



CHAPTER 9

Political Parties

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 9-1** Describe the roles of American political parties and how they differ from parties in other democracies.
- 9-2** Summarize the historical evolution of the party system in America.
- 9-3** Explain the major functions of political parties.
- 9-4** Explain how parties are organized in America.
- 9-5** Define partisan identification, and explain how it shapes the political behavior of ordinary Americans.
- 9-6** Summarize the arguments for why America has a two-party system.

political party A group that seeks to elect candidates to public office.

From 2006 through 2008, Democratic Party leaders had reason to smile. They won control of the House and the Senate in 2006, and then they achieved a unified government after Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election. But in 2010, the Democrats lost a seat (and their filibuster-proof majority, which we discuss in Chapter 13) in the Senate, after the Republican Party's upset victory in a special election in Massachusetts for the late Senator Ted Kennedy's seat. The Republican Party went on to regain control of the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2010 midterm elections, gaining more than 60 seats, and further reducing the Democratic majority in the Senate as well. Then, however, in 2012, President Obama won reelection, Republicans maintained control of the House, and Democrats kept control in the Senate, until they lost that chamber in 2014. The final two years of the Obama presidency have Republicans in control of both chambers of Congress while a Democrat is in the White House (paralleling Bill Clinton's experience after 1994).

What does the split in party control tell us about voter loyalties? Very little, actually. Party loyalty of voters remains about what it has been for many decades. For instance, at the time of the 2012 national elections, Gallup polls found that about 30 percent of voters self-identified as Republicans, a third as Independents, and 35 percent as Democrats. Digging slightly deeper, we find that many of those Independent voters actually lean toward one party or the other. In similar 2012 data, 42 percent of voters self-identified as "Republican" or "lean Republican" while 45 percent chose "Democrat" or "lean Democrat," leaving just 13 percent of the public as truly Independent of either party (we return to this point later in the chapter). The central fact is that party attachment explains much but not all of any election's results. Political parties must cope with economic conditions, personal popularity, crises in foreign policy, and various social issues. The attachment of voters to parties has waxed and waned over the past century, but the very existence and endurance of political parties in the United States is significant, given how the Framers of the Constitution opposed them.

THEN

The Founders disliked parties, thinking of them as "factions" motivated by ambition and self-interest. George Washington, dismayed by the quarreling between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson in his cabinet, devoted much of his Farewell Address to condemning parties. This hostility toward parties was understandable: the legitimacy and

success of the newly created federal government were still very much in doubt. When Jefferson organized his followers to oppose Hamilton's policies, it seemed to Hamilton and *his* followers that Jefferson was opposing not just a policy or a leader but also the very concept of a national government. Jefferson, for his part, thought Hamilton was not simply pursuing bad policies but was subverting the Constitution itself. Before political parties could become legitimate, it was necessary for people to separate in their minds quarrels over policies and elections from disputes over the legitimacy of the new government itself. The ability to make that distinction was slow in coming; thus, parties were objects of profound suspicion, at first defended only as temporary expedients.

NOW

American political parties are the oldest in the world, dating back to the first decade of the republic. Thirty years ago many claimed they were in decline, but today they have resurged in many ways. New parties and affiliated movements (like the Green Party launched in 2000 by consumer advocate Ralph Nader, or the Tea Party movement that developed after the 2008 presidential election) may come and go, but two parties, the Democratic and Republican, still dominate the country's campaigns and elections. Nor have party leaders been replaced by media consultants, pollsters, or others whose profession is raising money or devising strategies for whichever candidates bid highest for their services. What distinguishes political parties from other groups, and why are they a fundamental feature of American politics? This chapter aims to explain what parties are, what they do, and why they have remained such an important part of American politics for over 200 years.

9-1 What Is a Party?

A **political party** is a group that seeks to elect candidates to public office by supplying them with a label—a "party identification"—by which they are known to the electorate.¹ This definition is purposefully broad so that it will include both familiar parties (Democratic, Republican) and unfamiliar ones (Whig, Libertarian, Socialist Workers) and will cover periods in which a party is very strong (having an elaborate and well-disciplined organization that provides money and workers to its candidates) as well as periods in which it is quite weak (supplying nothing but the label to candidates).

Political scientists think of parties as having three parts. A party exists as an *organization* that recruits and campaigns for candidates, as a *label* in the minds of voters, and as a *set of leaders* who try to organize and control the legislative and executive branches of

government.² Parties help candidates get elected (by nominating and recruiting candidates, and then giving signals to voters about which candidates to support), and then organize and run government once they are in office.

