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Original Citation

Nesbitt-Larking, Paul (2008) Political Alienation. In: Encyclopedia of U.S. Campaigns, Elections, and Electoral Behavior. Sage, p. 505. ISBN 9781412954891

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Volume 1

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

**U.S. Campaigns,
Elections, and
Electoral Behavior**



KENNETH F. WARREN

GENERAL EDITOR



Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

A SAGE Reference Publication

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Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Encyclopedia of U.S. campaigns, elections, and electoral behavior / Kenneth F. Warren, general editor.

p. cm. — (A Sage reference publication)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4129-5489-1 (cloth)

1. Political campaigns-- United States --Encyclopedias. 2. Elections-- United States --Encyclopedias. I. Warren, Kenneth F., 1943-

JK2281.E53 2008
324.973003--dc22

2007050207

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

08 09 10 11 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Photo credits are on page I-54.

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Campaigns; McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform; Special Interests.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Center for Responsive Politics, www.opensecrets.org (cited August 2007); Federal Election Commission, www.fec.gov (cited August 2007); Thomas Gais, *Improper Influence: Campaign Finance Law, Political Interest Groups, and the Problem of Equality* (University of Michigan Press, 2001); F.J. Sorauf, *What Price PACs?* (Twentieth Century Fund, 1984); Christopher Witko, "PACs, Issue Context and Congressional Decision Making," *Political Research Quarterly* (v.59/2, 2006).

CHRIS WITKO
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

Political Alienation

POLITICAL ALIENATION IS the sense of estrangement, repulsion, or disaffection that political actors experience to the extent that they regard the political system, regime, or government as distant and unresponsive. The societal causes of political alienation are established in the political sociology of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx. Marx explains how workers under capitalism come to be isolated from their own humanity, from each other, and to lose their autonomy and sense of purposeful agency. For Marx, who was writing before the era of mass democracy, the political system served to reinforce economic alienation through force and fraud.

Melvin Seeman presents a psychosocial typology of alienation that comprises a cluster of interrelated characteristics: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. Facets of political alienation include low levels of trust and political efficacy, cynicism, a sense of rootlessness or anomie, despair, hostility, disaffection, loneliness and isolation, and feelings of apathy or pointlessness. The consequences of political alienation fall into two broad categories: apathetic withdrawal and angry criticism. Those who become apathetic tend to seek a parochial status in political life in which they avoid engagement with the political system, limiting their political participation, grudgingly dealing with political authority, and attempting, as much as possible, to evade political life. If questioned on political matters, such agents might express sentiments of deference to those in authority or

vague lack of interest. The apathetic are unlikely to vote or to respond to cues for political involvement.

Those who are angered are more inclined to engage in counter-organizations of various kinds. They may join marginal and/or extreme oppositional organizations in order to express their point of view. Forms of protest focus on acts designed to gain the greatest media exposure, to cause the greatest disruption, and to reveal most glaringly the shortcomings of the sociopolitical establishment. Protest rallies, acts of civil disobedience, the destruction of public property, and even occasionally acts of violence are among the tools employed by those whose political alienation has led them to protest. In electoral terms, angry critics are likely to vote for the more marginal and extreme parties, or not to vote at all and invest their energies in interest group or protest group activity instead.

While political alienation can be a manifestation of a psychological characteristic, it is more likely to be associated with the membership of an individual in a certain social category. Thus, alienation is not always a matter of irrational withdrawal or hostility, but can be the anticipated response of those who genuinely believe that the political system has nothing of interest to offer them, and cannot be made to work in their interests.

SEE ALSO: Nonvoters; Political Cynicism; Protest Voting; Voter Alienation; Voter Apathy.

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PAUL WINGFIELD NESBITT-LARKING, PHD
HURON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, CANADA

Political Base

THE TERM *political base* often refers to the group of voters who are most likely to support a candidate within their own party because the candidate holds the same philosophical and political views as both the party to which they belong and themselves. In elections at the local, state, and legislative level, base voters are more likely to support the nominee from within their own party simply because the dynamics of local and legislative politics relies on the majority, and base voting allows attainment of this majority.