been remade by **new communication technologies**. **Social media campaigning** lets candidates and groups reach voters directly, bypassing editorial gatekeepers. **Partisan news sites** and **ideologically oriented programming** serve audiences that want their own views reflected back. **Consumer-driven media** follows audience preferences, with coverage shaped by clicks, subscriptions, and advertising incentives. That tends to reward material that holds attention.

Abundant choice changed how people consume news. **Selective exposure** is the tendency to choose sources that match existing attitudes. **Echo chambers** are information environments where repeated contact with similar views reinforces what people already believe. The result is **reinforcement of existing beliefs** rather than the clash of perspectives the old broadcast era accidentally provided, when three networks gave everyone roughly the same news.

- Traditional news media: newspapers, television, and radio, with editorial gatekeepers deciding what counts as news.
- New and social media: direct, abundant, and participatory, with gatekeeping replaced by algorithms and audience choice.
- Consumer-driven media: coverage optimized for attention and revenue, which favors conflict, novelty, and affirmation over proportion.

The consequences cut both ways. More people can now publish and share information without going through a traditional news organization, including outsiders, activists, and ordinary citizens, and campaigns can reach supporters at lower cost. But the same openness strains **news credibility**, the perceived trustworthiness of information, because false or misleading content travels through the same channels as reporting. For the exam, treat this as a structural change in how news works, with both advantages and disadvantages to consider.

Trap. more media choice does not automatically mean a better-informed public. When people can choose, many choose affirmation, and selective exposure means the same technology that enables diverse voices also enables self-segregation. If a question asks about the effect of media fragmentation, focus on reinforcement of existing beliefs and the formation of echo chambers.

Your 20-minute plan for this unit

- Minutes 0-5. Read the trap table out loud, then open the Unit 5 flashcards in Rycal and run the Core cards for 5.1 through 5.4, the voting and parties block.
- Minutes 5-12. Do a Brain Dump on campaign finance. Write everything you remember about hard money, soft money, Citizens United, and Super PACs, then check your notes against section 5.11 and

fill in the gaps. Follow with the Core flashcards for 5.5 through 5.8.

- Minutes 12-18. Work the two practice questions above, then a set of AP-style questions in Rycal on elections and media. For each question, name the underlying institution before reading the options.
- Minutes 18-20. Run one FRQ drill in which you outline a Q1-style concept application that uses the Electoral College or an interest-group tactic in a new scenario. Close with the six-question recall check.

Confusions That Cost Points

Unit 5 is the biggest unit in the course, and these are the contrasts the exam mines most heavily.

These same contrasts are in the Unit 5 flashcards in Rycal, so you can drill the pairs directly rather than rereading the table.

THE MIX-UP	THE FIX
Open vs. closed primary	A closed primary limits voting to registered party members; an open primary lets voters beyond the party's registrants participate, subject to state rules. Closed gives the party more control over its own nomination.
Hard vs. soft money	Hard money is regulated, limited, and given directly to candidates or committees. Soft money was unregulated party money outside federal limits, banned at the national level by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002.
What Citizens United decided	The case protected independent political spending by corporations and unions as speech. It did not allow unlimited direct contributions to candidates, which remain limited. Independent expenditure is not a contribution.
Interest group vs. political party	Parties run candidates and seek to control government. Interest groups lobby, advertise, and mobilize to influence policy without seeking office. Check whether the organization is trying to win offices or to influence policy outcomes.
Presidential vs. midterm turnout	Turnout runs higher in presidential years and lower in midterms, and the president's party typically loses House seats in midterms as the election becomes a referendum on presidential performance.
Electoral College vs. popular vote	Electors formally choose the president, 270 to win, with most states awarding all electors to the statewide winner. The national popular-vote winner can lose, because the contest is over electors, not total votes.
Free rider vs. selective benefits	The free rider enjoys a group's victories without contributing, which creates the collective action problem. Selective benefits, available only to members, are how groups solve it.
Direct lobbying vs. grassroots mobilization	Lobbying is direct contact with officials. Grassroots mobilization works indirectly by encouraging citizens to pressure officials themselves. An amicus curiae brief is a third lane, informing judges as a friend of the court rather than as a party.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations follow. Do not peek.