First, parties recruit and support candidates in elections. Party leaders work to find potential candidates and recruit them to run for office, and then help them win the party's nomination. They then help these candidates raise money, conduct polls and focus groups, and develop advertisements to successfully win the general election as well.

Second, parties exist in the heads of voters. When Americans walk into a polling place, many of them identify as either a Democrat or a Republican. As we will see later in the chapter, this label—whether voters consider themselves Democrats or Republicans—powerfully shapes how they evaluate political leaders and how they vote in elections.

Third, parties also coordinate behavior among elite politicians in office. As we see in Chapter 13, the majority party in the House and the Senate has the responsibility of organizing the chamber. Furthermore, congressional parties also work with the president to try and implement his legislative agenda. Sometimes, the president and Congressional parties are in near-complete agreement on an issue, as when nearly all House Democrats supported—and all House Republicans opposed—final passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare.³ But at other times, the president and the party diverge greatly on what they want, as in the case of free trade, where President Obama supports more free trade agreements, but many congressional Democrats do not.⁴

In this chapter, we discuss the first two dimensions of party politics: how parties help elect candidates and how they shape the behavior of ordinary voters. We defer the third aspect of parties—parties as coordination devices among elected politicians—to later chapters (see especially Chapter 13 on Congress and Chapter 14 on the presidency).

What makes a party powerful? A powerful party is one whose label has a strong appeal for voters, whose organization can decide who will be candidates and how their campaigns will be managed, and whose leaders can dominate one or all branches of government. In the late 19th century, political parties in America reached their zenith in all three areas: voters were very loyal to their parties (largely because of patronage and other factors), party leaders dominated the Congress, and party bosses controlled who ran for office. In the 20th century, parties weakened considerably along all three dimensions. But in more recent decades, parties have regained some of their strength, though they are not as powerful as they were in

the 19th century. As we see throughout this chapter, the reason for the decay and resurgence of parties are deeply rooted in political factors.

Political Parties at Home and Abroad

While American parties have been weaker or stronger over time, in general, they have been weaker than parties in many other advanced industrialized democracies, especially parliamentary democracies. There are several important reasons for this disparity in power.

First, in many other systems, parties control access to the ballot. In the great majority of American states, the party leaders do not select people to run for office; by law, those people are chosen by the voters in primary elections. Though sometimes the party can influence who will win a primary contest, it is ultimately up to the voters to decide. In Europe, by contrast, there is no such thing as a primary election—the only way to become a candidate for office is to persuade party leaders to put your name on the ballot. This obviously gives party leaders much more sway over their members: if ordinary members get out of line, the party can threaten to remove their name from the ballot in the next election.

Second, in a parliamentary system, the legislative and executive branches are unified, rather than divided as they are in America. If an American political party wins control of Congress, it does not—as in most European nations with a parliamentary system of government—also win the right to select the chief executive of the government. The American president, as we have seen, is independently elected, and this means that the president will choose his or her principal subordinates not from among members of Congress but from among persons out of Congress. Should the president pick a representative or senator for his or her cabinet, the Constitution requires that person to resign from Congress in order to accept the job. Thus, an opportunity to be a cabinet secretary is not an important reward for members of Congress, and so the president cannot use the prospect of that reward as a way of controlling congressional action, as the prime minister could in a parliamentary system.

Third, the federal system of government in the United States decentralizes political authority and thus decentralizes political party organizations. For nearly two centuries, most of the important governmental decisions were made at the state and local levels—decisions regarding education, land use, business regulation, and public welfare—and thus it was at the state and local levels that the important struggles over power and policy occurred. Moreover, most people with political jobs—either elective or appointive—worked for state and local government, and thus a party's interest in obtaining these jobs for its followers meant it had to focus attention on who



Posters supporting parties in Israel's 2015 elections.

controlled city hall, the county courthouse, and the state capitol. While power has increasingly been concentrated in Washington, D.C., in recent decades, many important decisions are still made at the state and local level.

Federalism, in short, meant American political parties would acquire jobs and money from local sources and fight local contests. This, in turn, meant the national political parties would be coalitions of local parties, and though these coalitions would have a keen interest in capturing the presidency (with it, after all, went control of large numbers of federal jobs), the national party leaders rarely had as much power as the local ones. The Republican leader of Cuyahoga County, Ohio,

for example, could often ignore the decisions of the Republican national chair and even the Ohio state chair. All of these factors help to explain why American parties are (generally) weaker than parties in other nations.

