CHAPTER 8

Political Parties

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After reading this chapter you should be able to:

• Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
• Describe the four most important functions of political parties.
• Trace the history of the major political parties in America.
• List the functions performed by minor parties.
• Account for the emergence of a two-party system in the United States.
• Assess the extent of party identification in the United States and its influence on voters’ choices.
• Summarize the ideological and organizational differences between Republicans and Democrats.
• Decide whether the American system is more pluralist or majoritarian in its operation.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY
On the surface, the American two-party system seems tailor-made for majoritarian democracy. Every election has two broad categories for voters to choose from, so that opportunities for narrowly-focused small groups to gain control of the government apparatus are reduced. At the same time, the party system reduces the amount of information voters need to make rational choices. However, even this seemingly majoritarian device does not fully realize its majoritarian potential.

Majority parties are not always able to implement the policies they favor, due mainly to they lack of effective party discipline. That deficiency, in turn, is related to the decentralized structure of American parties. In a sense, America has, not two, but one hundred and two parties—two national organizations and two major parties in each of the fifty states.

On the whole, Democrats and Republicans do differ with respect to their political ideologies. The Democrats are more liberal and tend to place a high value on political and social equality. They are willing to use the government to achieve a more egalitarian economy and society, but they do not wish to use the government to restrict individual freedom (in matters related to lifestyles, reproductive choices, or freedom of expression, for example) to protect the social order. Republicans, on the other hand, are more likely to prefer order and freedom to equality; they prefer limited government when issues of equality are at stake, but they are often willing to use government power to support a particular vision of social order, even at the cost of individual freedom.

However, these general statements of ideological differences between the parties tend to obscure the fact that there are ideological differences within the parties as well. Nonetheless, the difficulties American parties have in maintaining discipline and coordinating the actions of government officials make it hard for them to fulfill the ideals of the majoritarian model. Even though American politics is dominated by two parties, third party candidates are always striving to advance their agenda, even if it ruins a victory for one of the two major parties.
CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Political Parties and Their Functions
A political party is an organization that sponsors candidates for office under the organization’s name. The link between political parties and democracy is so close that many democratic theorists believe democracy would be impossible in modern nation-states without parties. Parties perform several important functions in a political system, including the following:

- **Nominating candidates for election to public office.** This provides a form of quality control through peer review by party insiders who know candidates well and judge their acceptability. Parties may also take an active role in recruiting talented candidates for office.

- **Structuring voting choices.** Parties reduce the number of candidates on a ballot to those that have a realistic chance of winning. This reduces the amount of information voters must acquire to make rational decisions.

- **Proposing alternative government programs.** Parties specify policies their candidates will pursue if elected. These proposed policies usually differ between the parties.

- **Coordinating the actions of government officials.** Parties help bridge the separation of powers, to produce coordinated policies that are effective in governing the country.

A History of U.S. Party Politics
Today, political parties are institutionalized parts of the American political process, but they were not even mentioned in the Constitution. Although there were opposing factions from the beginning, the first party system developed during Washington’s administration. It was not until the election of 1800 that the parties began nominating their own candidates. In these early elections between the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans, the candidates receiving the most votes would be elected as president and vice president regardless of their party affiliation. Because the president and vice president could be of two different parties, they could possess opposing positions and ideologies. The Twelfth Amendment modified the electoral system so that the president and vice president were elected from the same party. And yet by 1820, the Democratic Republicans dominated the political system so that the Federalists did not even field a candidate. Soon the Democratic Republican Party began to fracture from within, and new parties began to emerge.

The first system developed during a period with limited suffrage and little popular participation in the electoral process. As states began allowing popular selection of presidential electors and relaxing the voting requirements, the first popular national political parties began to emerge in Andrew Jackson’s Democrats and John Quincy Adams’s Whigs. These new parties began to hold national conventions and draft party platforms. Slavery and sectionalism eventually destroyed the Whigs and led to the formation of a new party in 1855 opposed to the spread of slavery, the Republican Party.