1. In a presidential election, Candidate A wins the national popular vote but Candidate B wins the Electoral College and the presidency. Which statement best explains how this outcome is possible?
- A. Most states award all of their electoral votes to the statewide popular-vote winner
 - B. The result was unconstitutional because the popular-vote winner must prevail
 - C. Electors are required to follow the national popular vote
 - D. The winning candidate must have carried more states
2. A corporation spends \$2 million on television ads urging voters to defeat a Senate candidate. The corporation does not coordinate with any campaign. After *Citizens United v. FEC*, which statement is true?
- A. The spending is a protected independent expenditure because it was not coordinated with any campaign
 - B. The spending is illegal because corporations may not spend money on elections
 - C. The spending is legal only if the corporation gives the money directly to the candidate within federal limits
 - D. The spending is legal only if it stays below a federally set dollar cap for independent ads
3. A voter researches each candidate's tax plan, estimates how each plan would affect her own finances, and votes for the candidate whose plan benefits her most. Which model of voting behavior does this best illustrate?
- A. Retrospective voting
 - B. Party identification
 - C. Rational choice voting
 - D. Prospective voting
4. An interest group hires former congressional staffers to meet directly with current members of Congress and persuade them to support a bill. This tactic is an example of:
- A. Electioneering
 - B. Lobbying
 - C. Grassroots mobilization
 - D. Civil disobedience

Answer Key

1. **A.** A is correct because most states award all of their electoral votes to the statewide popular-vote winner, so a candidate can pile up huge margins in a few states, lose narrowly in many others, and finish ahead in electors while behind in total votes. B is incorrect because the outcome follows the constitutional design of the Electoral College, so calling it unconstitutional misreads the system. C is incorrect because electors are not bound by the national popular vote; in most states they reflect the statewide result. D is incorrect because winning more states is neither necessary nor sufficient, since states carry different numbers of electors and the contest is over 270 electoral votes, not a state count.
2. **A.** A is correct because *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) held that independent political spending by corporations and unions is protected speech under the First Amendment, and spending that is not coordinated with a campaign is an independent expenditure. B is incorrect because it states the law as it stood before *Citizens United* and ignores the holding. C is incorrect because it confuses independent

expenditures with direct contributions, which remain limited and regulated; giving money straight to a candidate is the hard-money world, not the Citizens United world. D is incorrect because it invents a requirement that does not exist; the issue is coordination with the campaign, not the dollar amount.

3. C. C is correct because rational choice voting means choosing based on a calculation of which option best serves one's own interests, which is exactly what this voter does. A is incorrect because retrospective voting judges the past performance of the party in power rather than calculating personal benefit. B is incorrect because no party attachment drives this voter's choice. D is incorrect because prospective voting concerns expectations about the future generally, while this voter is weighing concrete personal costs and benefits.

4. B. B is correct because lobbying is direct contact with government officials to influence policy, which is what these meetings are. A is incorrect because electioneering means activity aimed at campaigns and elections, not direct persuasion of sitting officials. C is incorrect because grassroots mobilization organizes ordinary citizens to pressure officials, rather than contacting officials directly. D is incorrect because civil disobedience means deliberately breaking a law as protest, which is not happening here.

If you missed any question, write the idea you missed as a flashcard and add it to the Unit 5 flashcards in Rycal. Bring that card back over the next few days instead of rereading the explanation once.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud or write it down. Peeking first turns this into rereading, and rereading builds recognition of the page instead of recall of the ideas.

1. Name the four constitutional amendments that expanded voting rights and state the barrier each one removed.
2. Explain the difference between retrospective and prospective voting, and say which model best explains midterm losses for the president's party.
3. Why is turnout higher in presidential elections than in midterms? Give two structural and two demographic reasons.
4. Contrast open and closed primaries, and explain which one gives party organizations more control over the nomination.
5. State the holding of *Citizens United v. FEC* and explain what a Super PAC can do, what it cannot do, and why.
6. Describe three distinct functions of the media as a linkage institution, and explain how agenda setting differs from persuasion.

Anything you could not say out loud is your next card. Add it in Rycal and review it again in a few days.

