A staffer from Dr. George Gallup’s Institute of Public Opinion takes notes during an interview. Gallup did not invent scientific sampling, but he was the first to report results publicly and regularly through his syndicated newspaper column “America Speaks.” Courtesy of the Gallup Organization.
Democrats and Republicans shared presidential election victories almost equally. Voter participation declined from 1900 to 1912 and then fluctuated during the rest of the century with no clear trend.

The twenty-five presidential elections of the twentieth century produced twelve Democratic and thirteen Republican presidents (see upper chart). In seven of these elections, the winning margin in the popular vote was 5 percent or less. In the 1960 and 1968 elections, with Richard M. Nixon as the Republican candidate in both, the winning margin was less than 1 percent. In two elections, the tally was so close that the ultimate losers, Charles Evans Hughes in 1916 and Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, were announced as the winners on the morning after the election.

American voters seemed to prefer a two-party system and were often reluctant to cast their votes for third parties. Nevertheless, third-party candidates had considerable influence in four of the century’s twenty-five presidential elections. Theodore Roosevelt won nearly 30 percent of the popular vote in 1912. Robert La Follette captured 17 percent of the vote in 1924. George Wallace garnered 14 percent of the vote in 1968. Ross Perot won 19 percent of the vote in 1992. In three of these elections—1912, 1968, and 1992—the winning candidates garnered a plurality, rather than a majority, of the votes cast.

The American system is unique among industrial democracies. It is characterized not only by the long-term balance between the two major parties and resistance to third-party candidates, but also by an electoral college system that maintains the “winner-take-all” principle in every state.

Voter participation—the ratio of actual voters to the total number of eligible voters—is difficult to calculate. Ballot-box stuffing and miscounts cause errors in the count of actual voters, but these problems are trivial compared with the difficulty of estimating the number of eligible voters. Early in the century, each state decided independently who was qualified to vote in national elections. A number of states gave the vote to resident aliens and a few to women. Residence, age, and literacy requirements varied from state to state, as did the administrative practices that in some states excluded blacks, American Indians, and Asian Americans from the voting population.

Amendments to the Constitution, federal legislation, and a series of federal court decisions that struck down literacy and residency requirements eliminated much of the discretion the states had enjoyed. But substantial differences among states remained. In 2000, for example, fourteen states denied the vote to convicted felons.

For every presidential election since 1916, several official estimates of voter participation are available. The lower chart shows the maximum and minimum estimates of participation in each election. Both series indicate that voter participation was exceptionally low in 1920, 1924, 1948, and 1996, and exceptionally high in 1952 and 1960.
Popular Vote in Presidential Elections
Percentage of votes cast

Voter Participation in Presidential Elections
Percentage of eligible voters

Politics 181
In thirty-two of the fifty Congresses elected from 1900 to 1998, Democrats held a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, elected the Speaker, and dominated the committees. The Democrats held their largest majority in the Seventy-fifth Congress (1937–38), with 333 Democrats to 89 Republicans and 13 third-party members. The Democrats ruled the House of Representatives without a break from 1955 to 1995.

The periods of Republican advantage occurred earlier in the century, from 1901 to 1911 and from 1917 to 1933. The latter period began and ended with majorities of fewer than ten seats. The Republicans held their largest majority, 300 to 132, in 1921.

Dramatic turnarounds occurred in 1920, when the Republicans gained 64 seats, and in 1932, when the Republicans lost 99 seats. In the postwar election of 1946, the Democrats lost 55 seats, but in the following election, they gained 75. The “Republican Revolution” of 1994 was comparable in scale. The GOP gained 54 seats to take control of the House for the first time in thirty years, and then maintained control in the 1996 and 1998 elections.

The Democrats held a majority of U.S. Senate seats in twenty-nine of the fifty Congresses elected during the century. As in the House, the largest Democratic majority was achieved in the Seventy-fifth Congress (1937–39), with 75 Democrats to 17 Republicans and 4 third-party Senators. The longest period of Democratic control lasted from 1955 until 1980.

The Constitution requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate to ratify a treaty, and the rules of the Senate require a supermajority to close off debate. In more than 80 percent of the century’s Congresses (forty-two of fifty), neither party had a two-thirds majority in the Senate. In eighteen of those Congresses, the majority party had a margin of no more than ten seats. The Senate, by its structure, is more inclined to bipartisan compromise than the House.