Thus, the election of 1856 marked the first contest between Democrats and Republicans, the parties constituting our present-day party system. Since then, there have been three critical elections signaling new, enduring electoral realignments in which one of the two parties became dominant. In the period from 1860 to 1894, the electorate supported both sides equally. From the critical election of 1896 until 1930, Republicans dominated much of our government. The critical election of 1932 produced a Democratic majority. That majority retained control until 1994, when the Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress. We could be in a period of electoral dealignment, and, if so, party loyalties will become less important to voters.
The American Two-Party System

The history of American party politics has been dominated by successive two-party systems, but minor parties—including bolters, farm-labor parties, ideological protest parties, and single-issue parties—have not fared well as vote-getters. The main functions of third parties are to allow voters to express their discontent with the choices offered by the two primary parties, serve as policy advocates, and act as safety valves for the system.

American election rules have supported the two-party system. Although candidates campaign for a popular vote in each state, the winner is decided in the electoral college. This federal structure contributes to the persistent power of the Democrats and Republicans. Even when one party wins a landslide presidential election, the loser can retain significant strength in other branches of the government and in many of the fifty state governments. This makes it possible for the minority party to rebuild, and eventually retake, the presidency.

The longevity of the present two-party system is also a result of the tendency for citizens to be socialized from childhood to think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans. They identify with one party or the other, and this identification predisposes them to vote for candidates of that party. Whereas a citizen’s actual voting behavior may change from election to election or from candidate to candidate, party identification usually changes more slowly over time. As citizens begin voting against their party, only then do they consider reassessing their party identification.

Party Ideology and Organization

The Democratic and Republican parties differ substantially on ideology. More Republicans than Democrats consider themselves as conservative. The 2000 platform of the Republicans called for tax cuts, more military spending, and smaller government. On the other hand, the Democratic platform advocated active but smaller government, fiscal discipline, free trade, and tough crime policies.

The federal structure is apparent in the organization of the country’s political parties. Each party has separate state and national organizations. At the national level, each party has a national convention, national committee, congressional party conference, and congressional campaign committee. Historically, the role of the national organizations was fairly limited, but in the 1970s, Democratic procedural reforms and Republican organizational reforms increased the activity of the national organizations. The national organizations have increased in strength and financial resources, yet state party organizations are relatively independent in organizing their state activities, and so the system remains decentralized.

The Model of Responsible Party Government

Responsible parties are a key feature of majoritarian theory. For a party system to work, the following four things are necessary: (1) the parties must present clear, coherent programs, (2) the voters must choose candidates on the basis of these programs, (3) the winning party must carry out its program, and (4) the voters must hold the incumbents responsible for their program at the next election. This chapter argues that the first and third criteria are met in American democracy. The next chapter looks more closely at the remaining features.

KEY TERMS

political party
nomination
political system
electoral college
RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

This chapter indicates that the American system is built on a loose confederation of independent, state party organizations rather than a rigidly hierarchical structure with a national party at its apex. Indeed, until very recently, the national party all but went out of existence in non-presidential election years. Thus, the two most conspicuous products of national party organizations have been the presidential nominating conventions and the party platforms.

If you are interested in doing research on party conventions or platforms, consult:

National Party Conventions, 1831–2000 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press 2000). This publication includes excerpts of party platforms, as well as chronologies of nominating conventions and state-by-state votes of delegates on issues placed before the conventions. In addition to this work, the Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections, mentioned in the last chapter, also provides a wealth of information on these topics.

The platforms of the major parties are available online at the American Presidency Project: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.php>.


USING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Visit the Democratic and Republican websites at <http://www.dnc.org/> and <http://www.rnc.org>, respectively. What similarities and differences do you notice in the information and services available at each site?