Key terms for this unit

Fourteenth Amendment, Fifteenth Amendment, Seventeenth Amendment, Nineteenth Amendment, Twenty-Fourth Amendment, Twenty-Sixth Amendment, Rational choice voting, Retrospective voting, Prospective voting, Straight-ticket voting, Voting rights expansion, Campaign consultant, Campaign strategy, Fundraising, Campaign costs, Election cycle, Social media campaigning, Microtargeting, Canvassing, Phone banking, Earned media, Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, Soft money, Stand by Your Ad provision, *Citizens United v. FEC*, Political spending as speech, Campaign

contribution, Political action committee (PAC), Super PAC, Independent expenditure, Campaign finance regulation, Free speech versus electoral fairness, Federal Election Commission (FEC), Media linkage institution, Agenda setting, Traditional news media, New communication technologies, Investigative journalism, Election coverage, Political commentary, Horse-race journalism, Polling in media coverage, Public trust in government, Media choice, Media bias, Media ownership, Partisan news site, Ideologically oriented programming, Consumer-driven media, Emerging technology, Reinforcement of existing beliefs, News credibility, Political knowledge, Selective exposure, Echo chamber, Voter turnout, Structural barriers, Political efficacy, Voter registration, Voter ID laws, Absentee voting, Early voting, Vote-by-mail, Presidential election turnout, Midterm election, Demographic predictors of turnout, Party identification, Candidate characteristics, Issue voting, Linkage institution, Political party, Interest group, Elections, Media as linkage institution, Voter mobilization, Voter education, Party platform, Candidate recruitment, Campaign management, Party leadership in legislatures, Party organization, Candidate-centered campaign, Party adaptation, Demographic coalition, Critical election, Political realignment, Campaign finance law, Voter data management, Digital outreach, Party messaging, Third party, Independent candidate, Winner-take-all system, Two-party system, Structural barrier, Proportional representation, Major-party co-optation, Spoiler effect, Lobbying, Drafting legislation, Membership mobilization, Amicus curiae brief, Iron triangle, Issue network, Interest-group resources, Access, Free rider, Selective benefits, Collective action problem, Single-issue group, Ideological movement, Social movement, Protest movement, Professional organization, Military influence, Bureaucratic influence, Policy coalition, Policy agenda, Incumbency advantage, Open primary, Closed primary, Caucus, Party convention, General election, Electoral College, Winner-take-all allocation, Popular vote, Electoral vote, Electoral-popular vote divergence, Battleground state, Congressional election, Primary election, Presidential election year, Constituency, Coattail effect.

Questions students ask about Unit 5

How much of the exam is Unit 5?

Unit 5 is 20 to 27 percent of the AP exam, the second-largest unit after Unit 2 and the largest single share of the free-response section's subject matter. Campaign finance, the Electoral College, and media effects are among the most frequently tested topics in the entire course.

What is the difference between an interest group and a political party?

A political party seeks to win elections and control government. An interest group seeks to influence policy without trying to take over the government. Parties run candidates; groups lobby the winners. The exam tests this distinction often, so make sure you can state the difference clearly.

Can a third party ever win the presidency under the current system?

The system makes it extremely difficult but not impossible. Winner-take-all elections, single-member districts, and the Electoral College all punish divided opposition, so third parties usually end up as spoilers or as issue entrepreneurs whose ideas the major parties absorb. The exam cares more about why the barriers exist than about any particular third party's platform.

Do I need to memorize specific FEC contribution limits?

No. Focus on the concepts rather than the dollar amounts. Hard money is regulated and limited, soft money was banned by the BCRA, independent expenditures are protected speech after Citizens United, and Super PACs cannot coordinate with candidates. Contribution limits change, so the exam tests the framework, not the figures.

How does the Electoral College show up on the exam?

As data to interpret and as institutions to explain. Expect electoral maps and vote totals on the Q2 Quantitative Analysis FRQ, and expect multiple-choice questions that test whether you understand the basic mechanics, including 538 electors, 270 to win, winner-take-all allocation in most states, and the possibility that the popular-vote winner loses.

Where to go next

Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. If you use Rycal, this unit is the Unit 5 flashcards under AP U.S. Government, and the deck covers the terms in this guide. The practice questions there hit the same traps named in this guide, including open and closed primaries, hard and soft money, and what Citizens United actually decided. Use your missed questions and your recall check to decide which cards to make first, then return to them over the next few days.

About this guide. Written for Rycal and aligned to the College Board AP U.S. Government and Politics course framework, Unit 5. All questions and explanations are original Rycal writing. Rycal is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the College Board.