

Chapter 5: Political Parties

Section 1: Parties and What They Do

Vocabulary: political party, major parties, partisanship, party in power

A. What is a **Political Party**?

1. A political party is a group of persons who seek to control government through winning elections and holding public office.
2. Most political parties are made up of people who are committed to a common set of public policies and programs.
3. The Democratic Party & the Republican Party are the **major parties**, i.e., the dominant political parties in the United States. The Reform Party is a **minor party**. They are neither principle- nor issue-oriented. They are, instead, *election*-oriented.
4. Coalitions are alliances of many people of diverse interests. They also are election, rather than issue, oriented. Each political party is actually a coalition.

B. What Do Political Parties Do?

1. The **Nominating Function**

- a. parties recruit and choose candidates.
- b. parties provide nominees with a solid base of support.
- c. the function that most clearly sets political parties apart from other political groups operating in the United States is the nomination of candidates for elective office.

2. The **Informer-Stimulator Function**

- a. parties take stands on issues and criticize the stands taken by their opponents.
- b. parties use the news media to perform this "educational" function.
- c. the function of informing the public and stimulating political debate is performed by the news media, interest groups, and the parties themselves.

3. The **"Seal of Approval" Function**

- a. parties try to ensure that the people they nominate are qualified and of good character.
- b. parties work to ensure that elected officials perform their duties well.

4. The **Governmental Function**

- a. both State and federal public officials are regularly appointed on a partisan basis.
- b. parties are the major agent for cooperation between the legislative and executive branches.

5. The **Watchdog Function**

- a. the party out of power scrutinizes and criticizes the action of government officials.
- b. their watchfulness forces public officials to become responsive to popular concerns.

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Section 2: The Two Party System

Vocabulary: minor party, two-party system, single-member district, plurality, bipartisan, pluralistic society, consensus, multiparty, coalition, one-party system

A. Reasons for the Two-Party System

1. The Historical Basis

A **minor party** is one of the less widely supported parties in the political system. The

- a. Democratic and Republican Parties, i.e., the two major parties, make up the basis for the **two-party system**.
- b. The Framers of the Constitution were opposed to political parties.

In the debate over ratification of the Constitution, Federalists and Anti-Federalists

- c. became the country's first two parties. Thus, the two-party system in the United States goes back to the ratification of the Constitution.

2. The Force of Tradition

- a. Most Americans support the two-party system simply because it has always existed.
- b. Minor parties have therefore made little headway.

3. The Electoral System

Single-member districts are the institution that promotes continuation of the two-

- a. party system. Most candidates are elected to office in districts where there is only one candidate elected to each office. The winner of the election takes all of the power.

State election laws are deliberately written to discourage minor parties. In most states, it is extremely difficult to get a 3rd party candidate's name on the ballot. They tend to

- b. discourage minor parties because people prefer not to "waste" their vote. Only 7 times in our history has a 3rd party presidential candidate's name appeared on every state ballot.

In single member districts, the winner is the candidate who receives a **plurality** of the

- c. vote cast. A plurality winner is the one who receives the most votes, as opposed to a majority (one more vote than half).

4. The American Ideological Consensus

- a. Although the United States is a pluralistic society, Americans tend to agree on fundamental issues. This is called a consensus, or general agreement.

- b. A **pluralistic** society is a culture composed of many distinct subgroups. Although there is generally a consensus, there have been major divisions over issues such as:

the Civil War, economics in the Great Depression, racial desegregation, Vietnam, & abortion.

- America's major political parties tend to take moderate stands in order to attract the largest possible number of voters. Ironically, the most radical supporters of a party are those who go to a convention, set the platform, and select the candidate. The candidate is often not a moderate that would appeal to a large cross-section of the country. During the campaign they must appear to be moderate in order to appeal to the largest portion of the population that they can.
- c.
 - d. Ideologically homogeneous Americans are those that share basic political beliefs and principles.
 - e. In an effort to appeal to the center, political parties often appear very similar in platforms and policies. There can be great differences between parties & candidates, but most often they are similar.

B. Multiparty Systems

1. In a multiparty system parties represent a wide variety of class, religious, sectional, and political interests, often tend to produce political instability.
2. In America, institutional and ideological factors make a multiparty system unlikely.

C. One-Party Systems

- Nearly all dictatorships have one-party systems. A **one-party system** is a political system in which only one party exists, or in which only one party has a reasonable chance of winning elections.
- 1.
 2. Traditionally, many areas of the United States were dominated by a single party. Members of the Jewish faith, union members, Hispanics, and African-Americans have tended to support the Democratic party in recent decades.
 3. In recent years, two-party competition has spread.

D. Membership of the Parties

1. Party membership is voluntary and is generally composed of a cross-section of the population.
2. There are some segments of the electorate that tend to support one party or the other.
3. Although the parties are broadly based, there are voting alignments that tend to persist:
 - Democrats: African Americans, Catholics, Jews, Union Members
 - Republicans (GOP): White males, Protestants, business people.
4. Other factors also may determine party affiliation:
 - Family: 70% of all children share their parent's political beliefs
 - Major Events: The Civil War, 911, WW2, & the Depression all shape our beliefs
 - Economic Status: Higher income tend to be Republicans, and vice versa.

