

CHAPTER 12 POLITICAL PARTIES

Narrative Lecture Outline

What is a Political Party?

At the most basic level, a political party is a group of office holders, candidates, activists, and voters who identify with a group label and seek to elect to public office individuals who run under that label. This is a practical definition in keeping with the practical nature of American politics. Our parties tend not to be as ideological as parties in other countries. Ours is a centrist party system.

Our system contains two major parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Parties create platforms on which to run. Basically, a party's platform states their main issue positions and ideology. As mentioned in the vignette at the opening of this chapter, there is often a debate about how important platforms actually are to people and the parties to which they belong. In the 2004 presidential race, they seemed to accurately characterize the positions of the presidential candidates and the national party (see Table 12.1). Could you say the same about parties at the state level? In non-presidential years?

We also have a number of minor or third parties at any given time. Among the more important third parties today are the Reform Party and the Libertarian Party.

Parties are made up of three types of "members"—

- governmental party: the office holders and candidates
- organizational party: workers and activists
- party-in-the-electorate: those who vote for the party or consider themselves to be allied or associated with it.

The Evolution of the American Party System

Americans have had a love-hate relationship with parties since the beginning of the republic. George Washington despised parties and used his Farewell Address to warn against them. However, Hamilton and Jefferson, as heads of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist groups respectively, are often considered "fathers" of the modern party system. By 1800, the country had a party system with two major parties that has remained relatively stable ever since. We have had doomsayers sound the death knell for both parties on a variety of occasions, but somehow, they always seem to survive.

The Early Parties Fade

The period from 1817 to 1825 was called the Era of Good Feelings, and party politics practically disappeared at the national level. However, parties were alive and well at lower levels. The electorate expanded dramatically at this time, the U.S. pushed westward, most states abolished property requirements, and immigration continued.

Nomination processes and the Electoral College also opened up to additional participation. This broadened the base of the parties. Conventions were held, beginning with the 1832 Democratic Convention to nominate presidential candidates. Andrew Jackson was the first to be nominated.

Jackson's populism and strong personality polarized politics, and the Whig Party emerged to oppose him. The Whig Party was descended from the Federalists, and its early leaders included Henry Clay (Speaker of the House). The Whigs and Democrats were fiercely competitive. However, the issue of slavery plagued the Whigs and they soon dissolved to be replaced by the Republican Party, formed in 1854. The Republicans set their sights on the abolition of slavery, and by 1860, elected Abraham Lincoln as president.

Democrats and Republicans: The Golden Age

From the presidential elections of 1860 to the present, the same two major parties have contested elections in the United States: Republicans and Democrats. Control of the major institutions of government has seesawed between them.

Reconstruction—Republican dominance 1876-1896—closely competitive system 1896-1929—Republican dominance 1930s and 1940s—Democratic dominance 1950s and 1960s—mixed 1970 to present—neither party dominant

The Modern Era

The “Modern Era” followed the “Golden Age” (1870-1920). Party and government in large cities seemed interchangeable. This was the era of political machines, bosses, and patronage.

Political machines—party organizations that recruit members by offering tangible incentives such as jobs, money, favors, and so on—were central to the lives of millions of people. They helped new immigrants to settle, provided social services and jobs, sponsored community events, and gave food and housing to the poor. All of this, in exchange for votes.

Government has gradually taken over many of the functions that were performed by the party-based political machines. Government now prints ballots, provides social welfare monies, conducts elections, and so forth, so party organizations have fewer functions and less ability to enforce party-line votes and strict discipline.

Several other developments have decreased the power of parties:

- direct primary: The selection of candidates was moved out of the smoked filled room and into a more public setting. Qualified voters now determine who can run for election.
- civil service laws: have removed patronage, or the “spoils system,” from the control of parties. Government jobs now go to those who pass merit-based tests, and not simply to loyal party workers.
- the rise of issue-oriented politics: Social changes and broad-based education has led to more thoughtful voters and issues that cut across traditional party lines. Issues that include environmentalism and ticket-splitting have become commonplace.
- television: TV emphasizes individuals and personalities over party labels.
- the rise of political consultants: These hired guns are often employed by both sides and use whatever works. They are the new intermediary between the voter and the candidate, and thus weaken the parties.

Political parties have changed a lot over the years, but remain reliable vehicles of mass participation. Parties have adapted to changing conditions, just as the Constitution has adapted.