9-2 The Rise and Decline of the Political Party

Our nation began without parties and, over time, their power has waxed and waned. Today, while parties are powerful in some respects, they are weaker in others. We can see this process in five broad periods of party history: (1) when political parties were created (roughly from the Founding to the 1820s); (2) when the more or less stable two-party system emerged (roughly from the time of President Andrew Jackson to the Civil War); (3) when parties developed a comprehensive organizational form and appeal (roughly from the Civil War to the 1930s); (4) when party “reform” began to alter the party system (beginning in the early 1900s but taking effect chiefly from the New Deal until the late 1960s); and (5) the period of polarization and resurgence (from the late 1960s through to today).

The Founding

The first organized political party in American history was made up of the followers of Thomas Jefferson, who, beginning in the 1790s, called themselves *Republicans* (hoping to suggest thereby that their opponents were secret monarchists).^{*} The followers of Alexander Hamilton kept the label *Federalist*, which once referred to all supporters of the new Constitution (hoping to imply that their opponents were “Antifederalists,” or enemies of the Constitution).

These early parties were loose caucuses of political notables in various localities, with New England strongly Federalist and much of the South passionately Republican. Jefferson and ally James Madison thought their Republican Party was a temporary arrangement designed to defeat John Adams, a Federalist, in his bid to succeed Washington in 1796. (Adams narrowly defeated Jefferson, who, under the system then in effect, became vice president because he had the second most electoral votes.) In 1800, Adams’s bid to succeed himself intensified party activity even more, but this time Jefferson won and the Republicans assumed office. The Federalists feared that Jefferson would dismantle the Constitution, but Jefferson adopted a conciliatory posture, saying in his inaugural address that “we are all Republicans, we are all

^{*}The Jeffersonian Republicans were not the party that today we call Republican. In fact, present-day Democrats consider Jefferson to be the founder of their party.



HOW WE COMPARE

How Many Political Parties?

The United States has two political parties in Congress. Other countries have fewer or more significant national parties:

- China, 1
- Russia, 4
- Canada, 5
- Germany, 6
- Mexico, 7
- Israel, 14
- Italy, 16 (more or less)
- France, 18
- Brazil, 30

Source: The CIA World Factbook, Political Parties and Leaders, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2118.html>, accessed February 2015.

Federalists.”⁵ It was not true, of course: the Federalists detested Jefferson, and some were planning to have New England secede from the Union. But it was good politics, expressive of the need that every president has to persuade the public that, despite partisan politics, the presidency exists to serve all the people.

So successful were the Republicans that the Federalists virtually ceased to exist as a party. Jefferson was reelected in 1804 with almost no opposition; Madison easily won two terms; James Monroe carried 16 out of 19 states in 1816 and was reelected without opposition in 1820. Political parties had seemingly disappeared, just as Jefferson had hoped. The parties that existed in these early years were essentially small groups of local notables. Political participation was limited, and nominations for most local offices were arranged rather casually.

The Jacksonians

What often is called the second party system emerged around 1824 with Andrew Jackson’s first run for the presidency and lasted until the Civil War became inevitable. Its distinctive feature was that political participation became a mass phenomenon. For one thing, the number of voters to be reached had become quite large. Only about 365,000 popular votes were cast in 1824. But as a result of laws that enlarged the number of people eligible to vote and an increase in the population, by 1828 well over a million votes were tallied. By 1840, the figure was well over 2 million. (In England at this time, there were only 650,000 eligible voters.) In addition, by 1832 presidential electors were selected by popular vote in virtually every state. (As late as 1816, electors were chosen by the state legislatures, rather than by the people, in about half the states.) Presidential politics had become a truly national,

genuinely popular activity; in many communities, election campaigns had become the principal public spectacle.

The party system of the Jacksonian era was built from the bottom up rather than from the top down, as it had been since the Founding. No change better illustrates this transformation than the abandonment of the system of having caucuses composed of members of Congress nominate presidential candidates. The caucus system was an effort to unite the legislative and executive branches by giving the former some degree of control over who would have a chance to capture the latter. The caucus system became unpopular when the caucus candidate for president in 1824 ran third in a field of four in the general election. It was completely discredited that same year when Congress denied the presidency to Jackson, the candidate with the greatest share of the popular vote.

