

Citizens and Government

As you read, look for:

- the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and
- vocabulary terms **open primary** and **lobbying**.

Abraham Lincoln described American democracy as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. When people join together to form a government, each citizen is an equal member of that government. All have rights *and* responsibilities.

Responsibility for personal actions and respect for the rights of others are expected from citizens. Civic responsibilities include obeying the law, paying taxes, and serving on a jury.

Citizens have personal rights that are named in the U.S. Constitution and the state constitution. These include free speech, freedom of religion, and the right to vote. Voting is both a right and a responsibility of citizens.

Voting and Elections

In 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowered the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. This is now the legal age for voting in every state, including Louisiana.

Voters must live in the parish where they are registering to vote. They may register at the registrar of voters' office, by mail, or even at the Office of Motor Vehicles. Seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds at some Caddo Parish high schools registered to vote at school on a special voter registration day. They wanted to be ready to vote in the next election.

Statewide elections in Louisiana are held as **open primaries**. All candidates from all parties compete in the first, or primary, election. There are no limits based on political party in the Louisiana open primary.

Voters can vote for any candidate and are not limited to voting for a candidate from their political party. A voter can register as a member of the Republican Party and vote for a candidate from the Democratic Party. The reverse is also true.

Lagniappe

A person must register to vote at least 30 days before an election in order to vote in that election.

Civic: Relating to a citizen

Figure 14 Voter Qualifications

To register to vote in Louisiana, a citizen must be

- A U.S. citizen
- At least 18 years old prior to the next election
- Not in prison or have been convicted of a felony
- Not judged mentally incompetent
- A resident of Louisiana and the parish in which the person seeks to vote



Above: Democrat Kathleen Blanco and Republican Bobby Jindal held several debates during the 2003 runoff election for governor.

Lagniappe

In addition to campaign buttons, political candidates have given away nail files, pocket combs, paper fans, and rulers printed with their names and campaign slogans.

The two candidates receiving the most votes then have a *runoff election*. The two candidates could be from the same political party or from different political parties.

Political Parties

Political parties are organizations of people who have similar ideas about how government should be run. The political party system in the United States developed early in our country's history. The first two political parties formed around Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. These two men who served in the cabinet of President George Washington had very different views on the role of government. Since that time, parties have come and gone, but the United States has, for the most part, a two-party system.

Today, the two major political parties are the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. More Louisiana voters are registered as Democrats than as Republicans. In recent years, however, many of those Democrats have voted for Republican candidates.

Louisiana voters often vote more by faction than by party. Groups of voters with common interests, attitudes, and goals tend to vote alike. Factions in Louisiana have included Catholics, Protestants, Acadians, African Americans; North Louisiana, South Louisiana, New Orleans; and urban or rural. Some of these groups overlap; for example, North Louisiana is mostly rural and Protestant.

Campaigns

All candidates for public office campaign to win votes. Technology has changed campaign styles. In the past, the best way to get votes was to speak directly to the people in the town square. Candidates once walked the streets of the town, going door to door to ask for votes. Today districts are larger, people are busier, and television reaches many more people than personal contacts can.

Candidates hire political consultants to run their campaigns. These consultants use public opinion polls—surveys of a random group of people—to help their candidates. The consultants also plan the television spots and newspaper advertisements. This increased use of the media requires much more money. Television, radio, and newspaper advertising are expensive. Fund-raising is now essential for candidates and political parties.

Concern about campaign financing has increased as more and more money is spent. Campaign finance laws limit the amount of money an individual or group can contribute. Candidates must also report their campaign spending and contributors' names to a state campaign board.

Lobbying

Trying to influence a legislator about a proposed law is called **lobbying**. Every citizen can be a lobbyist. Lobbyists write letters to legislators or visit them at the Capitol. Some lobbyists work as volunteers, while others are paid to speak on behalf of organizations. Paid and volunteer lobbyists may testify at committee hearings about the possible effects of proposed laws.

Citizens with a common interest or concern form groups to lobby the legislature for their cause. In the early 1980s, citizens lobbied for laws to reduce the high number of accidents and deaths caused by drunk drivers. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) convinced the legislature to increase the penalties for DWI (driving while under the influence).

The influence of paid lobbyists is part of the political debate in Baton Rouge and in Washington. Laws have been passed to set guidelines and limits on the actions of lobbyists. Paid lobbyists often have large sums of money available from the groups they represent. Using that money to buy influence is illegal.

Check for Understanding ✓

1. What is one responsibility of a citizen?
2. What is one right of a citizen?
3. What is an open primary?
4. What is a political party?
5. What is the purpose of a political campaign?
6. What is the debate about the influence of lobbyists?



Above: Citizens show their interest and involvement in elections in various ways. These homemade signs appeared on a St. Martinville lawn.

Lagniappe

The term *lobbyist* is said to have been coined by President Ulysses Grant. He used the term to describe the people who waited in the lobby of the Willard Hotel hoping to get his attention.

Meeting Expectations

What is the Electoral College?

The president of the United States is elected state by state, using a system based on population. Each state's official vote is cast by a representative group of people called *electors*. The *Electoral College* is the name for the entire group of electors from every state.

The concept of the Electoral College was established by the U.S. Constitution. The members of the Constitutional Convention debated several methods of selecting the president. They considered the role of the states in the new republic and balanced the interests of small states and large states. They compromised to create the plan that provides for an indirect election of the president.

The Constitution sets the number of electors for each state equal to the number of its senators and representatives in Congress. Louisiana has 9 electors (for its 2 senators + 7 representatives). Each state legislature decides how the electors are chosen for the state and how the votes will be distributed.

How are state electors chosen, and how do they decide who to vote for? First, each political party chooses a list of electors for its candidate. Then, on election day, the registered voters vote for their candidates. In most states, including Louisiana, there is

a winner-take-all system. That is, the winner in the election gets all the state's electoral votes.

The winning candidate's electors become the official state electors. They cast their state's electoral votes for their party's candidate. After the electors from all states vote, the candidate who wins a majority of the electoral votes is elected president.

The Electoral College system has been debated since its beginning. In the elections of 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000, the candidate who won the popular vote did not win the electoral vote. Critics of the Electoral College say this shows that the system is not fair because more people voted for the other candidate. Supporters say the system has worked for two hundred years and changing it may create new concerns.

1. What is the Electoral College?
2. What is its main purpose?
3. What determines how many electors a state has?
4. What is one argument for keeping the Electoral College system?
5. Why do some people want to do away with the Electoral College system?
6. Which candidate won Louisiana's electoral votes in the 2004 presidential election?

2004 United States Presidential Election

	United States		Louisiana	
	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote	Popular Vote	Electoral Vote
Bush/Cheney (R)	62,039,073	286	1,102,169	9
Kerry/Edwards (D)	59,027,478	251	820,299	0
Other	1,157,859	1	20,638	0
Totals	122,284,939	538	1,943,106	9