The Functions of the American Parties

For 150 years, the two-party system has been used to organize and resolve political and social conflicts. Parties may be less popular today than at earlier points in history, but remain a vital agent of change and representation in our system. One of the most important roles the parties fulfill is that of converting a huge array of ideas and opinions (of millions of voters) into two comprehensible sets of ideas. They aggregate public opinion to a manageable level.

Mobilizing Support and Gathering Power

Parties help elected leaders gather support and power. They are stable coalitions that work between elections, as well as during them. Members of the party can usually be counted on to support office holders elected under the party banner. A political party is a fairly simple way of determining how much support one has in Congress or among the electorate.

A Force for Stability and Moderation

Parties promote stability and act to moderate public opinion due to their pragmatic drive to win elections.

Unity, Linkage, Accountability

Parties provide linkages among branches and levels of government. They allow the often disparate parts of our political system to work together. Parties also link voters and elected officials, and parties can hold office holders accountable at periodic party meetings.

Because parties must win national elections, they can also function as unifiers of the country. They dampen sectionalism and give people in remote parts of the country something in common with other Americans far away.

The Electioneering Function

Parties organize and compete in elections. The parties recruit candidates, provide staffing, give money, and provide numerous other important services during election cycles.

Party as a Voting and Issue Cue

A voter's party identification acts as a filter for information. It provides the single most important cue for voting. If a citizen is not informed about a candidate or race, they generally vote for the party they prefer.

Policy Formulation and Promotion

Parties formulate and convey their ideas about public policy through the national party platform. Every four years, the party gathers and writes a lengthy document explaining its positions on key issues in advance of the presidential nominating convention. About two-thirds of platform promises have usually been implemented when the party's candidate wins the election.

Crashing the Party: Minor Parties in the American Two-Party System

The United States uses a single member plurality electoral system (often called "first past the post" or "winner take all"). This type of electoral system generally produces two main parties (look at the UK and Canada as other examples). Many European countries use proportional representation. PR guarantees seats in parliament to any party achieving some specified threshold of votes. This being the case, PR systems tend to have a larger number of parties than SMP systems dependent upon underlying cleavages and the institutional design of the PR system itself.

However, American parties tend to move around on the political spectrum to gain votes. For example, Bill Clinton is generally perceived to have moved the Democratic Party towards the right in order to gain the presidency. Often, the parties adapt. But sometimes, major party adaptation isn't enough to capture some set of interests or some personality; a minor or third party can emerge.

Minor parties appear sporadically. These minor parties are not a threat to the two major parties. As a matter of fact, only eight third parties have ever won any electoral votes in a presidential contest, and only five have ever won more than 10 percent in a presidential election. Among the third parties that have had some success are:

- 2000: Ralph Nader and the Green Party
- 1996 and 1992: Ross Perot's Reform Party
- 1968: George Wallace and the American Independent Party
- 1924: Robert LaFollette's Progressive Party
- 1912: Teddy Roosevelt and the Bull Moose Party
- 1856: Millard Fillmore's American Party

Third parties generally arise from one of the following causes:

- sectionalism: Dixiecrats in 1948
- economic protest: Populists in 1892
- specific issues: Green Party and the environment
- ideology: Socialists, Communists, Libertarians
- charismatic personalities: George Wallace's American Independent Party
- failures of the major parties: Ross Perot arose out of the major parties' failures to deal with the deficit and debt as key issues.

Although third parties form for a variety of reasons, usually the issues are coopted by the major parties. Third parties help the major parties change and force them to acknowledge alienated groups, incorporate new ideas, and nominate more attractive candidates.

Why Third Parties Tend to Remain Minor

Institutional Reasons

- “single-member plurality” electoral system: This system, also called “first-past-the-post,” means that only the winner gets elected. In proportional representation systems, there tend to be more parties because parties are rewarded (with seats in parliament for example) for as little as 1 percent or 5 percent of the vote.
- most states allow Democrats and Republicans an automatic place on the ballot, but have laws requiring third parties to gather signatures and petition the public.
- state and national legislatures are organized on a party basis and aim to perpetuate that public funding of campaigns is more generous for the two major parties; Third-party candidates must get more than 5 percent of the vote and major party candidates do not.
- the news media ignore minor parties since they are perceived as “non winners”

Other Reasons

- dualist theory: states that there is a binary nature to American politics. We have nonideological, centrist politics.