To replace the caucus, the party convention was invented. The first convention in American history was held by the Anti-Masonic Party in 1831; the first convention of a major political party was held by the anti-Jackson Republicans later that year (it nominated Henry Clay for president). The Democrats held a convention in 1832 that ratified Jackson’s nomination for reelection and picked Martin Van Buren as his running mate. The first convention to select a man who would be elected president and who was not already the incumbent president was held by the Democrats in 1836; they chose Van Buren.

The Civil War and Sectionalism

Though the party system created in the Jacksonian period was the first truly national system, with Democrats (followers of Jackson) and Whigs (opponents of Jackson) fairly evenly balanced in most regions, it could not withstand the deep split in opinion created by the agitation over slavery. Both

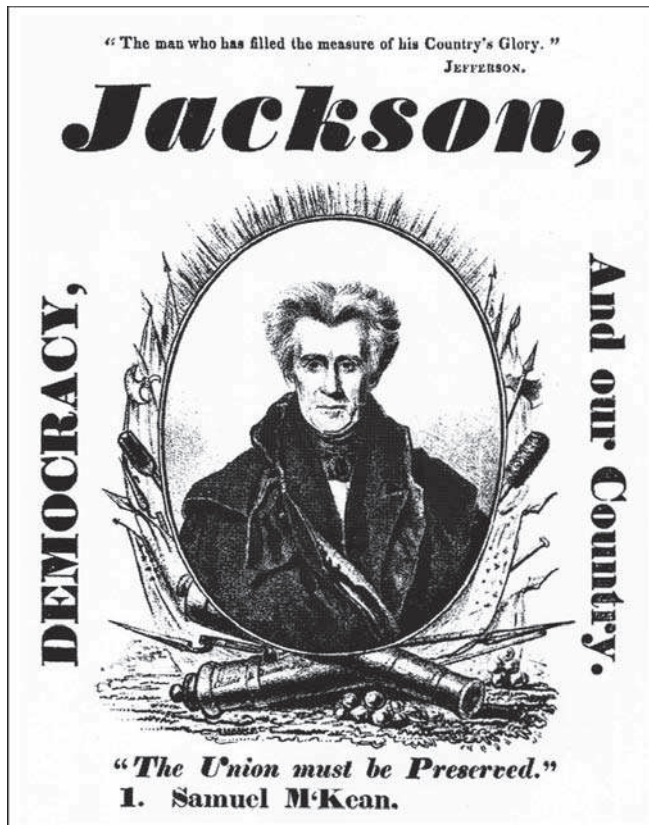


CONSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIONS

“The Spirit of Party”

Noted historian Richard Hofstadter wrote about the Constitution as “A Constitution against Parties.” That was the title Hofstadter gave to the second chapter of his 1969 book, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840*. For the republic’s first half-century, most national leaders did not accept the idea that parties were a necessary and desirable feature of American government. For example, near the end of his second term as president, George Washington wrote a letter that later became known as his “Farewell Address.” It reads in part:

Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally. This Spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. . . . The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge natural to party dissension . . . is itself a frightful despotism. . . . [The] common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and the duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.



Courtesy of The Tennessee Historical Society

When Andrew Jackson ran for president in 1828, more than a million votes were cast for the first time in American history. This poster, from the 1832 election, was part of the emergence of truly mass political participation.

mugwumps or **progressives**
Republican Party faction
of the 1890s to the 1910s,
composed of reformers who
opposed patronage.

parties tried, naturally, to straddle the issue, since neither wanted to divide its followers and thus lose the election to its rival. But slavery and sectionalism were issues

that could not be straddled. The old parties divided and new ones emerged. The modern Republican Party (not the old Democratic-Republican Party of Thomas Jefferson) began as a third party. As a result of the Civil War, it became a major party (the only third party ever to gain major-party status) and dominated national politics, with only occasional interruptions, for three-quarters of a century.

Republican control of the White House, and to a lesser extent Congress, was in large measure the result of two events that gave to Republicans a marked advantage in the competition for the loyalties of voters. The first of these was the Civil War. This bitter, searing crisis deeply polarized popular attitudes. Those who supported the Union side became Republicans for generations; those who supported the Confederacy, or who had opposed the war, became Democrats.

As it turned out, this partisan division was nearly even for a while: Though the Republicans usually won the presidency and the Senate, they often lost control of the House. There were many northern Democrats. In 1896, however, another event—the presidential candidacy of William Jennings Bryan—further strengthened the Republican Party. Bryan, a Democrat, alienated many voters in the populous northeastern states while attracting voters in the South and Midwest. The result was to confirm and deepen the split in the country, especially North versus South, begun by the Civil War. From 1896 to the 1930s, with rare exceptions, northern states were solidly Republican, southern ones solidly Democratic.