The House elects its own Speaker, but the vice president of the United States presides over the Senate and casts the deciding vote in the case of a tie. In fifteen of the century’s fifty Congresses, the vice president did not belong to the same party as the Senate majority.
After women first entered Congress early in the century, their numbers increased slowly and then rose rapidly.

The first woman member of Congress, Jeannette Rankin of Montana, was elected in 1916. That was four years before the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution enfranchised women nationally, but Montana and some other states had already done so.

Congresswoman Rankin served one term when first elected and another when she was elected again in 1940. In her first term, she was the only woman in the House. In 1941, she had eight female colleagues, and together they held less than 2 percent of the seats in the House. By 1991, women held 28 seats. In 1999, they held 56 House seats—13 percent of the total.

Once elected, congresswomen won reelection as easily as their male colleagues. Forty-one of the 103 women elected to the House between 1916 and 1986 remained for five or more terms. The longest-serving incumbent, Frances Bolton of Ohio, held office for thirty years.

The first female senator, Rebecca Felton of Georgia, was appointed to fill an unexpired term in 1922. Hattie Caraway of Arkansas, the first woman senator to be regularly elected, served from 1931 to 1945. Only one other female senator, Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, was elected and reelected more than once. Twelve of the 27 women who entered the Senate during the century were appointed to fill out unexpired terms, an honor often bestowed on the widows of deceased senators. Until 1992, there had never been more than three female senators serving at the same time. Nine women held Senate seats in 1999, just under 10 percent of the total.
Congresswomen
Number of women in the House of Representatives and the Senate

Politics 185
The number of black elected officials increased greatly after 1970.

From 1867 to 1877, following the Civil War, blacks had voting rights in the former Confederate states. Numerous black officials won election to Congress during that period. With the demise of Reconstruction, however, a combination of legal and illegal devices effectively canceled black suffrage throughout most of the South, where the black population was concentrated. Thereafter, a handful of blacks held minor offices in communities with large black populations, but none was elected to national or state offices.

This situation persisted throughout the first half of the century and into the second half. It did not change very much until the civil rights movement gathered momentum in the 1960s. In 1966, Edward Brooke, Republican of Massachusetts, was elected as the first black U.S. senator in eighty-eight years. In 1967, Carl B. Stokes was elected as mayor of Cleveland and Richard G. Hatcher as mayor of Gary, Indiana. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm, Democrat of New York, became the first black woman ever elected to Congress. The trend in appointive offices was similar. Thurgood Marshall took his seat on the Supreme Court in 1967.

In the last three decades of the century, the number of black elected officials increased sixfold, from 1,469 in 1970 to 8,868 in 1998. During that time, blacks gradually achieved an impressive share of certain high public offices. Most of the country’s largest cities elected one or more black mayors. In 1999, the 37 House seats that black representatives held accounted for about 9 percent of all seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But only one black governor and two black senators were elected in the century. At the lower levels of elected government—school boards, sheriffs, and county tax assessors, for example—blacks were also significantly underrepresented. At the end of the century, only about 2 percent of all elected officials were black.
Black Elected Officials
Total number of blacks holding elected office at all levels of government
The attitudes of Middletown adolescents toward social issues did not vary dramatically between 1924 and 1999.

The 1924 survey of Middletown high school students by Robert and Helen Lynd included items designed to elicit their attitudes toward two basic social issues: the Protestant Ethic of unlimited personal responsibility, and economic inequality in the United States. Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

“It is entirely the fault of a man himself if he does not succeed.”

“The fact that some people have so much more money than others shows that there is an unjust condition in this country that ought to be changed.”

These items were repeated without change in the 1977 and 1999 replications of these surveys. As the chart shows, the percentage of Middletown adolescents agreeing with the Protestant Ethic remained level from 1924 to 1977 but increased from 1977 to 1999, while the proportion agreeing with action against economic inequality increased in each of the three surveys from 1924 to 1999.
Social Attitudes of Middletown Adolescents

“It is entirely the fault of a man himself if he does not succeed.”

Percentage agreeing

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<th>Year</th>
<th>1924</th>
<th>1977</th>
<th>1999</th>
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<tr>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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“The fact that some people have so much more money than others shows that there is an unjust condition in this country that ought to be changed.”

Percentage agreeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1924</th>
<th>1977</th>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
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