Third parties play a valuable role in American politics. They popularize new ideas, serve as vehicles of popular discontent, induce change in the major parties, assist party realignments, and allow the expression of dissent and opposition.

The Party Organization

National Committees: The Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC) are the national policy organs of the parties. They choose national chairpersons and run the quadrennial conventions. In addition, the Senate and House parties also have committees that are located, with the national committees, in Washington, D.C.

Leadership: The party chairpersons are usually selected by the sitting president for the party in power and the party national committee usually selects the other national chairperson. The chair is an important spokesperson for party interests.

National Conventions: Every four years, the national committees put together the presidential nominating conventions. Until 1984, they got gavel-to-gavel coverage by media outlets. Today, coverage is more selective. The conventions allow parties to nominate candidates, but also to discuss party organizational matters.

States and Localities: Parties are structurally based at the state and local levels. Much of the work of the party is carried out at the precinct, city, county, and state levels.

Informal Groups: Parties are supplemented by a number of other groups such as the National Federation of Democratic Women, the Young Republicans, State Governor's Associations, interest groups, PACs, and many more. In addition, there are think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, for the Republicans and the Progressive Policy Institute for the Democrats.

Party Realignments: A party realignment is a rare occurrence in which existing party affiliations change dramatically and the change lasts over several election cycles. Until recently, such changes in party support occurred about 36 years apart. A major realignment is ushered in by a critical election that polarizes or challenges voters to reconsider their party attachments. Sometimes, a war, economic crisis, or other such event precipitates a realignment. Othertimes, a realignment occurs due to a mobilization of new voters or existing voters may be converted from one party to another on the basis of issues or candidates. Recent research suggests that party affiliation may be in a continual state of flux and some voters are highly responsive to individual candidates and issues. That would make realignments simply an extreme case or change in party loyalties.

Secular Realignment: The gradual shifting of party coalitions is often called secular realignment. In recent years, with increases in ticket-splitting, partisan independence, and voter volatility, it is difficult to determine in what direction party support is going and who might come out a winner. The system remains quite fluid.

The Transformation of the Party Organization

Both parties have adopted new technological and communication strategies. However, each party has their strengths and weaknesses.

Until 1992, the Republicans outclassed the Democrats in most categories of campaign service and fund-raising. The Republican Party staff was more developed and more creative, since the Republicans were a minority party from 1932 to 1980 in Congress, and did not have incumbency and other advantages. The Republicans have developed a particularly effective direct mail fund-raising organization, and the party often has trouble legally spending all the money it collects.

The Republican Party supports a large array of activities and services including:

- party staff
- voter contact
- polling
- media advertising
- campaign staff training and research

However, in 2000, all was not well with Republican efforts. An outgoing RNC chair noted that the GOP had too few volunteers and too many paid staff. He worried that success and reliance on technology and money might not be a firm basis for consistently winning elections.

The Republicans pioneered the use of interactive Internet sites to raise money. Howard Dean, a Democrat, used Internet meet-ups to reach new heights of online campaign contributions. Though he didn't win the presidency in 2004, Dean's money raising prowess earned him the DNC chair.

In 2004, the Republicans raised more money than the Democrats, but Democrats came closer than ever before to meeting Republican money raising. This was true even when accounting for soft money (unregulated money given to the parties).

The national Democratic Party remained quite weak and disorganized until it suffered massive defeats in the 1980s. This catalyzed the party to learn about Republican successes and try to craft some of its own. Democrats still trail Republicans in most campaign and fund-raising functions, but they are improving dramatically. In 1992, they won the presidency for the first time in 16 years. The Democrats now have their own direct mail program and a multi-million dollar media center for producing TV and radio spots at very low rates. They also created the Democratic National Training Institute.

Democratic party campaign committees in Congress now raise significant amounts of money from congressional incumbents, since many Democrats have become far more successful raising money recently, and therefore, have amassed large war chests. However, the real strength for the Democrats is in the number of party activists. Under Howard Dean, the DNC has been working toward the goal of real and effective "boots on the ground" in all 50 states.

The Party in Government

The Congressional Party

The party is highly important and very visible in Congress. Party groups select the leadership of both houses, arrange committees, and organize and operate the Congress.

Congressional party leaders have methods of enforcing party discipline such as good committee assignments, prime office assignments, fund-raising help, legislative assistance (favorable treatment for a pork barrel project), endorsements, electoral help by popular party leaders, and much more. Party discipline, however, is not terribly effective in most cases. Most elections are candidate-centered and individualistic, and in those cases, many party sanctions cannot have much influence.

