

CHAPTER II

POLITICAL AND ELECTION SYSTEM IN THE UNITED STATES

A. United States Political System

The United States is one of the largest democratic countries in the world. Its democracy, based on one of the six basic principles of its constitution, known as representative democracy. In a representative democracy, citizens elect representatives to represent them as the government officials. Citizens can also contact their officials when they want to support or change a law (Department of Homeland Security, 2008).

1. System of Government

The system of Government that applied in the United States is a federal republic. “Federal” means that it divides authority between central and regional governments. It comprises of three levels of government, which are federal, states, and local government. While a “republic” refers to the form of government where people hold power by electing representatives to exercise their power (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Therefore, as a federal republic, citizens may choose their representative to run for each level of government through fair and democratic election.

a. Federal Government

The federal government acts as the center of the government. According to the constitution ratified in 1788, the United States consists of three branches of government, which are the legislative, executive, and judicative.

The legislative branch consists of two houses of legislature so that it named bicameral legislature. There are the House of Representatives that comprised of 435 representatives apportioned among the states according to population, and the House of Senate that comprised of 100 senators (two from each state) (U.S. Department of State, 2004). In the executive branch, the president acted as the head of state as well as the head of government. In the judicative branch, there is Supreme Court as the highest court of the country.

The powers and responsibilities of the federal government refer to the constitution. Some of the powers listed in the constitution include regulating commerce between the states, providing for national defense, creating money, regulating immigration and naturalization, and entering into treaties with foreign countries (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Other than that, regulations are managed in the state level.

b. State Government

The United States consists of 50 individual states which each of them have their position of legal autonomy and political significance, sharing authority and functions with the federal government (Vile, 2007). State Government consists of two chambers of legislative body, headed by the governor in the executive branch, and has independent judiciary body (the state supreme court/court of appeals). Each state has sovereignty over its own authority, it is not a sub-unit of the central government that needs to report in any constitutional way to them.

c. Local Government

Local governments may include cities, counties, towns, school districts, and special-purpose districts, which govern such matters as local natural resources or transportation networks (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Local government looks after regulation applies within its territorial boundaries. It has Board of Supervisors and Town/City Council in the legislative branch, Executive branch (Mayor) as the head of government, and Judicial Branch Court.

2. Political Party

According to an Italian scholar, Giovanni Sartori, political party is any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through election, candidates for public office (Hofmeister & Garbow, 2011). A political party is an essential element in the democratic country. A political party exists as a mean to accommodate the aspirations of the people in a democratic society. Based on the definition above, we can see that there are two salient characteristics of a political party. These are the fact that political party cannot be separated from the interest to run for public offices, and also the elections. Without political parties, a modern representative democracy is not conceivable (Hofmeister & Garbow, 2011).

The United States use the two-party system, where two major parties are dominating the political competition. It does not mean that there is no other party prevails, there are also other parties called minor parties or third parties that only play a subordinate role in the government. The two-party system appeared and maintained because of the force on the existence of the office of the presidency, and its mode of election.

“This is the only truly ‘national’ office to be fought for; it is the focal point of all national political life. The simple, obvious fact about the office of president is that only one person can fill it. The Senate or the House of Representatives could dissolve into a multitude of factional groups, but only one person can occupy the president’s chair in the White House.” (Vile, 2007).

The Democratic and the Republican Party are the key parties in the United States. There are also many third parties yet has a meager number of representatives in the government, among them, are The Constitution Party, Reform Party, Libertarian Party, Green Party, and others.

