CHAPTER 6

Political Parties

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. What Parties Are and What They Do
   A. The Three-Headed Political Giant

II. Who Belongs to Major Parties and Why?
   A. In the Driver’s Seat: Democrats and Republicans
   B. A Back Seat in Politics? Independents
   C. If Parties Are So Important, What Do They Do?

III. American-Style Politics: The Two-Party System
   A. The Winners: The Democrats and the Republicans
   B. Realignment of Parties
   C. Why Two Parties?
   D. The Hidden Actors: Third Parties in the United States

IV. Party Structure from the Bottom Up
   A. Local Parties
   B. State Parties
   C. National Parties

V. Conclusion: Decline or Transformation of Political Parties?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

When most Americans think of politics, they think of political parties. Unfortunately, what comes to mind is not always a good image. Parties often appear to produce the worst effects of “politics” in government: pettiness, self-serving behavior, and unnecessary competition and conflict. Many people believe that our democracy would be improved if we no longer had political parties.

Such opinions, based on myths and misconceptions about the role of political parties in the United States, seldom supply the best picture of the American political process. This chapter studies those very important myths about political parties. The first is the idea that there is no difference between the parties. If there is no difference between the Democrats and the Republicans, then one would be naturally inclined to call into question the need for parties. What contributory role do they serve in the American political system? To answer this question, the chapter will first describe what political parties are, what they do, and who is in them. From this discussion, you should gain a more complete understanding of the useful functions that parties perform. Reading the second segment of the chapter will answer some of those questions about why we have political parties, why we have Republicans and Democrats, and why we have just two major parties. Additionally, you will get a chance to explore the role that third parties play in the electoral process. As you read this section, consider the reasons why third parties are not more successful and what changes would have to be made to increase their competitiveness. This reading will involve looking at history as well as looking at modern American politics and society. Finally, you will see how parties are organized at the national, state, and local levels.
Myths and misconceptions about political parties contribute to the declining popularity of party politics. Not only is the public less committed, but also even politicians seem to be losing their loyalty to parties. These developments raise two more important questions. Are parties in decline? And should we care if they are? In reading this chapter, you will see that political parties in America are going through a period of transformation. You should also gain a greater appreciation of the party system and find reason to hope for its good health in America.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After carefully reading and studying the chapter, you should be able to:
1. Define political parties and describe their characteristics.
2. Describe each aspect of the three-headed political parties.
3. Identify the membership of the two major political parties.
4. Summarize the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties.
5. Describe the four functions of political parties.
6. Explain the development of the party system in the United States.
7. Explain the reasons for our two-party system.
8. Discuss the role of third parties in the United States, explaining both their problems and their contributions to the political process.
9. Describe the organization of major political parties at each level of government.
10. Evaluate the decline of political parties in American politics.
11. Evaluate the myth of party irrelevance to decide whether parties are viable institutions in the United States today.

READING TABLES AND POLITICS & POPULAR CULTURE
1. According to Table 6.1, which issue is the most important in the 2008 election for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents?
2. According to Figure 6.1 in which years did the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as Republicans surpass those who said they were Democrats?

REVISING CHAPTER 6
Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
Fill in the following terms and definitions in the appropriate blanks:

1. A local voting district of several square blocks at the base of the local party organizations is a(n) ______.  
   a. political parties  
   b. party-as-organization  
   c. party-in-the-electorate  
   d. party-in-government

2. Independent organizations created by interest groups to raise and contribute money to the campaigns of sympathetic candidates are called______.  
   a. political parties  
   b. party-as-organization  
   c. party-in-the-electorate  
   d. party-in-government

3. A term used to describe political parties in which decision-making power is dispersed and no single individual controls the system is______.  
   a. political parties  
   b. party-as-organization  
   c. party-in-the-electorate  
   d. party-in-government
4. An electoral system in which candidates must win more votes than any rivals in order to gain the contested seat is called a(n) _____ system.
5. Elections that are held to select candidates to run for office under a particular party banner are_____.
6. An electoral system in which legislative seats are awarded according to the percentage of votes received by each political party is a _____ system.
7. Groups of loyal supporters who agree with a party’s stand on most issues and vote for its candidates form a(n) _____.
8. A statement of a political party’s goals and specific policy agenda is a(n) _____.
9. The provision of jobs in return for political support is called_____.
10. A major shift in voter support when one party becomes dominant and controls both the presidency and Congress is called_____.
11. Coalitions of people organized formally to recruit, nominate, and elect individuals to political office and to use that office to achieve shared goals are_____.
12. The provision of services or contracts in exchange for political support is called_____.
13. A shift in voter support in which the public disassociates itself from any party and splits support between the major parties is called_____.
14. An alliance of individuals who have been elected or appointed to office under a party label is a(n) _____.
15. A campaign in which paid consultants or volunteers, rather than a political party, coordinate campaign activities, raise money, and develop strategies is a(n) _____ campaign.
16. In the party organization, a city council district below the citywide level is called a(n)_____.
17. An alliance of people who identify with a particular party and tend to vote for its candidates and contribute to its campaigns is a(n)_____.
18. An alliance of party members who work full-time for the party recruiting candidates and supporting politicians is a(n)_____.
19. A campaign in which the party coordinates activities, raises money, and develops a strategy is called a(n)_____.
True/False: If any part of the statement is incorrect, mark it False and write in the reason(s) why the statement is false.

