Lecture Outline: Chapter 6

Political Parties

I. The American public continues to question the relevance of political parties.
   A. Public opinion polls support the proposition that we live in an “antiparty age” marked by public alienation from parties.
   B. Fifty percent of respondents in a recent poll had unfavorable attitudes about political parties. Many blame parties for confusing rather than clarifying the issues.
   C. The roots of these beliefs are found in the public’s general acceptance of the myth of party irrelevance, that the Democratic and Republican parties are unnecessary and perhaps worthless for our political system.
   D. In discussing the role and functions of political parties, we discover that this myth represents only a partial truth about the role of parties.

II. American political parties have several unique characteristics.
   A. Political parties differ from country to country.
      1. Unlike many of their European, African, and Middle Eastern counterparts, the two major American political parties are not strictly grounded in ideology.
         (Ideology is defined in Chapter 1.)
      2. Although there are minor parties in the United States that are strongly ideological (such as the Libertarian, Conservative, and Socialist Workers parties), no clear Republican or Democratic ideology guides the major party activists. Both major parties support a strong democratic, capitalist tradition, although they differ on many specific economic and social issues. The Democratic Party tends to attract liberals, while the Republican Party tends to attract conservatives. But both parties count liberals, moderates, and conservatives in their membership.
      3. In effect, political parties in the United States are coalitions of people organized formally to recruit, nominate, and elect individuals to office; to organize elections; to use elected office to achieve shared political goals; and to help bring stability to the political system.
      4. Parties are decentralized, dispersed organizations, with no single individual or organization, not even the president, having control over the entire party system. All state and most local party organizations operate more or less independently of each other.
      5. Parties are loosely regulated, for the most part at the state level, and they are not mentioned in the Constitution.
   B. Parties can be understood as being a “three-headed giant.”
      1. The party-as-organization is small and relatively informal, consisting primarily of state and local chairpersons and ward and precinct captains.
      2. The party-in-the-electorate is anyone who identifies with a specific party and who generally votes for its candidates.
      3. The party-in-government is composed of those individuals who have been elected or appointed to public office under the party label.
   C. The role of party identification is important in our political system.
      1. Party identification is a psychological attachment that a majority of Americans have to either the Republican or Democratic Party.
      2. The candidate’s party label is often an important cue to voters, who often do not have an in-depth knowledge of many candidates.
3. In recent years, a decline in strong party identification has been accompanied by an increase in self-declared independents.

D. Democrats differ from Republicans in terms of both supporters and issue positions.
   1. The Democratic Party gets its greatest support from residents of the Northeast, African-Americans and Hispanics, Catholics and Jews, women, the working class, liberals, and individuals over the age of 50.
   2. The Republican Party gets its greatest support from white Protestants, the middle and upper class, and conservatives.
   3. Democrats tend to favor an active role by government in social welfare programs, the regulation of business, and nonmilitary foreign aid programs. Republicans tend to support a reduction in the role of government regulation of business, social welfare programs, aid to minorities, and an increase in military expenditures.

E. Independents make up a significant part of the electorate.
   1. Although the growth in the number of independents has leveled off over the past 10 years, the steady increase since the 1950s in the number of independents supports the myth of party irrelevance.
   2. Many self-declared independents, however, still rely on party labels when voting in many state and local elections, where they have relatively little information about the issue positions and leadership qualities of the candidates.

III. Parties carry out a number of important functions.
   A. Parties organize individuals into electoral coalitions that tend to agree with each party’s stands and support its candidates for office.
   B. Parties develop particular policy positions by writing and implementing platforms.
   C. Parties recruit and run candidates for office, although many candidates are self-recruited, and a significant number of candidates running for high-visibility offices rely on professional campaign consultants.
   D. Parties organize the legislative and executive branches of government (see also Chapter 10 on Congress). Most members of Congress tend to vote, a majority of the time, along party lines.
   E. Parties also serve to allay and control conflict among and between different groups and interests in our society.

IV. Although they are not mentioned in the Constitution, parties have been a part of our political system from the time of the founders.
   A. The first party system included the Federalists, who were led by Hamilton and favored a strong centralist government, and the Jeffersonians (also known as the Democratic Republicans), who were organized by Jefferson and Madison and favored limited national government.
      1. The Federalists attracted most of their support from bankers, industrialists, northern landowners, and merchants. The Jeffersonians drew their support from the Middle Atlantic States and the South, particularly from farmers, businessmen, and craftsmen.
      2. The Federalists gradually lost their base of support. From 1800 to 1820, the Jeffersonians dominated national politics.
   B. In 1828, the Jeffersonian Party split in two, one wing dominated by Andrew Jackson’s Democrats, the other members combining with former Federalists to form the Whig Party. The Democrats and the Whigs laid the foundation for the modern two-party system. They dominated the political system until the 1850s, when the Whigs split over the issue of slavery. The Republican Party was formed as the antislavery party, and the Democrats attracted disillusioned former Whigs.
C. The Republican Party and the Democratic Party have dominated the political system since the 1860s.
   1. Between 1860 and 1928, the Republican Party won 14 of 18 presidential elections.
   2. In 1932, the presidential election of Franklin D. Roosevelt marked the beginning of almost 30 years of Democratic dominance of the White House and Congress.
   3. Between 1968 and 2000, the Republicans have won six of the eight presidential elections, although the Democrats have controlled both houses of Congress (with the exception of the Senate between 1981 and 1987 and between 1995 and 2005, and the House between 1995 and 2005).