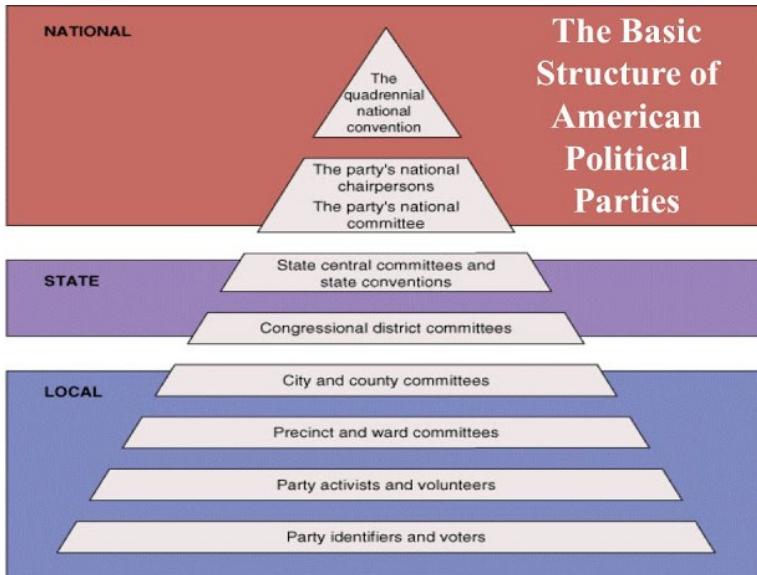
At the very beginning, two parties existed in the United States were the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party (Jefferson Republican). Federalist Party was becoming so unpopular, leaving the Democratic-Republican as the only national party exist. After the 1824, there is intense disagreement among party leaders of the Democratic Republican party that the party split in two (Parla, 2008). Democratic Party established, and so was its opposition, the Whig party (National Republican). In 1854, the Republican Party established by some Whig party member and antislavery Democrats (Parla, 2008). Whig party later became unpopular, leaving Democrat Party and Republican Party as two major party exist until today.

Each party has its focus and direction in the way they should govern the United States. They often aligned with different ideologies. Democrat aligned as a libertarian, while the Republican aligned as a conservative party.

Parties in the United States have its formal structure of organization resides in each level of government. It forms

a pyramid of committees starting from local at the base to the national level at the tip. However, it does not imply that the lower levels of the pyramid are subject to control or direction by the levels above them (Vile, 2007). In local level, there are party identifiers and voters, party activists and volunteers, precinct and ward committees, and city and county committees. In state level there are congressional district committees, and state central committees and state conventions. In the national level, there are National party committee (which includes party's national chairperson), and the quadrennial national convention. Figure 2.1 depicts the organizational pyramid. As it gets to the base, the number of offices will be more extensive. The higher the office, the lesser the employees.

Figure 2. 1 The Basic Structure of American Political Parties



*Source: O'Connor, Karen; Sabato, Larry J; Yanus, Alixandra B. 2012. *Essentials of American Government: Roots and Reform*. London. Pearson.*

The national convention is a process held every four years (quadrennial) to nominate a presidential candidate from each party. The National Party Committee for Democratic Party is Democratic National Committee (DNC), and for Republican Party, it is called Republican National Committee (RNC). The national chairpersons are responsible for promoting the election of the party's presidential candidate. Besides, the National Committee is responsible for conducting the party's presidential election campaign and for organizing the national convention of the party, but there are also congressional and senatorial campaign committees, emphasizing the fact that presidential and congressional politics are distinct (Vile, 2007).

State central committees is a governing body that reside in each states of the United States. State-level organizations are responsible for key party functions, such as statewide candidate recruitment and campaign mobilization (Krutz, 2016).

The precinct is the lowest level of party organization. The county-level organization is responsible for many of the operational responsibilities in local elections. This level of organization frequently takes on many of the most basic responsibilities of a democratic system, including identifying and mobilizing potential voters and donors, identifying and training potential candidates for public office, and recruiting new members for the party (Krutz, 2016).

B. United States Election System

1. Election in the United States

An election is a formal process where citizens choose a political candidate to serve as their representative in a specified position of government by voting. As the United States use a democratic political system, an election is essential to choose the government to represent the people. Even though democracy is not merely about the election, however, democracy starts from an election.

