

CHAPTER 8 - Political Parties

OVERVIEW

Although not mentioned in the Constitution, political parties developed early in the history of the republic. Alignments with parties are fairly consistent, changing when a critical election or era occurs.

Parties serve a variety of important functions, yet Americans tend to view them negatively. This is partially due to the fact that parties are mired in a constant struggle to win elections. The United States has mostly had a two-party system due to election rules. The parties have been weakened by reforms intended to give voters a greater say in their affairs. The Democrats and Republicans continue to dominate the election landscape.

OUTLINE

I. What Parties Do

To most political commentators in other advanced democracies, political parties play an important and vital role. In contrast, many Americans – political science professors being one exception - think that things would be better if there were no parties.

A. How Parties Contribute to Democratic Politics

1. Organizing and Operating the Government → There are different levels of government in the United States (local, state, and national), and there are several branches at each level (legislative, executive, and judicial). Parties are a means for all of these to coordinate their efforts.

2. Focusing Responsibility for Government Action → Parties are a way of holding politicians accountable collectively for government policies.

3. Developing Issues and Educating the Public → Parties identify problems, publicize them, and advance possible solutions. Parties do this while struggling against each other in elections and one result is the education of the voter.

4. Synthesizing Interests → Because parties compete nationwide, they have incentives to provide platforms that offer a mix of benefits and burdens to all in the hope that a larger good will be the result. When they do not, they suffer electorally.

5. Recruiting and Developing Governmental Talent → Parties want to win, and so they are always on the lookout for promising candidates. Like predators in the natural environment, parties help to maintain the quality of public officials by weeding out the weak.

6. Simplifying the Electoral System → Without parties to narrow down the choice of candidates, voters might be faced with a great number of candidates to pick from, without party labels! Voters would have to spend a great deal of energy becoming informed about each candidate.

B. How Parties Detract from Democratic Politics

- There are two reasons why Americans have, since the end of the 19th century, held parties in relatively low esteem:

- First, that parties *can* perform valuable functions is no guarantee that they *will* perform valuable functions. People organize and perpetuate parties primarily for their own selfish interests.

- Second, parties can abuse their powers. The stronger parties have more potential for extreme abuse. American history provides lots of examples.

1. Capturing Governments and Dictating What They Do → Progressives accused the party machines of acting like an elected dictatorship.

2. Confusing Responsibility → Parties will blame their opponents for things over which their opponents are not responsible, and parties will take credit even though they were not responsible. They may even try to turn a policy into a failure to make the opposition party look bad (particularly when the government is divided between Democrats and Republicans).

3. Suppressing the Issues → For various reasons, parties may choose not to develop new issues. One result can be the emergence of third parties.

4. Dividing Society → Rather than synthesize disparate interests into some larger whole, parties may do just the opposite.

5. Recruiting Candidates for the Wrong Reasons → Parties sometimes recruit unqualified politicians. The emphasis on media in campaigns has resulted in the parties also recruiting celebrities, who may or may not be qualified.

6. Oversimplifying the Electoral System → By presenting voters with only two choices, Democrat or Republican, parties leave some voters disenchanted.

C. The Balance Sheet → Scholars generally approve of political parties, since they see the alternative—no parties—as even worse, while reformers view parties from the ideal and, hence, conclude they fail.

II. Political Parties in American History

Parties in America stopped representing merely elites during the Jacksonian Era. They became mass parties. *American parties now are weaker and less active than most of their European counterparts.*

A. The Party Systems Interpretation of American History → The rarest of American elections is the “critical” or “realigning” election: when party alignments change. During realigning eras, third parties appear and turnout rises.

1. The First Party System: Jeffersonian

2. The Second Party System: Jacksonian Democracy

3. The Third Party System: Civil War and Reconstruction

4. The Fourth Party System: Industrial Republican

5. The Fifth Party System: The New Deal

- The critical elections of 1932 and 1936 established the fifth party system. It was a class-based party alignment with Roosevelt and the Democrats becoming the party of the common people (farmers, blue-collar workers, housewives, and minorities), while Republicans became, more than ever, the party of business and the affluent.

- Democrats dominated the era. Only one Republican was elected president. Eisenhower won in 1952, and was reelected in 1956. Only once (1952) did Republicans control Congress and the presidency.

- Major issues arose during this era: the Great Depression, World War II, and the “Cold War.” Democrats found it increasingly difficult to deal with the racial issue.

6. The Contemporary Party System

- What characterizes this system is the high rate of ticket-splitting, with voters supporting the presidential and congressional candidates of different parties in the same election.

- Beginning in 1964, Republicans made deep inroads in the Democrats' southern base. The racial issue resulted in many blue-collar and urban whites joining southerners in abandoning Democratic presidential candidates.

- The Vietnam War and social issues also divided Democrats. Most commentators believe the New Deal party system is gone, but they do not agree on what, if anything, has replaced it.

III. Two-Party and Multi-Party Systems: American Parties in Comparative Perspective

- For two centuries of the country's history, two major parties have dominated elections for national office. Most democracies have multi-party systems. What factors explain this?
- Most scholars believe that an important factor in determining whether a polity has two parties or more is its electoral system. At the national and state levels the United States relies almost exclusively on the single-member, simple plurality system. This system tends to manufacture majorities, or at least to exaggerate their size. Voters are not inclined to support third-party candidates since that is viewed as "wasting your vote."
- In most of the world's democracies, however, the electoral system uses some version of proportional representation. Under these systems, governing majorities exist only where voting majorities exist.

IV. How Strong Are American Parties Today?

- In recent decades, scholars and journalists have disagreed over the health of political parties in America. Why?
- Partially, because of the confusion as to what a party is. Parties are multifaceted. They are composed of the organization, public officials, and voters. Those describing the decline of parties focus on the weakening of party organizations at the state and local levels, and the decline in party cohesion in Congress. Also, there are fewer Democrats and Republicans, and more Independents. However, in recent years, the first two trends have reversed.

A. The Decline of Party Organizations

- The decline of American party organizations was in considerable part a consequence of deliberate public policies: civil service reform and direct primary.

- There are other factors as well. The communications revolution lessened the need for traditional parties. The post-World War II increase in mobility, social, economic, and residual, undercuts parties. The Supreme Court's reapportionment decisions (one-man-one-vote) also had an impact.

B. The Revival of Party Organizations?

- Unlike in the past, national party committees today are active and well-financed. They were rejuvenated by the parties increasingly relying on full-time political operatives and experts on polling, fundraising, campaigning, and the media. They have, in turn, helped rejuvenate party organization at lower levels.

- Some view this resurgence differently, describing parties as not stronger but just busier.

V. Parties vs. Interest Groups

- Some political theorists believe that the power of interest groups correlates negatively with the power parties. Assuming a two-party system, the argument makes sense.

- If the argument is valid, the real alternative to party domination of the electoral process is not popular influence, but interest group influence.