2. Find and read the Democratic and Republican party platforms for an election held within the last twenty years. Note the areas of similarity and difference between the two. In the election year you chose to examine, would you say that observers who might have claimed, “there’s not a dime’s
worth of difference between the two parties” would have been correct? Give evidence to support your answer.

3. Using the Gallup Poll, National Election Studies, or other available survey data (see Chapter 5 of this guide), research changes in party identification over the last twenty years.

GETTING INVOLVED

If you are interested in working for a political party, you may want to begin by contacting the local party organization in your county or joining the Young Democrats or Young Republicans on your campus. The congressional campaign websites for the two parties provide some help for those who want to volunteer: Republicans can be found at <http://nrcc.org/> and <http://www.nrsc.org/>, Democrats at <http://www.democraticaction.org/> and <http://www.dssc.org/>. There are some internships available for students who would like to become involved with the parties on the national level.

SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What is the third largest political party in the United States?
   a. Reform Party
   b. Green Party
   c. Constitutional Party
   d. Libertarian Party
   e. Socialist Party

2. How do political parties differ from interest groups?
   a. Only political parties contribute funds to candidates.
   b. Only political parties provide information to voters about candidates
   c. Only political parties represent identifiable interests.
   d. Only political parties mobilize get-out-the-vote campaigns.
   e. Only political parties sponsor candidates for office as their avowed representative.

3. Which of the following is not among the four most important functions of a political party?
   a. Nominating candidates for office
   b. Proposing alternative government policies
   c. Raising money for candidates
   d. Structuring the voting choice
   e. Coordinate actions of government officials

4. Which of the following best describes a “critical election?”
   a. An incumbent president is defeated.
   b. An electoral realignment occurs.
   c. Divided government is produced.
   d. Divided government is ended.
   e. An incumbent president is re-elected.

5. The development of the first party system uncovered problems in the method of electing the president and vice president. How did the Twelfth Amendment solve these problems?
   a. It created the electoral college.
   b. It dissolved the electoral college.
   c. It required separate votes for president and vice president.
   d. It required presidential candidates to be financially sound.
   e. It required a popular vote for the President.
6. Instead of allowing the popular vote to elect the president, what institution, created by the U.S. Constitution, serves that function?
   a. political parties
   b. Congress
   c. the Supreme Court
   d. interest groups
   e. the electoral college

7. Why did the Whig Party ultimately fail?
   a. Slavery and sectionalism.
   b. Rum, Romanism, and rebellion
   c. The electoral dominance of the Democratic Party
   d. The personal magnetism of Abraham Lincoln
   e. Emergence of the Federalist Party

8. Which of the following is not considered to have been a critical election?
   a. 1860
   b. 1896
   c. 1920
   d. 1932
   e. All of the above were critical elections

9. What do we call the statement of policies adopted by each party at their national convention?
   a. caucus
   b. party platform
   c. party policies
   d. conference confirmation
   e. party coalition

10. What is the Prohibition Party an example of?
    a. a boltier party.
    b. a party of ideological protest.
    c. a farmer-labor party.
    d. a single-issue party.
    e. a realignment party.

11. What term do we use to describe a change in voting patterns after a critical election?
    a. congressional conjunction
    b. political party purge
    c. electoral realignment
    d. electoral caucus
    e. electoral dealignment

12. Which of the following does responsible party government most closely resemble?
    a. The majoritarian model of democracy
    b. The pluralist model of democracy
    c. anarchism
    d. socialism
    e. federalism

13. Which of the following contributes to the persistence of the two-party system?
    a. constitutional recognition of two parties
    b. proportional representation
    c. political socialization
    d. centralized national party organization
    e. All of the above
14. Which of the following did the Democratic Party Platform of 2000 concentrate on?
   a. Tax Cuts
   b. More Military Spending
   c. Equality
   d. Restricting Abortion
   e. Abolishing the Department of Education