An election is crucial to make sure that citizen has their power passes in an orderly manner to the elected representatives, it guided by the United States Constitution. The U.S. Constitution guarantees that all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 can vote in federal (national), state, and local elections (U.S. Department of States, 2016). Elections, even those for federal office, are conducted locally by thousands of administrators, typically civil servants who are county or city officials or

clerks (U.S. Department of States, 2016). Most of the important rules that define the way elections are carried out come out of state laws, legal decisions, and local administrative practices (Meyer, Election Basics, 2015). As the United States has three level of government, there are elections in each level of government.

a. Federal Election

Federal election (also called as national election) is the highest level of election in the United States. In federal election, there are the presidential election and congressional election.

1) Presidential Election

President of the United States serves for four years term. It means that president and vice president elected in every four years in November. A person should fulfill several requirements to be eligible as a presidential candidate. According to the constitution, a presidential candidate should be a natural born citizen (not a naturalization citizen) of the United States, at least 35 years old, and has been a legal resident of the US for 14 years before the election (U.S. Department of States, 2016). A president can serve maximum two years term in a row.

To be a president, a candidate should pass through four steps of the election. These steps are primaries and caucuses, national conventions, general election, and Electoral College (U.S. Department of States, 2016).

The eligible candidates that have the same concern and direction are most likely to gather in the same party. In the beginning, each party will possibly

have several presidential candidates. Party should organize an electoral process called the primaries, held from January to June in the election year, to nominate a representative of that party in the national election. There are two types of primaries that used by states; these are primaries and caucuses. Primary elections and caucuses differ in how they are organized and who participates (U.S. Department of States, 2016). The primaries funded and conducted by the state government over several months in the spring before the election. States parties choose whether they want to hold a primary or a caucus, and some states have switched from one format to the other over time (U.S. Department of States, 2016). Some states even have both primaries and caucuses.

Almost every state uses primary election method. In general, according to the kind of voters, there is an open primary and closed primary. In an open primary, all voters can participate, regardless of their party affiliation or lack of affiliation (Bureau of International Information Programs, 2016). While in a closed primary, only registered party members can vote for their party. Election held in secret ballot.

In caucuses, faithful party members speak openly on behalf of the candidates they support for the party nomination (Bureau of International Information Programs, 2016). Voting is conducted at local (precinct) party meetings and is done by raising hands or breaking up into groups and the votes being counted manually by the number of supporters for each candidate (LeMay, 2017). In caucuses, participants also contribute to the making of the national party platform. Because of

the need for the high level of political engagement and time in the caucus participation, caucuses tend to attract fewer participants than primaries.

Every summer in a presidential election year, July to early September, parties conducted their national convention. In this convention, each party nominated a candidate that will represent them in the national election based on the result of previous elections. In the national convention, a presidential candidate also chooses the running mate (vice presidential candidate).

After each party has nominated a candidate, the general election is ready to take place. General election usually held on Tuesday after the first Monday in November. American citizens go to vote their preferable candidate at the polling place in the general election (USA.gov, 2018).

The result of the general election is not final. After receiving the result of the popular vote, the candidate should pass through the Electoral College in the early December. In this process, candidates will be elected by the electors to get the majority of electoral votes. The member of Electoral College is the active party member. Each party required to appoint some electors equal to the sum of Congress for states where they reside. Figure 2.2 illustrates the number of electoral college vote allocation in each state.

Figure 2. 2 Electoral College Vote Allocation 2012



Source: 4President.us, December 22nd 2012, from <http://blog.4president.org/2012/2010/12/printable-2012-electoral-college-map-with-2008-2004-2000-results.html>, retrieved December 23rd 2017

When a candidate wins the popular vote in a state, the electors from that candidate's party in that area can go for Electoral College. For example, if a Democrat candidate wins in Texas, 38 of Democrat electors will go to the Electoral College while the Republicans or the other parties are not. This is what is called “the winner takes all.”

To be a winner, a candidate should win the majority votes. It counted to 270 as a minimum, from the 538 total electoral votes. When there are no candidates reached the majority votes, President will be chosen according to the decision of the House of Representatives, while Senate will choose the Vice President.

2) Congressional Election

Congressional election held to elect the legislature, which is the House of Representatives, and the House of Senate. It conducted every two years in November. Thus it called the “mid-term” election.

