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 the United States.
* 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 U.S. two-party system seems tailor-made for majoritarian democracy. Every election has two broad categories for voters to choose from, so 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 the lack of effective party discipline. That deficiency, in turn, is related to the decentralized structure of U.S. parties. In a sense, the United States has not 2 but 102 parties—2 national organizations and 2 major parties in each of the 50 states.

On the whole, Democrats and Republicans 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 U.S. 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 U.S. politics is dominated by two parties, third-party candidates are always striving to advance their agenda, even if it ruins a victory for the candidate of 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.
* C*oordinating 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 U.S. political process, but they are 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 as 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 elections. 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 U.S. party politics has been dominated by successive two-party systems, but minor parties—including bolter parties, 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.

U.S. election rules have supported the two-party system. Although candidates campaign for a popular vote in each state, the winner of the presidential race is decided in the electoral college. Even when one party wins a landslide presidential election, the loser can retain significant strength in other branches of the government. The federal structure also allows the loser party to retain strength in many of the fifty state governments. This makes it possible for the losing 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 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 in ideology. More Republicans than Democrats consider themselves 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. Both parties have and will spend huge sums of money on those things which they deem important.

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

caucuses

national convention

party platform

critical election

electoral realignment

two-party system

electoral dealignment

majority representation

proportional representation

party identification

national committee

party conference

congressional campaign committees

party machine

responsible party government

# 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 nonpresidential 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, 1831–2004* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press 2005). 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 chapter 7, 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>. Check in the documents section under Party Platforms.

Your text contains URLs for the websites of major and minor U.S. political parties. For information on contacting parties, try <http://www.politicalindex.com/sect8.htm>.

# 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 study 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](http://www.rccc.org/)> and <[http://www.nrsc.org](http://www.nrsc.org/)>, Democrats at <[http://www.democraticaction.org](http://www.dccc.org/)> and <[http://www.dscc.org](http://www.dscc.org/)>. There are some internships that are 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 provide information to voters about candidates.

b. Only political parties sponsor candidates for office under their party’s name.

c. Only political parties mobilize get-out-the-vote campaigns.

d. Only political parties represent identifiable interests.

e. Only political parties contribute funds to candidates.

3. Which of the following is *not* among the four most important functions of a political party?

a. raising money for candidates

b. structuring the voting choice

c. nominating candidates for office

d. proposing alternative government policies

e. coordinating actions of government officials

4. Which organization functions as the bridge between powers to coordinate policies?

a. congressional caucuses

b. interest groups

c. media outlets

d. political parties

e. presidential blue ribbon committees

5. Which of the following were the two earliest factions under British rule?

a. Federalists and Anti-Federalists

b. Republicans and Democrats

c. Tories and Loyalists

d. Democratic Republicans and Federalists

e. Tories and Whigs

6. What institution, instead of the popular vote, elects our president?

a. party primaries

b. Congress

c. Supreme Court

d. electoral college

e. interest groups

7. Why did the Whig Party ultimately fail?

a. slavery and sectionalism

b. rum, romanism, and rebellion

c. electoral dominance of the Democratic Party

d. 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. 1932

d. 1976

e. None of the above; all were critical elections.

9. What term refers to the statement of policies adopted by each party at their national convention?

a. caucus

b. party policies

c. party platform

d. conference confirmation

e. party coalition

10. What was Lyman Baum’s ultimate Populist message in the *Wizard of Oz*?

a. Government is just a pawn of the people.

b. The powers-that-be survive by deception.

c. Every man can make a difference.

d. The people are just pawns of the government.

e. There’s no place like home.

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. majoritarian model of democracy

b. 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. centralized national party organization

c. proportional representation

d. primacy principle

e. political socialization

14. Although everyone agrees that rural voters have become more Republican, the 1990s could also be described by

a. sudden electoral dealignment.

b. gradual process of realignment.

c. gradual growth of political identity.

d. sudden restriction on political partisanship.

e. none of the above.

15. Which of the following types of third parties rejects the prevailing doctrines and proposes radically different principles, which can favor government activism?

a. bolter party

b. single-issue party

c. farmer-labor party

d. electoral consignment party

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 is *not* considered a reason why people vote for a third party?

a. Third parties are policy advocates.

b. Third parties function as safety valves for the disgruntled.

c. Third parties allow voters to voice their discontent.

d. Third parties advocate for the majority.

e. None of the above; all are reasons people vote for third parties.

18. Imagine an election in which ten legislative seats are at stake. Party A receives 60 percent of the votes. Party B gets 30 percent of the votes. Party C tallies 10 percent of the votes. Thus, Party A is awarded six seats; Party B, three seats; and Party C, one seat. What is this an example of?

a. proportional representation

b. majority representation

c. electoral dealignment

d. reapportionment

e. realignment

19. What is the most distinguishing feature of U.S. political parties?

a. tight party discipline

b. clear ideological definition

c. absence of centralized power

d. hierarchical organization

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

21. Which of the following is *not* part of the national party organization?

a. national committee

b. national convention

c. congressional campaign committees

d. national steering campaign

e. congressional party conferences

22. During the 1970s, while Democrats concerned themselves with procedural reforms, Republicans were concerned with

a. congressional reforms.

b. organizational reforms.

c. ethical reforms.

d. moralistic reforms.

e. procedural reforms.

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. Voters choose candidates on the basis of party.

c. When in office, the winning party tries to carry out its program.

d. Voters hold the governing party responsible for executing its program.

e. Each party attempts to minimize its differences with other parties.

25. When people are asked about their political ideology, those who live on the East Coast tend to identify with

a. the Republican Party.

b. the Democratic Party.

c. the Independent Party.

d. the Libertarian party.

e. no answer.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the positive and negative aspects of third-party campaigns during national elections.

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

3. Discuss the differences between majority representation and proportional representation. Would the United States benefit from either? How would it change?

4. Discuss the different aspects of the national convention of the political parties 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. How was the Wizard of Oz reflective of America society in the early 1900s? Discuss the vague references and the ultimate message Baum was trying to convey.

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. d

2. b

3. a

4. d

5. e

6. d

7. a

8. d

9. c

10. b

11. c

12. a

13. e

14. b

15. e

16. c

17. d

18. a

19. c

20. a

21. d

22. b

23. a

24. e

25. b