This split had a profound effect on the organization of political parties, for it meant that most states were now one-party states. As a result, competition for office at the state level had to go on *within* a single dominant party (the Republican Party in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and elsewhere; the Democratic Party in Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and elsewhere). Consequently, there emerged two major factions within each party, but especially within the Republican Party. One was composed of the party regulars—the professional politicians, the “stalwarts,” the Old Guard. They were preoccupied with building up the party machinery, developing party loyalty, and acquiring and dispensing patronage—jobs and other favors—for themselves and their faithful followers. Their great skills were in organization, negotiation, bargaining, and compromise; their great interest was in winning.

The other faction, variously called **mugwumps** or **progressives** (or “reformers”), was opposed to the heavy emphasis on patronage; disliked the party machinery because it permitted only bland candidates to rise to the top; was fearful of the heavy influx of immigrants into American cities and of the ability of the party regulars to organize them into “machines”; and wanted to see the party take unpopular positions on certain issues (such as free trade). Their great skills lay in the areas of advocacy and articulation; their great interest was in principle.

At first the mugwumps tried to play a balance-of-power role, sometimes siding with the Republican Party of which they were members, at other times defecting to the Democrats (as when they bolted the Republican Party to support Grover Cleveland, the Democratic nominee, in 1884). But later, as the Republican strength in the nation grew, progressives within that party became increasingly less able to play a balance-of-power role, especially at the state level. If the progressives were to have any power, they came to believe, it would require an attack on the very concept of partisanship itself.

The Era of Reform

Progressives began to espouse measures to curtail or even abolish political parties. They favored primary elections to replace nominating conventions because the latter were viewed as manipulated by party bosses; they favored nonpartisan elections at the city level and in some cases at the state level as well; they argued against corrupt alliances between parties and businesses. They wanted strict voter registration requirements that would reduce voting fraud (but would also, as it turned out, keep ordinary citizens who found the requirements cumbersome from voting); they pressed for civil service reform to eliminate patronage; and they made heavy use of the mass media as a way of attacking the abuses of partisanship and of promoting their own ideas and candidacies.

The progressives were more successful in some places than in others. In California, for example, progressives led by Governor Hiram Johnson in 1910–1911 were able to institute the direct primary and to adopt procedures—called the *initiative* and the *referendum*—so citizens could vote directly on proposed legislation, thereby bypassing the state legislature. Governor Robert La Follette brought about similar changes in Wisconsin.