The House of Representative comprises of 435 representatives from each state depend on the number of its population, voted by the voters in the state they represent. The state with higher population will get the most number of representative in the house. A person should be at least 25 years old, has been the U.S. citizen for seven years, and resides in the state that he/she represents.

Another congressional election is the election of the House of Senate. Senate comprises 100 members elected from each state. Each state has two representatives in the House of Senate. Senator serves six years term which then divided into three groups so that one-third of them up for the mid-term election. To be a senator, a person should be at least 30 years old, has been the U.S. citizen for nine years, and resides in the state that he/she represents.

To win the election, a candidate should have more votes than the other. The candidate who receives a plurality of the vote (that is, the most considerable number of votes in the given voting district) wins the election (U.S. Department of States, 2016).

b. State and Local Election

Different from the federal election, each state and local government can conduct the election at any time

depends on each regulation. Offices like the state's governor, legislature, mayor, judges, local officials and other official recommendations can be chosen through elections (USA.gov, 2018). It is also applicable for voting initiatives that affect related offices, for example law, taxes, and budget.

A chief election official has decisive authority in the election of each state (USA.gov, 2018). A single individual, board or commission of the elections, or a combination of two or more entities can run the election at the local level (USA.gov, 2018). Figure 2.3 depicts the institutional configuration of local election officials.

Figure 2.3 Local Election Administration Structure



Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, June 15th 2016, from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-administration-at-state-and-local-levels.aspx>, retrieved December 23rd 2017

2. Campaign System

In the election, campaign plays an essential role to bridge candidates and voters. It is a process to introduce the candidate and disseminate information on their plans and objectives. A campaign is a conscious, sustained and incremental process designed to be implemented over a specified period to influence a specified audience (Pfau & Parrot, 1993). In this case, the period of the campaign is the official time set by the officials according to law. While the specified audiences are the voters, who have the right to vote in the determined location, just to win their votes.

There are several ways to do a campaign. A candidate can directly meet voters, present at the town meetings and debates, or disseminate the information through media (TV, internet, printed advertisements, direct mail, *et cetera*). The main stage of the political campaign is the organized event where candidates can present information about themselves and their policies directly though voters and speeches (Meyer, Political Campaigns, 2015).

Officially, there are two campaign periods for the presidential candidate, which are the campaign before the primary election and the general election. After a person declared their candidacy (usually in the spring of the year before an election), a candidate can go for a campaign. Campaigning for the primary election is relatively complicated. Voters need to know about the candidate as well as their objectives and plan to decide the preferable candidate that represents their aspirations. By the reason of the time limit, voters may have no time to look into all candidates, nor all the candidates get sufficient media or debate time to deliver their messages to the voters (Krutz, 2016).

When a single candidate has officially nominated from each party, campaign for the general election in national level can proceed (between mid-August and early-November). Candidates need to communicate to a nation of 100 million voters for the 12 or more months that make up the presidential campaign season (U.S. Department of States, 2016). They travel around the 50 states disseminating information about them, trying about who they are and what objectives they will pursue the country. Since most American voters identify themselves as moderates, candidates often shift their messages to "capture the middle" (Independence Hall Association, 2008). In the campaign for general election, rallies, debates, and advertising take a substantial portion (USA.gov, 2018). Since there are only two major party candidates and a few minor party candidates, it is more straightforward to conduct than primaries and conventions (Krutz, 2016).

Generally in 19th centuries, presidential election campaigns only rely on party organizational structure. But in its current development, political parties and presidential candidates organize campaigns with the help of political consultants, policy advisers and pollsters (Budiatri, 2013). Potential candidates typically launch "exploratory committees" that involve extensive polling and fund-raising activities (Independence Hall Association, 2008). Campaign of each candidates organized by the campaign committee, that mostly are temporary prior to election. However parties also have permanent professional campaign organization in the top level, which are each national committees. These organizations coordinate all national campaigns especially those for president (Meyer, Political Campaigns, 2015).

