CHAPTER 5

Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Campaigns

CHAPTER SUMMARY

American political parties are evolving, and a debate continues over whether our political parties are declining or becoming invigorated. Political parties are loosely organized coalitions of like-minded individuals that in the states rely most heavily on county-level organizations. Although many people identify with the party of their parents, they hold that identification increasingly lightly and show a penchant for ticket splitting.

Each state party has a charter or by-laws to govern its operation and, typically, is headed by a state committee. State party organizations vary greatly in organizational vitality and resources. Republican organizations generally outstrip Democratic ones on the size of their salaried staff and on financial resources. County party committee members are chosen at the precinct level and are volunteers. They are less professional than the state organization and few operate year-round offices. The local party organizations range from fragmented, part-time activities to cohesive, experienced, and professional organizations able to offer candidates a range of services.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties contain elements from across the ideological spectrum, although the distribution of conservatives and liberals in each party is distinct. The Republican ideological distribution is one of increasing conservatism, whereas the Democrats display moderate party leaders buffering two equally divergent groups holding different ideologies and opposing views on campaign issues. However, evangelical Christian activists, who want an even more conservative Republican party, have challenged local Republican parties. By the mid-1990s the Christian right controlled many local Republican party conventions, had captured many local races, and dominated the Republican governing organization in eighteen states and were very influential in thirteen others. Since 2000 the Christian Coalition has grown in strength and has helped form a solid base for the Republican Party at the state level and national level. They have also been very influential in the “culture wars.”

General elections in the United States are usually two-party contests and have been for most of the nation’s history. Explanations for institutionalization of a two-party system now focus on the structure of the electoral system. Parties compete in elections where there is only one winner and no reward for second or third. States vary in their level of political competition. Most fall into the “substantial two-party competition” category. The days where one party virtually ran state government are largely gone. For many states two-party competition has taken a new tack in favor of the Republicans. Beyond electoral competition, which party controls the major policymaking institutions is important. Divided government is not uncommon, and until the late 1980s Republican influence in state institutions was declining or, as in the South, all but nonexistent. By the early 1990s, Democratic fortunes had declined even in the South. Democrats enjoyed some success in the 2004 elections in the states by actually gaining control of state government in some “red states” like Montana. Thus, two-party competition is spreading at a time when states are becoming a battleground for resolution of tough issues; competition should bring a wider search for solutions and greater innovation in the states. Political parties are still viable in the American political system.
Interest groups have become powerful players in our system. Some individuals join interest
groups to communicate their preferences to government, whereas others are attracted to join by
the benefits the group makes available to members. Interest groups come in all shapes and sizes,
and many rely on lobbyists in the state capitol to influence public policy. Interests represented in
the capitol lobby are as varied as the states. A ranking of the twenty most influential lobbies in
the fifty states shows schoolteachers’ associations, general business organizations, and utility
companies and their associations at the top of the list. Many state-level interest groups are
ideological and seek political activity oriented toward some higher good: clean air, fairer tax
systems, consumer protection, and so on.

A lobbyist is often defined in the states as anyone receiving compensation to influence legislative
action. Some states require lobbyists to register. For some, the requirement exists even for unpaid
representatives of various interests. The number of lobbyists varies greatly from state to state, and
most states require lobbyists to file reports on expenditures and assess stiff penalties for
violations. Scandals in a number of states have led to prohibitions against giving gifts to
legislators and prohibitions against public officials taking them. Interests affected by state
government cannot afford to be without representation. To be effective, lobbyists must have
access and so they cultivate relationships with lawmakers. For their part, lawmakers need
information on how legislation might affect different interests and the ability of a lobbyist in
providing this information is of increasing importance as the states take on new tasks. Some
interest groups, to show support for some action, rely on “grassroots lobbying” where
orchestrated public demonstrations or evidence of support in the form of mail, faxes, and
telephone calls are used.

PACs are narrowly focused subsets of interest groups and are making extensive inroads into state
politics. PACs collect funds and distribute them to candidates. They were created when
corporations and labor unions were barred from making contributions directly to the candidate.
One study of PAC activity in three states showed they accounted for more than 50 percent of the
funds raised for incumbents and somewhat lesser, but still substantial, amounts for candidates for
open seats. They are seen as a threat to political parties as recruiters of candidates and financiers
of campaigns, and some states have reacted by increasing regulations and even prohibiting out-of-
state PAC money.

State and local political campaigns are no longer old-fashioned, unsophisticated operations. They
are influenced by modern campaign technology and financing. The mass media, particularly
television and the Internet, ensure that campaign information is available to everyone, and
capturing media attention is increasingly sophisticated. But free media time is seldom sufficient;
candidates must also rely on paid advertisements to get their message to the public. The image of
the candidate and negative images of the opponent can be easily transmitted via the TV screen.
Much of this is made possible by the development of a new occupational specialty—the political
consultant, who provides expertise in polling, direct mail campaigning, fundraising, advertising,
and campaign management.

Political parties, interest groups, and campaigns are part of the democratic system. Ideally, the
system keeps government working in the public’s interest. Considerable change, now under way
in the components of the system, makes it difficult to assess their eventual impact on state and
local government, but the vitality of those governments depends on the outcome.