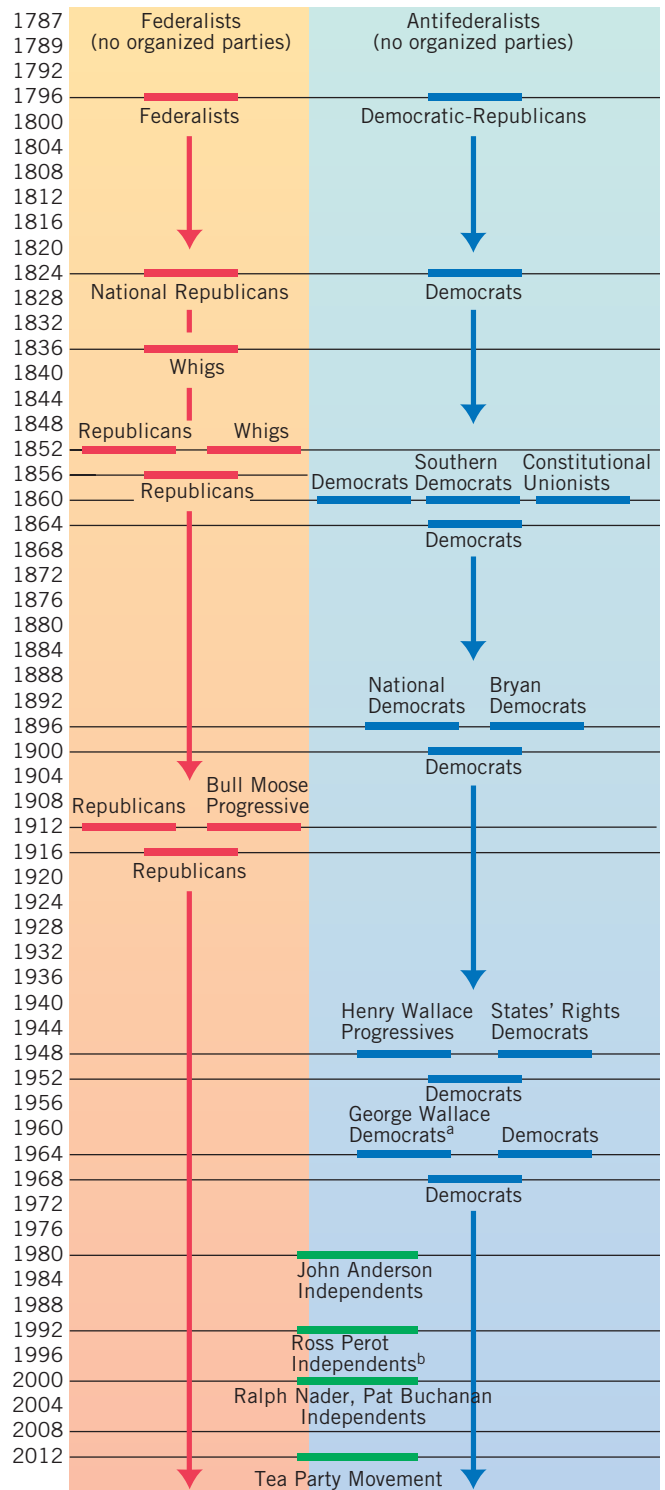
The effect of these changes was to reduce substantially the worst forms of political corruption and ultimately to make boss rule in politics difficult if not impossible. But they also had the effect of making political parties, whether led by bosses or by statesmen, weaker, less able to hold officeholders accountable, and less able to assemble the power necessary for governing the fragmented political institutions created by the Constitution. In Congress, party lines began to grow fainter, as did the power of congressional leadership. Above all, the progressives did not have an answer to the problem first faced by Jefferson: If there is not a strong political party, by what other means will candidates for office be found, recruited, and supported?

Polarization and Resurgence

By the mid to late 20th century, political parties reached their nadir in America. In Congress, levels of party voting were quite low, and congressional Democrats were divided into Northern and Southern wings, which disagreed vociferously on segregation and civil rights for African Americans. Parties as organizations were weakened by the progressive-era reforms discussed previously, and voters' attachments to their parties weakened as well (see Figure 9.2 later in the chapter). Elections came to be much more about the candidate than the party, with the candidate responsible for his or her own fate (in sharp contrast to earlier eras of strong parties). Many scholars argued that parties were in a state of decline.⁶

But slowly, this situation began to change. In the aftermath of major civil rights fights in Congress, segregation

FIGURE 9.1 Cleavages and Continuity in the Two-Party System



^aAmerican Independent Party.

^bUnited We Stand America or Reform Party.

was outlawed, and the parties began to gradually take their modern positions on race, with Democrats more supportive of government efforts to address racial inequalities, and Republicans less so. This helped to transform

the South—which had been solidly Democratic since the Civil War 100 years earlier—into a competitive, two-party region (and today, one that more strongly favors Republicans).⁷

At the same time, the parties began to diverge not just on race, but on a whole host of issues, taking more distinct stands on taxes, abortion, women's rights, and so forth. As we discuss later, this change was due in part to the increasing importance of activists: as the party machines died, they were replaced with issue activists motivated by positions on particular issues. This helped to drive apart the parties on the major issues of the day, and make ideology—rather than patronage—the glue that holds the parties together. Today, at the elite level, the parties are fairly

characterized as polarized, with Democrats on the left and Republicans on the right. We see this in Chapter 13 when we examine Congressional roll-call voting—Congressional elites today are nearly as divided as they were in the late 19th century. We also see this in the 2012 party platforms in Table 9.1: The parties sharply diverge on many key issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, health care, taxes, and Social Security privatization.

We also can see today's stronger parties reflected in the resurgent strength of parties as nominating bodies. In the era of party bosses, the party itself selected the nominee, but as we discussed above, the progressives dismantled this system and replaced it with a system of primary elections. The weakened state and local parties