D. During their history, Americans have undergone four major realigning elections—elections in which the majority of voters have shifted their loyalty from one party to the other. We may be going through a period of dealignment, in which the public disassociates itself from either party and splits its votes between the parties.

E. Why do we have a two-party system when many other democracies, including Israel, Holland, France, and Italy, have multiparty systems? Four major explanations are given.
   1. Our winner-take-all elections discourage the development of third parties, which often find it impossible to win a majority or plurality of the vote.
   2. Our nation has a natural division of interests, generally divided politically along two lines (for example, strong versus weak national government, urban versus rural), and these divisions foster a two-party system.
   3. A similarity of goals—an overriding national consensus—exists in the United States regarding political, social, and economic problems.
   4. In general, state laws have historically made it difficult for third parties to get on the ballot.

F. Third parties still flourish in our nation.
   1. Over 900 third (or minor) parties have existed in the United States since our nation was founded.
   2. They receive most of their support at the state and local levels, although some third parties have done reasonably well in presidential races. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt, running as the presidential candidate of the Bull Moose Progressive Party, received 27 percent of the vote. In 1992, H. Ross Perot, running as an independent but with close ties to the Reform Party, received 19 percent of the presidential vote. However, in 2000, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader came in a distant third in the presidential election, carrying 3 percent of the vote.
   3. Third parties are important because they place new issues on the political agenda. For example, the 1932 party platform of the Socialist Party included a call for social security, unemployment insurance, a five-day workweek, workmen’s compensation, national health insurance, and aid to farmers—programs that were later recognized as important by both the Democratic and Republican parties.

V. Party power is fragmented among local, state, and national organizations.
A. Local party organizations generally have several tiers.
   1. They are usually divided into precincts (several square blocks) and wards (generally consisting of a number of precincts), and they may also include city, county, congressional district, state legislative, and judicial units. The power of these units varies from one part of the nation to another.
   2. In many parts of the country, local party organizations scarcely exist. In two-thirds of cities with populations over 5,000, nonpartisan elections are the rule.
B. **Machine organizations** were prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in both urban and rural parts of the country. Political machines still exist in some parts of the nation, although they are far fewer in number. The **Progressive movement**, during the early part of this century, was aimed at reducing the power of machine politics. With the growth of federal and state social welfare programs in the 1930s, there was less need for machines to provide patronage—jobs and services for the poor and lucrative contracts and preferments for the well off.

C. The influence and power of state party organizations vary from state to state. State party organizations have assumed more important roles as they have increased their fund-raising, pollering and research services, and computer record keeping and voter analysis for state and local candidates.

D. Every four years, national party organizations convene the national presidential conventions and support candidates for major office.
   1. The role of national organizations in the campaign process has recently been challenged by political action committees (PACs) (see also Chapter 8) and professional campaign and media consultants (see Chapter 7).
   2. The Republican National Committee has increased its effectiveness by strengthening its campaign support system.
   3. The Democrats have concentrated their efforts on reforming and democratizing the delegate selection process for national conventions.

VI. Some scholars have suggested that political parties have undergone a decline in power and influence, becoming weak and ineffective, but others argue that parties have really undergone a transformation.

A. They have had to respond to interest groups, PACs, television, and professional campaign consultants who have challenged them in many areas, including campaign financing, educating the people on issues, campaign strategy, and decision making.

B. A majority of voters still feel some attachment to the Democratic or Republican Party, although this attachment is not as strong as it used to be.

C. Although party influence in the Senate and House is far from absolute, the members vote along party lines more often than not. This support is not out of blind loyalty to a party or a leader, but is tied to shared views within each party regarding many issues.

D. Parties remain the single most important cue for citizens making voting decisions.

VII. Evidence suggests that the myth of party irrelevance is a distortion of reality—only a partial truth. Parties play an important role in structuring and guiding voting and in the campaign process, they organize government in the legislatures, and they serve as a link between the people and elected officials. Parties tend to attract different coalitions of voters and office seekers; Republicans and Democrats tend to view many issues differently and to vote differently.