1. T F Political parties were favored by the founders of our country and defined as Democrats and Republicans in the Constitution.

2. T F The national political party organizations of both major parties hold tight control over local candidate selection.

3. T F In a single-member district system the margin of victory in an election doesn’t matter.

4. T F An example of a strong ideological third party in America could be the Libertarian Party or Socialist Workers Party.

5. T F The percentage of American voters who identify themselves as independents has decreased steadily since the 1960s.

6. T F Wards and precincts are geographic designations used to help organize voting districts.

7. T F Political parties continue to play an important role in organizing Congress and influencing voting positions.

8. T F The Republican and Democratic parties are highly centralized. Most decisions regarding the parties are made at the national level by a few central committees.

9. T F The Great Depression brought about a major realignment of political party coalitions in favor of the Democratic Party.

11. T F Replacing single-member district electoral systems with proportional representation systems would benefit the rise of minority parties in American politics.

12. T F Because the United States has a two-party system, third parties have no influence on the development of political issues and policies.

13. T F Some scholars believe that the United States is currently going through a period of dealignment.

14. T F Although American political parties play a major role in national politics, they have little influence in local political affairs.

15. T F Third parties, like the Republican and Democratic parties, automatically receive federal funding for presidential campaigns.

16. T F The Constitution does not mention political parties.

17. T F Party labels are not listed on ballots and therefore do not guide voter decisions at election time.

18. T F Political party platforms are binding principles that party members cannot deviate from.
19. T F Primary elections are designed to select candidates to run for office under the party banner.

20. T F Third parties have difficult times running at the state level because of electoral rules such as requiring petitions, nominating conventions, and minimum levels of registered voters.

21. T F Minor parties thrive in the United States and often present program alternatives that are adopted by the Democratic and Republican parties.

22. T F Political parties are instrumental in running the government and stabilizing the political system.

23. T F Most of the third parties’ electoral success has come at the state and local levels.

24. T F Political action committees (PACs) came into being when federal laws prohibited interest groups from donating money to political campaigns.

25. T F American political parties are coalitions of people organized formally to recruit, nominate, and elect candidates for public office and to use elected office to achieve shared political goals.

PREPARING FOR AN EXAM

Multiple-Choice Questions

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Which of the following statements best expresses the prevailing myth about political parties in the United States?
   a. Political parties don’t serve any useful purpose.
   b. There are too many political parties in the United States.
   c. The two parties spend all their time fighting.
   d. Political parties do a great deal of good.
2. Unlike political parties in most other democratic countries, the two major American political parties are
   a. less competitive.
   b. less ideological.
   c. more organized.
   d. more popular.

3. The party-in-the-electorate refers to all those people who
   a. have been elected to office by a political party.
   b. regularly pay membership dues to a political party.
   c. identify with a party and tend to vote for its candidates.
   d. help run the local political party.

4. Which of the following is an accurate statement about political party membership in the mid-1990s?
   a. Most voters identified with either the Republican or the Democratic party.
   b. More young adults were Democratic, rather than independent or Republican.
   c. The majority of voters were independent.
   d. Republicans outnumbered both independents and Democrats.

5. The party-in-government is comprised of the
   a. individuals who identify with a party and vote for that party at election time.
   b. individuals who serve on organizing committees or serve as delegates to the national/state conventions.
   c. individuals who run for political office.
   d. individuals who work in a government office under a party label.

6. Reasons for why America has developed a strong two-party system include which of the following statements?
   a. the dominance of single-member districts
   b. winner-take-all elections
   c. state laws favoring a two-party system
   d. all of the above

7. When a political party attracts different groups of voters to support its policies and candidates, this is called a(n)
   a. election caucus.
   b. party platform.
   c. party-in-government.
   d. electoral coalition.

8. American political party control over elected officials
   a. is insignificant because the average politician no longer votes his or her party’s position.
   b. has increased with the reorganization of Congress.
   c. is based on the party’s total control over elections.
   d. is much less than it is in other democracies.