TABLE 9.1 Party Platform Differences, 2012

Policy	Democratic Position	Republican Position
Abortion	"The Democratic Party strongly and unequivocally supports <i>Roe v. Wade</i> and a woman's right to make decisions regarding her pregnancy, including a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay. We oppose any and all efforts to weaken or undermine that right."	"We assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution and endorse legislation to make clear that the Fourteenth Amendment's protections apply to unborn children."
Gay marriage	"We support marriage equality and support the movement to secure equal treatment under law for same-sex couples."	"We believe that marriage, the union of one man and one woman, must be upheld as the national standard, a goal to stand for, encourage, and promote through laws governing marriage. . . . We reaffirm our support for a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman."
Social Security privatization	"We will block Republican efforts to subject Americans' guaranteed retirement income to the whims of the stock market through privatization."	We should "allow younger workers the option of creating their own personal investment accounts as supplements to the system."
Obamacare	"Mitt Romney and the Republican Party would repeal health reform . . . We will continue to stand up to Republicans working to take away the benefits and protections that are already helping millions of Americans every day. We refuse to go back to the days when health insurance companies had unchecked power to cancel your health policy, deny you coverage, or charge women more than men."	"Congressional Republicans are committed to its repeal; and a Republican President, on the first day in office, will use his legitimate waiver authority under that law to halt its progress and then will sign its repeal."
Gun Control	"We believe that the right to own firearms is subject to reasonable regulation. . . . We can work together to enact commonsense improvements—like reinstating the assault weapons ban and closing the gun show loophole—so that guns do not fall into the hands of those irresponsible, law-breaking few."	"We acknowledge, support, and defend the law-abiding citizen's God-given right of self-defense. . . . We oppose legislation that is intended to restrict our Second Amendment rights by limiting the capacity of clips or magazines or otherwise restoring the ill-considered Clinton gun ban."
Taxes	"We support allowing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest to expire and closing loopholes and deductions for the largest corporations and the highest-earning taxpayers. We are committed to reforming our tax code so that it is fairer and simpler, creating a tax code that lives up to the Buffett Rule so no millionaire pays a smaller share of his or her income in taxes than middle class families do."	Taxes, by their very nature, reduce a citizen's freedom . . . We propose to extend the 2001 and 2003 tax relief packages—commonly known as the Bush tax cuts."

Source: 2012 Democratic and Republican Party Platforms, archived at the American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

that followed from progressive reforms meant that members of Congress needed to develop their own personal organizations to win reelection. At the presidential level, a series of reforms (described below) similarly weakened the power of party bosses to select the nominee in the 1970s. But in the ensuing decades, parties have returned to become more important. Parties now help to shape the field of candidates and influence who wins.⁸ To be clear, party bosses can no longer pick candidates, and sometimes the candidate of the party elite loses—take Hillary Clinton in 2008, for example. But party leaders have reasserted themselves in the candidate selection process, as we will see below.

The rise of such polarized parties has lead some to bemoan this development and call for a weakening of parties. However, it is important to remember that stronger parties come with some benefits as well. In 1950, a committee of political scientists published a famous report arguing that we needed stronger parties to give voters clear and distinct policy alternatives.⁹ Today, we arguably have parties that can do this for voters, and as a result, it is easier for them to make such choices.¹⁰ But at the same time, such divided parties can generate gridlock and division. Polarized parties generate benefits, but they also come at a real cost as well.

Party Realignments

There have clearly been important turning points in the strength of the major parties, when we have had an alternation of dominance by one party and then the other. To help explain these major shifts in the tides of politics, scholars have developed the theory of **critical or realignment periods**. During such periods a sharp, lasting shift occurs in the popular coalition supporting one or both parties. The issues that separate the two parties change, and so the kinds of voters supporting each party change. This shift may occur at the time of the election or just after, as the new administration draws in new supporters.¹¹

There seem to have been five major realignments in American politics: 1800, when the Jeffersonian Republicans defeated the Federalists; 1828, when the Jacksonian Democrats came to power; 1860, when the Whig Party collapsed and the Republicans under Lincoln came to power; 1896, when the Republicans defeated William Jennings Bryan; and 1932, when the Democrats under Roosevelt came into office.

There are at least two kinds of realignments: one in which a major party is so badly defeated that it disappears and a new party emerges to take its place (this happened to the Federalists in 1800 and to the Whigs in 1856–1860), and another in which the two existing parties continue but voters shift their support from one to the other (this happened in 1896 and 1932).