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Section 3: The Two Party System in American History

Vocabulary: incumbent, faction, electorate, sectionalism

The Nation's First Parties

- The first parties can be traced to the battle over the ratification of the Constitution
- Federalist Party
 - Formed around Alexander Hamilton (Secretary of Treasury under Washington)
 - Considered party of the rich and well-born
 - Supported the Constitution
 - Favored a strong central government with a strong executive
 - Programs appealed to financial, manufacturing, & commercial interests
 - Liberal Constructionist view of the Constitution
- Anti-Federalists
 - Formed around Thomas Jefferson (Secretary of State under Washington)
 - More sympathetic to the common man
 - Favored reduced government dominated by Congress
 - Programs appealed to shopkeepers, laborers, farmers, and planters
 - Favored a Strict Constructionist view of the Constitution
 - Party name evolved to Jeffersonian Republicans, then to Democratic-Republicans, then finally to the Democratic Party
- The first election (1796) following Washington was won by John Adams, a Federalist
- In the election of 1800, the Anti-Federalists won the election. The Federalist party never returned to power.

American Parties: Four Major Eras

-Era of the Democrats: 1800 – 1860

- Federalist Party disappears after the election of 1800
- The Democrats were unopposed in national politics until the 1820s
- Democrats split into factions in the 1820s
- Rise of the Whig Party (Republican Party)
- Major conflicts over public lands, 2nd National Bank, tariffs, & slavery
- Democrats drew most of their support from the South and West
- Jacksonian politics produced 3 major changes in politics:
 - Voting rights for all white males
 - Huge increase in number of elected offices in US
 - Practice of giving public offices & contracts to political supporters
- Whig Party rose to oppose Jacksonian politics
 - Led by popular Henry Clay & Daniel Webster
 - Party supported by eastern bankers, merchants, industrialists, & the owners of large southern plantations
- Tensions over slavery fragmented both parties in the 1850s. The Democrats split into 2 major groups, the North and the South.
- The Whig Party fragmented and disappeared, leaving several smaller parties trying to

attract the former Whigs. The most successful of these smaller parties were the Republicans. The Republicans managed to draw many Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats.

-Although the Republicans unsuccessfully ran a Presidential candidate in 1856, they managed to get Abraham Lincoln elected in the election of 1860.

-The Era of the Republicans (1860-1932)

-Republicans would dominate the Presidency for the next 75 years.

-They were supported by business & financial interests, farmers, laborers, & newly freed slaves.

-The Democratic Party was able to survive mainly in the "Solid South". They slowly began to rebuild their electoral base.

-Although Democrats managed to intermittently capture the Presidency, their stay was usually short-lived.

-Although the Democrats lost the election of 1896, they did manage to accomplish 2 key changes:

-The Democrats campaigned as the "champion of the little man", forever cementing the Democrats as the defender of the poor and disaffected citizens of our country.

-They managed to shift national politics away from sectionalism & back toward economic issues.

-In the election of 1912, Teddy Roosevelt was attempting to gain the nomination of the Republican Party. He had previously served one term as President. The Republicans chose the incumbent, William Howard Taft, as their candidate. Roosevelt left the Republicans and set up the Bull Moose Party, a splinter party. This effectively split the Republicans into 2 voting groups, allowing the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to win.

-Wilson won twice, but the Republicans regained the White House in 1920 & held it until 1932.

-The Return of the Democrats (1932-1968)

-The Republicans were unable to deal with the Great Depression which began in 1929. The Democrats, led by Franklin Roosevelt, won the 1932 Presidential election.

-This election marked a fundamental change in the role that Americans thought the government should play in their life. Previously, they wanted government to stay out of their lives. The Depression firmly rooted the idea that sometimes it is government who can best help the people. The people really didn't care how much the government became involved in business or industry as long as the economy got better.

-Roosevelt was supported by southerners, small farmers, organized labor, and big-city political organizations.

-Roosevelt was elected to 4 terms as President. He died in 1945. His Vice-President, Harry Truman, finished Roosevelt's 4th term and was elected to a term of his own.

-Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican, was elected to 2 terms, in 1952 & 1956.

-The Democrats regained the Presidency when John Kennedy was elected in 1960.

-Following his assassination, Lyndon Johnson served out Kennedy's term and was elected to one of his own in 1964.

-Start of a New Era (1968-Present)

-Richard Nixon, a Republican won the White House in 1968 & again in 1972. Although he was very successful in foreign policy, he was caught up in illegal actions in the

Watergate Scandal. Facing impeachment, he resigned in 1974. His VP, Gerald Ford, served the remainder of his term.