9. Patronage and preferments are
   a. the bottom two levels of the local party structure.
   b. no longer legal options for political parties.
   c. used exclusively by third parties.
   d. used by party committee members to court voters and obtain campaign contributions.
10. Each of the following is a function served by the political parties except
   a. winning elections.
   b. insuring equal distribution of political power.
   c. building electoral coalitions.
   d. organizing government.

11. The election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 represented a new party alignment in the United States, with
   a. the victorious Democratic Party representing the urban North and white South.
   b. a Republican Party triumph representing small business and suburban interests.
   c. the defeat of the Whigs and triumph of the Republicans.
   d. the Democratic Party split between Federalists and Jeffersonians.

12. Which of the following developments would most certainly indicate a realignment of parties in American politics?
   a. A president is reelected by a landslide.
   b. One party wins the presidential election, but the other party wins control of Congress.
   c. One party attracts the support of new groups of voters and becomes dominant at all levels of government over a period of time.
   d. A third-party candidate gets 25 percent of the presidential vote.

13. Single-member district, winner-take-all elections in the United States
   a. reduce the strength of political party machines.
   b. hurt the spread of the Republican Party.
   c. encourage the growth of third parties.
   d. strengthen the two-party system.

14. Party labels
   a. are irrelevant in American politics today.
   b. do not ever appear on ballots.
   c. remain one of the best predictors of voter choice in many elections.
   d. become increasingly important during periods of realignment.

15. Which of the following is a true statement about third-party involvement in American elections?
   a. Third parties cannot legally submit candidates for the presidency.
   b. State laws make it hard for third parties to get on the ballot.
   c. Third parties are more likely to be successful nationally than at the state and local levels.
   d. None of the above.

16. Third parties in America
   a. find that federal election laws reward the existing two major political parties.
   b. promote politically extreme ideologies that are ignored by Americans.
   c. have enjoyed continued success at the national level, but they have not been able to gain ground at the state or local levels.
   d. never form party platforms around single policy areas.

17. Proportional representation
   a. is widely used in American elections.
   b. discourages voters from casting their ballots for third-party candidates.
   c. is simply a different name for the winner-take-all model.
   d. is used in many European nations.
18. There have been more than ____ third parties in American history.
   a. 900
   b. 30
   c. 300
   d. 10,000

19. Your neighbor argues that political parties are no longer important or useful. Which of his arguments listed below is false?
   a. Voters rely less on party identity than they did in the past.
   b. Ticket splitting is more common than in the past.
   c. Most Americans now vote as independents.
   d. None of the above statements are false.

20. There has been a transformation in the role of parties in recent elections, which is indicated by the fact that parties have
   a. become irrelevant to the election process.
   b. expanded their technical services for candidates.
   c. increased their control over the campaign process.
   d. lost control of local elections to PACs and professional consultants.

21. Despite the widespread belief that the two major parties are alike, more than ________ of the population identifies with either the Republicans or Democrats.
   a. 60 percent
   b. 90 percent
   c. 35 percent
   d. 40 percent

22. Which of the following functions is not performed by American political parties?
   a. organizing people into electoral coalitions
   b. developing statements of party goals and policy agendas
   c. recruiting candidates
   d. holding elections for government office

23. The influence and power of state party organizations
   a. vary from state to state.
   b. are consistently strong throughout the United States.
   c. are consistently weak throughout the United States.
   d. depend on the amount of power delegated to them from the national organizations.

24. Which of the following is not a reason that America has consistently had a two-party political system?
   a. winner-take-all elections
   b. a natural division of interests
   c. state election law
   d. constitutional prohibition

25. The trend in American political campaigns seems to be toward
   a. party-centered campaigns.
   b. candidate-centered campaigns.
   c. third-party-dominated campaigns.
   d. encouraging more straight-ticket voters.
26. One indicator of the myth of party irrelevance can be seen in the
   a. increase in the number of voters identifying themselves as independents.
   b. continued dominance of the Republican and Democratic parties.
   c. reforming of the electoral college to reflect proportional voting.
   d. increase in straight-ticket voting.
27. The lowest typical level of local party structure is called a
   a. precinct.
   b. ward.
   c. city.
   d. nation.
28. The Constitution made no mention of political parties because
   a. they were thought to be defined by state constitutions.
   b. it was assumed that they would function beyond the scope of the Constitution.
   c. many of the founders viewed them as dangerous.
   d. no compromise could be reached on the matter.
29. Which of the following is not considered by historians and political scientists to be a major party realignment?
   a. The election of Andrew Jackson in 1828
   b. The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860
   c. The election of Grover Cleveland in 1892
   d. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932
30. Which of the following is not true of American political parties?
   a. They require strict adherence to platform planks.
   b. They organize citizens into electoral coalitions.
   c. They develop policy positions.
   d. They work to win elections.