15. Which of the following characterizes the American party system today?
   a. There are far fewer Independents than Democrats and Republicans combined.
   b. There are more Republicans than Democrats.
   c. The Democrats are increasing in comparison to Republicans and Independents.
   d. All of the above
   e. None of the above

16. What term do we use to describe the system by which one office, contested by two or more candidates, is won by the candidate who collects the most votes?
   a. Reapportionment
   b. Representative Democracy
   c. Majority Representation
   d. Electoral Realignment
   e. Proportional Representation

17. Which of the following characterizes the platforms of the Democrats and Republicans?
   a. Both are essentially capitalist parties.
   b. The Republicans are capitalist, but the Democrats are not.
   c. The Republicans pledge themselves to equality, whereas the Democrats support freedom.
   d. The Republicans pledge themselves to limit all spheres of government activity, whereas the Democrats pledge themselves to increase all spheres of government activity.
   e. Neither party supports capitalism.

18. Imagine an election in which ten legislative seats are at stake. Party A receives 60 percent of the votes cast. Party B gets 30 percent of the votes. Party C tallies 10 percent of the votes. As a result, Party A is awarded six seats; Party B, three seats; and Party C, one seat. What is this an example of?
   a. A Proportional Representation System.
   b. A Majority Representation System.
   c. Electoral Dealignment.
   d. Reapportionment.
   e. Realignement.

19. What is the most distinguishing feature of the American political parties?
   a. tight party discipline.
   b. clear ideological definition.
   c. hierarchical organization.
   d. absence of centralized power.
   e. relatively young age.

20. What type of party typically acts as a safety valve, channeling discontent into conventional participation?
   a. minor parties
   b. major parties
   c. majority parties
   d. party machines
   e. party conferences
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21. In 1972, the Democratic National Committee initiated procedural reforms in the presidential nominating process that
   a. weakened local control over delegate selection.
   b. ensure representation of women and minorities at the party convention.
   c. denied seats to state delegations that failed to adhere to national rules.
   d. broaden participation in the nomination process.
   e. All of the above

22. As far as political parties are concerned, the Constitution
   a. limits the number of major parties to two but allows an unlimited number of minor parties.
   b. limits the number of major parties to two and allows no more than ten minor parties.
   c. mandates that ballots provide both candidate names and party affiliation.
   d. provides that they be organized on the state level.
   e. says nothing.

23. Which of the following is true about Third Parties in the United States?
   a. They tend to be more successful at the state and local level.
   b. They tend to be more successful at the national level.
   c. They rarely have any impact on elections.
   d. They have an advantage due to proportional representation.
   e. They have an advantage due to the Electoral College.

24. Which of these is not a characteristic of the responsible party model of government?
   a. Parties present clear programs to voters.
   b. Each party attempts to minimize its differences with other parties.
   c. Voters choose candidates on the basis of party.
   d. When in office, the winning party tries to carry out its program.
   e. Voters hold the governing party responsible for executive its program.

25. When people are asked about their political ideology, most Americans will identify their party as
   which of the following?
   a. Republican
   b. Democrat
   c. Independent
   d. Libertarian
   e. Preferred not to answer

Essay Questions

1. What kinds of roles do third-party candidates play during elections? Discuss their positive and negative aspects

2. What is a “critical election”? Trace the history of the two-party system since 1860 by focusing on the three critical elections in our nation’s history.

3. Is there “a dime’s worth of difference” between Democrats and Republicans? Support your answer with concrete illustrations focusing on party ideologies and organization.

4. Discuss the different aspects of the National Convention every four years. What are its goals, who participates, what kinds of power do they have, and what kinds of power do they not have?

5. Explain the flaw ratified in the original Constitution’s system to elect a President. How was it fixed and is it still working today? What are your thoughts on how we could make it better?
ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. d
2. e
3. c
4. b
5. c
6. b
7. a
8. c
9. b
10. d
11. d
12. a
13. c
14. c
15. a
16. c
17. a
18. a
19. d
20. a
21. e
22. e
23. a
24. b
25. b