- Due in part to controversy over the pardon of Nixon, Ford lost the Presidency in 1976 to his Democratic opponent, Jimmy Carter.
- Carter suffered many setbacks in the economy and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Although he ran again in 1980, it was unlikely he could retain the Presidency.
- Carter was defeated by the Republican, Ronald Reagan, in 1980. Reagan held the office through two terms.
- Another Republican, George Bush, won election to the President in 1988. Many political observers thought that the election of two very conservative Republican Presidents in a row signaled a move of the country to a more conservative path. The economy took a turn to the downside, which Bush was unable to fix. He lost the election in 1992 to Bill Clinton.
- Despite many rumors of affairs and wrong-doing, Clinton held the office through 2 terms.
- The election of 2000 gave many mixed signals to political observers. George Bush, the younger, won the election of 2000 and 2004, but by very close margins.
- Throughout much of the period between 1968 and the present, there has been a period of **divided government**. During most of this period, the President and the majority of Congress were not from the same party.

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Section 4: The Minor Parties

Vocabulary: ideological parties, single-issue parties, economic protest parties, splinter parties

A. Four Types of Minor Parties in the United States

1. The **ideological parties** are those based on a particular set of beliefs, a comprehensive view of social, economic, and political matters. The Communist and Libertarian parties are examples of ideological parties. Although they have not won many elections, they have been long-lived.
2. **Single-issue parties** are those concentrating on a single public policy matter. Other parties, like the "Know-Nothings" of the 1850s and the Right-to-Life party today, focus on single issues.
3. The **economic protest parties** were those parties rooted in periods of economic discontent, for example, the Greenback and Populist parties of the late 1800s.
4. The **splinter parties** were those that broke off from one of the two major parties. For example, the "Bull Moose" party of 1912 and the Dixiecrats" of 1948. Amazing as it may seem, most of the important minor parties in the nation's history have been splinter parties.

B. The Key Role of Minor Parties

1. Third parties have introduced useful innovations in American politics. Unlike major parties, minor parties tend to take clear-cut stands on controversial issues.

2. A strong third-party candidacy can play a "**spoiler role**" in an election where the two major parties are evenly matched. Minor parties take enough votes away from one of the two major parties to cost its candidate the election.
3. Minor parties have played important roles as critics and reformers in American political life.
4. When innovations proposed by minor parties gain popular support, they are usually adopted by one or both of the major parties.

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Section 5: Party Organization

Vocabulary: ward, precinct, split-ticket voting

- Interestingly, there is absolutely no mention of parties in the Constitution. In fact, the Framers feared the actions of factions (parties) and thought they would destroy the country. The national powers of the parties and their role in elections and government are not part of law, but rather custom.
- The Decentralized Nature of the Parties
 - The Role of the Presidency
 - The party of the President is usually more united and cohesive
 - The President is automatically the leader of the party
 - As President, he has much more access to the media and to governmental power than the opposition
 - The opposition party is usually in search of a leader, giving the impression that it is fractured and weak.
 - The Impact of Federalism
 - Parties tend to be very decentralized due to federalism
 - The basic goal of parties is to control government by winning elections
 - The parties must be decentralized in order to attempt to win elections at the local, state, and national level
 - Role of the Nominating Process
 - Candidate selection is an intra-party process that is not governed by law
 - The nominating process is often divisive for the parties
 - So, the very reason why parties exist-nominations-cause fragmentation of the party
- National Party Machinery
 - National Convention
 - Meet in the summer of every Presidential election year to nominate a Presidential candidate & a VP
 - Beyond that, the convention really has very little power or control over the actions of the party
 - National Committee

- In theory, the party is controlled between elections by the national committee.
- In reality, the committee really has very little national power. Their chief job is to coordinate the national convention.

-National Chairperson

- In each party, the national chairperson is the head of the national committee
- Although they are supposedly chosen by the national committee, they are in reality chosen by the most recently chosen Presidential candidate. They serve a 4-year term.
- The national chairperson directs the party staff and attempts to build party unity, raise money for the party, recruit new voters, and prepare for the next Presidential election.

-The Three Components of the Party

- Party Organization: Leaders, party activists, etc who run the party
- Party in the Electorate: Party loyalists who usually vote a straight party ticket in elections
- Party in Government: Party officeholders at all levels of government

-Future of Major Parties

- Political parties have never been very popular or trusted in our country
- They have been in a period of decline since the 1960s
- There are several reasons for this decline
 - There has been a sharp drop in the number of people who are willing to call themselves either Republicans or Democrats. Most people now consider themselves **independents**.
 - There has been a big increase in **split-ticket voting**, or people who will vote for candidates from different parties for different offices in the same election. Fewer people are willing to vote the straight ticket.
 - Both parties, but especially the Democrats, have made structural and rule changes within the party to make them more "open". The net result is that it has led to greater conflict within the party.
 - The increasing use of TV and the internet to campaign for office has led to a decrease in the dependence on a national organization to campaign for national office.
 - Special Interest Groups and PACS no longer support parties in an effort to earn support for their cause. They have increasingly begun to seek out individual candidates who support them, rather than a party.