Essay Questions
1. What are the three parts of a political party that are referred to as the “three-headed political giant?” Describe the role that each of these “heads” fulfills.
2. What is the purpose of the major political parties in the United States? Describe what political parties do and what contributions they make to our political system.
3. Why has the two-party system persisted in the United States, and why do third parties have little success? Provide historical explanations and illustrations.
4. Why do people believe that political parties are no longer important or useful in American politics? Describe the evidence for the myth of party irrelevance and the evidence that suggests that the myth is a distortion of reality.
5. What are some disadvantages associated with multiparty parliamentary systems?
6. Do the recent electoral outcomes indicate that we are in a period of realignment?

ANSWER KEY

Reading Tables and Politics & Popular Culture
1. Economic problems top the list for each group.
2. There is not a single reported year where the Republican numbers were greater than the Democrats.
Identifying Key Terms and Ideas

1. s
2. h
3. n
4. i
5. r
6. j
7. m
8. o
9. q
10. f
11. a
12. p
13. e
14. d
15. k
16. g
17. c
18. b
19. l

Understanding Facts and Concepts

1. False. Political parties were disapproved of by the founders and were not mentioned in the Constitution. They emerged from natural political divisions in the early republic.
2. False. The parties are loosely organized, and state and local party organizations are very independent.
3. True.
4. True.
5. False. Although there has been a recent decline in the percentage of independents, the percentage rose until the 1980s.
6. True. A ward typically covers a larger area than a precinct.
7. True.
8. False. The parties are highly decentralized, with most decision-making coming from the state level.
10. False. Realignments take time to complete, and the Democratic victories in the 1992 and 1996 presidential races as well as the possibility of party dealignment suggest no realignment has yet taken place.

11. True.

12. False. Third parties have often brought national attention to important issues that were later incorporated into the programs of the major parties.

13. True.

14. False. Although local politics is nonpartisan in some areas, party organizations are increasingly active in election campaigns in other communities.

15. False. Third parties must demonstrate an ability to garner at least 5 percent of the popular vote.

16. True.

17. False. Partisan ballots do list the party affiliation of candidates. This label often serves as a cue when voting.

18. False. Platforms are not binding. They are taken seriously by most party candidates, but there is room for deviation.

19. True.

20. True.

21. True.

22. True.

23. True.

24. True.

25. True.

**Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. a

2. b

3. c

4. a

5. d

6. d

7. d

8. d

9. d

10. b

11. a

12. c

13. d
14. c  
15. b  
16. a  
17. d  
18. a  
19. c  
20. b  
21. a  
22. d  
23. a  
24. d  
25. b  
26. a  
27. b  
28. c  
29. c  
30. a

**Essay Questions**

1. The three “heads” are:
   - **Party-as-organization**
     A small membership group that works year-round to recruit candidates and engage in fundraising.
   - **Party-in-the-electorate**
     A coalition of everyone that agrees with the party and tends to vote for the party’s candidates.
   - **Party-in-government**
     Individuals elected or appointed to government office under a party label.

2. The value of the political parties includes the performance of the following functions:
   - Build electoral coalitions
   - Develop public policy
   - Win elections
   - Organize government in legislative and executive branches
   - Control conflict between groups and interests
3. Carefully explore all the reasons that the United States has a two-party system. Make sure you support your argument with specific examples.
   - Winner-take-all electoral system
   - Natural division of political interests
   - National consensus on the big issues
   - The regulation by the states and the parties of the state electoral system

4. Fully support your points as you compare the evidence for decline with the evidence for continued strength.
   - Decline
     - Decline in popular support
     - Disorganized and ineffective in organizing government
     - Battles within parties between moderates and extremes
     - Transformation of system from party-centered to candidate-centered campaigns
   - Continued strength
     - Differences in parties
     - Most people still identify with a party
     - Most people believe that parties can handle national problems
     - Important aspect of electoral decisions

5. There are three major arguments to highlight in response to critics who want a proportional model in the United States.
   - Unstable government coalitions
   - Party-based campaigns
   - Radical ideologies in government discourse

6. No clear alignment is evidenced yet.
   - The gap between the majority (Republicans) and minority (Democrats) in Congress is slim.
   - Realignments tend to take many years to produce a trend. More time is needed to assess this.
   - Dealignment?
   - Rise in the number of independents
   - Weak party identification among voters