Party unity and cohesion seem to be growing recently. Electoral insecurity, caused by the increasing competitiveness of the party system, seems to be partially the reason. Also, parties may be more homogeneous than in earlier years. The carrot and stick of party money, as well as the growth of party-based advertising and polling, also play a role.

The Presidential Party

The president is an important party leader. His successes and failures reflect on his party. The president raises money, campaigns, and sometimes his “coattails” help party nominees. Some presidents are very interested in party building and are very helpful to the party organization and its candidates. They are called pro-party presidents. Other presidents act as if they are “above the fray” and are almost nonpartisan.

The Parties and the Judiciary

Members of the judiciary follow election returns and are influenced by public opinion. They are also products of their own party identification and have the same partisan perceptual screens as the rest of us.

Many judgeships are electoral positions, and though officially nonpartisan, there is usually an undercurrent of party affiliation. Judges are also appointed. These positions are patronage and usually go to judges who agree politically with the elected official (an active party member) who appoints him/her.

The Parties and State Government

Most of the same logic of the party’s relationship to the national legislature, executive, and judiciary apply at the state level as well. Occasionally, a third party will dominate at the state level. A good example of this was Jesse Ventura winning the governorship of Minnesota (he chose not to seek reelection in 2002).

There are a few differences. Governors have more patronage available to them than a president. These material rewards and incentives help the governor maintain party discipline and promote his/her agenda. Forty-one governors have the line-item veto that gives the governor considerable powers to wield against partisan enemies and for partisan allies. In legislatures, state legislatures generally have more party unity and cohesion than the national Congress and state legislative leaders generally have more power than their federal counterparts.

The Party In The Electorate

The party-in-the-electorate is the mass of potential voters who identify with party labels. This group is self-identified and seems to exhibit ever-lower levels of party loyalty.

Party Identification

American voters identify with a party, but rarely belong to it. They tend not to physically join and pay dues; instead, they simply assert they are a Republican or a Democrat. The party label becomes a voter’s central political reference symbol and a way of interpreting a complex world.

Party loyalties generally come from one’s parents, but can be affected by a number of factors such as peers, charismatic personalities, cataclysmic events, and intense social issues.

Declining Loyalty

Republicans and Democrats are split fairly evenly, with roughly one-third of the population each. The number of independents in the U.S. is rising; from 19 percent in 1958 to almost 38 percent 20 years later and 38 percent today. If pollsters go beyond simply asking affiliation, they often find that many self-declared independents “lean” quite strongly in one direction or the other. These “leaners” do feel party affiliations, but choose not to self-identify with a party. This could signal an erosion in the appeal of parties.

In addition, new issues have cut across traditional party lines and weaken party affiliation, as do the personality politics fostered by television and political consultants.

So who remains in the party stables? In general, the following trends seem to hold true:

- group affiliation: Labor unions tend to vote Democratic; Chambers of Commerce tend to vote Republican
- geographic region: The South still tends to vote Democratic in presidential races; the West seems to be strongly Republican
- gender: The Democrats seem to have a slight lead in garnering the women’s vote
- race and ethnicity: Over 80 percent of African Americans and many Hispanics vote Democratic, except for Cuban Americans, who are generally Republicans
- age: Young people are again becoming more Democratic
- social and economic factors: The GOP remains the party of professionals, executives, and white-collar workers and the Democrats lead among blue-collar workers and the unemployed
- religion: Protestants tend to favor the Republican Party and Catholics and Jews are mostly Democrats
- marital status: Married voters tend to lean Republican and those widowed are mostly Democrats
- ideology: Liberals tend to be Democrats and conservatives tend to be Republicans.

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(Discussing Table 12.2 at this point would be a good idea.)

Is the Party Over or Has It Just Begun?

Journalists and political scientists have been talking about declining party identification for years. Voters seem less loyal to their party, or at least more of them claim to be independents.

Generally, Democrats and Republicans can claim roughly the same percentage of American voters (among self identified partisans)—about one-third. Roughly another third claim to be independents. However, these independents tend to “lean,” and the way in which an independent leans tells us a lot about how he/she will vote.

The reluctance of “leaners” to identify with one of the two major parties is interesting. Many voters seem to think that belonging to a party is not a good thing. They claim to vote for individuals, not parties. However, they tend to vote consistently for one party. Thinking about the chapter and what we have talked about today, what might this mean?