

The words of American politics

Big Government: A negative term, used mainly by conservatives to describe government programs in areas where they believe government shouldn't be involved, especially those that spend money on social problems.

Bipartisan: A cooperative effort by two political parties.

Bleeding Heart: A term describing people whose hearts "bleed" with sympathy for the downtrodden; used to criticize liberals who favor government spending for social programs.

Bully Pulpit: The Presidency, when used by the President to inspire or moralize. Whenever the President seeks to rouse the American people, he is said to be speaking from the bully pulpit. When the term first came into use, "bully" was slang for "first rate" or "admirable."

Campaign: (noun) An organized effort to win an election. (verb) To strive for elected office.

Caucus: An informal meeting of local party members to discuss candidates and choose delegates to the party's convention.

Checks and Balances: The system of dividing power among the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) to prevent any one from having too much power. Each branch has some authority to check the power of the others, thereby maintaining a balance among the three.

Coattails: The power of a popular candidate to gather support for other candidates in his or her party. Winning candidates are said to have coattails when they drag candidates for lower office along with them to victory.

Convention: A national meeting of a political party, where delegates formally elect a party's nominee.

Dark Horse: A long-shot candidate.

Delegate: A representative to a party's national convention chosen by local voters to vote for a particular candidate. Each state is assigned a certain number of delegates based on its population.

Demagogue: A leader whose impassioned rhetoric appeals to greed, fear, and hatred, and who often spreads lies. Former U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy (see McCarthyism) is often cited as a classic demagogue.

Fence Mending: What politicians do when they visit their electoral districts to explain an unpopular action. The term originated in 1879, when Ohio Senator John Sherman made a trip home that most people considered a political visit. Sherman insisted, however, that he was home "only to repair my fences."

Filibuster: An attempt by a Senator or group of Senators to obstruct the passage of a bill, favored by the majority, by talking continuously. Because there is no rule in the Senate over how long a member can speak, a Senator can prevent a bill from coming up for a vote by talking endlessly. Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina set the record in 1957 by speaking for more than 24 hours without stopping.

Fishing Expedition: An investigation with no defined purpose, often by one party seeking damaging information about another. Such inquiries are likened to fishing because they pull up whatever they happen to catch.

Front Burner: Where an issue is placed when it must be dealt with immediately.

Gerrymander: The reorganization of voting districts by the party in power to insure more votes for their candidates. The term originated in 1811, when Governor Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts signed a bill that changed districts to favor the Democrats. The shape of one new district supposedly resembled a salamander, provoking a Boston newspaper editor to say, "Salamander? Call it a Gerrymander!"

GOP: Grand Old Party, nickname of the Republican Party.

Grass Roots: Political activity that originates locally, or arises from ground level.

Ideology: An integrated system of ideas about politics, values, and culture. Those who espouse an ideology are sometimes criticized as rigid and narrow-minded.

Incumbent: A current officeholder.

Inside the Beltway: The area inside the Capital Beltway, a highway that encircles Washington, D.C. An issue described as "inside the Beltway" is believed to be of concern only to the people who work in and with the federal government and of little interest to the nation at large.

Lame Duck: An officeholder whose term has expired or cannot be continued, who thus has lessened power.

Left-wing: Liberal. The labeling system originated from the seating pattern of the French National Assembly, which put liberals on the left, moderates in the middle, and conservatives on the right.

Lobby: A group seeking to influence an elected official, or the act of doing so. The term originated in the 17th century, when people waiting to speak with legislators at the English House of Commons waited in a large atrium outside the legislators' hall, called the lobby.

Machine Politics: Politics controlled by a tightly-run organization that stresses discipline and rewards its supporters. Machines are usually found in large cities and are frequently accused of corruption.

McCarthyism: The practice of smearing people with baseless accusations. Refers to the tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who in the 1950s destroyed the careers of many prominent Americans by branding them Communists.

Muckraker: A journalist who seeks out the scandalous activities of public officials. Derived from the Man with the Muck Rake, a character in John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress," who could never look up, only down.

Nomination: When a political party chooses its official candidate for a particular office.

Nominee: The candidate chosen by a political party to run for a particular office.

Photo-Op: Short for "photo opportunity," an event staged specifically for news cameras to help a politician appear on the evening news or in morning papers.

Platform: The positions that a party adopts, and stands on, at the beginning of an election campaign.

Political Party: An organization that seeks to achieve political power by electing its members to public office.

Political Suicide: A vote or action that is likely to be so unpopular with voters as to cause a politician's probable loss in the next election.

Poll: A survey used to gauge public opinion concerning issues or to forecast an election.

Pork Barrel: Wasteful and unnecessary projects that politicians secure for their local districts, usually to gain favor with local voters. The term dates from the days when salted pork was occasionally handed out to slaves from large barrels. An observer once wrote that the mad rush of politicians to get their district's share of treasury funds looked like slaves rushing to the pork barrel.

Primary: A state election in which party members vote for a candidate from within their party. The vote determines how many of that state's delegates each candidate gets.

Pundit: A political analyst, commentator, or columnist who usually works for a newspaper or magazine, or in broadcasting. Derived from a Hindi phrase meaning "learned one."

Reactionary: A militant conservative; opposite of "radical," which means ultraliberal.

Red Tape: Government paperwork and procedures that are slow and difficult. Stems from an 18th-century British practice of binding official papers with a reddish twine.

Rubber Chicken Circuit: The endless series of public dinners and luncheons politicians must attend to raise funds and make speeches. The food often includes chicken, which is cooked hours earlier and then reheated, giving it a rubbery texture.

Silent Majority: The mass of Americans whose opinions are not loud and public, but who together have enormous power. Popularized by President Richard Nixon, who claimed that Vietnam War protesters comprised a minority, while a "silent majority" supported the war.

Slate: Candidates for various offices running as a team; or a group of delegates running on behalf of one candidate.

Smoke-Filled Room: The sort of place where behind-the-scenes political wheeling and dealing, often devious, occurs. Refers to the penchant of many political operatives for smoking cigars.

Spin: A politician's attempt to shape the way the public looks at an issue or event, much the way a tennis player uses spin to direct the ball. Political advisers who spin are known as "spin doctors."

Stump: To campaign in person on a local level.

Swing Vote: The undecided, usually independent, portion of the electorate that can "swing" the outcome of an election one way or the other.

Trial Balloon: An idea a politician suggests in order to observe the reaction. If public reaction is favorable, the politician takes credit for it; if not, the idea dies quickly.

Whip: The party member who makes sure that all other members are present for crucial votes and that they vote in accordance with the party line. The term originated in British fox hunting, where the "whipper-in" was responsible for keeping the hounds from straying.

Whistle-Stopping: The practice of making speeches in many towns in a short time, often during a single day. When politicians traveled by train, small towns were called whistle-stops. Politicians would use the stop to deliver a quick campaign speech, often from the back of the train, before heading to the next stop.

Witch Hunt: A vindictive, often irrational, investigation that preys on public fears. Refers to witch hunts in 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, where many innocent women accused of witchcraft were burned at the stake or drowned.