The year 1860 offers a clear case of realignment. By 1860, the existing parties could no longer straddle the fence on the slavery issue. The Republican Party was formed in 1856 on the

basis of clear-cut opposition to slavery; the Democratic Party split in half in 1860, with one part (led by Stephen A. Douglas and based in the North) trying to waffle on the issue and the other (led by John C. Breckinridge and drawing its support from the South) categorically denying that any government had any right to outlaw slavery. The remnants of the Whig Party, renamed the Constitutional Union Party, tried to unite the nation by writing no platform at all, thus remaining silent on slavery. Lincoln and the antislavery Republicans won in 1860; Breckinridge and the pro-slavery Southern Democrats came in second. From that moment on, the two major political parties acquired different sources of support and stood (at least for a decade) for different principles. The parties that had tried to straddle the fence were eliminated. The Civil War fixed these new party loyalties deep in the popular mind, and the structure of party competition was set for nearly 40 years.

While such examples are still quite useful historically (and help to demarcate the different party systems in American politics), many scholars question the idea of realignment today.¹² They note that while parties have changed dramatically in recent decades, there is no single realigning election. Instead, the process has occurred gradually.¹³ Furthermore, it is not that one issue replaced another, but rather that the parties have been divided on multiple salient issues: abortion, gay rights, the size of the economy, and so on.¹⁴ Perhaps realignments described American politics at one time, but they no longer seem to apply today.

critical or realignment periods A period when a major, lasting shift occurs in the popular coalition supporting one or both parties.

9-3 The Functions of Political Parties

Previously, we saw that parties exist primarily to help elect particular candidates to office. To actually achieve this goal, parties need to recruit candidates to run for office, nominate them, and then work to help them get elected in the general election by appealing to voters. All three activities are vital for parties to actually hold power.

Recruiting Candidates

The first step to electing candidates to office is convincing them to run. In the last chapter, we saw that most people do not get involved in politics on their own: they need to

primary elections An election held to determine the nominee from a particular party.

closed primary a primary election where only registered party members may vote for the party's nominee.

open primary a primary election where all voters (regardless of party membership) may vote for the party's nominee.

Emanuel (then the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) worked for months to recruit good candidates to run for Congress. He held meetings with many members of Congress to enlist their help in identifying good potential candidates, and then asked them to make appeals to convince these candidates to run.¹⁶

Party leaders expend this effort to recruit candidates because the right candidates greatly increase the chances that their party wins close elections. Having the right candidate is not the only factor, but it is certainly an important factor. For example, some of those targeted by Emanuel in 2006 were military veterans who had served in Iraq. Given the lingering unhappiness with the War in Iraq, Democrats selected several Iraq War veterans to run as candidates, as these individuals could very credibly critique the president's military policy, and help overcome Republicans' traditional advantage on foreign policy and national security issues.¹⁷ In 2010, many felt Republicans could have captured the Senate, but they ran several poor-quality candidates (e.g., Todd Aiken in Missouri) that led to Democratic victories in races that initially favored Republicans. Remembering this, Republicans in 2014 worked hard to recruit much higher-quality candidates, and partially as a result, took back the Senate.¹⁸

While state and local parties run many of these efforts, as the example of Rahm Emanuel illustrates, the national parties are also increasingly involved in this process. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Republicans began to convert their national party into a well-financed, highly staffed organization devoted to finding and electing Republican candidates, especially to Congress. Money went to recruit and train Republican candidates, give them legal and financial advice, study issues and analyze voting trends, and conduct national advertising campaigns on behalf of the party as a whole. Shortly thereafter, Democrats followed suit, and also

be asked. Political candidates are no different: many of them did not think about running until someone asked them to consider doing so. Party leaders are typically the people doing the asking.¹⁵ Recruiting the right candidates is crucial to winning elections.

Party leaders often work tirelessly to recruit candidates. Before the 2006 election, Rahm

began having the national party work to recruit and train candidates.

Which candidates the parties recruit matters not just to who wins, but what happens to policy afterwards. For example, Nebraska had a long tradition of centrism and a lack of polarization in its state legislature; indeed, the legislature is officially nonpartisan. But in recent years, the chamber has polarized rapidly, as party leaders have recruited quite extreme candidates to run.¹⁹ So party leaders recruitment decisions shape policy in important ways.

Nominating Candidates

Once a party has recruited candidates, they need to decide which candidates will run under the party's label in the general election. Historically, parties did this via party caucuses and conventions (see the historical discussion above). But since the progressive era, most such nominations have occurred via **primary elections**.

There are two main types of primary elections: closed primaries and open primaries. In a **closed primary**, only registered members of a political party may vote to select the nominee. Before the primary, voters must register with either the Democratic or the Republican Party. When they go to the polls to vote in the primary, they are given the ballot only for their party. The primary is closed to those outside the party. In this sort of primary system, Independent voters (those who are not registered with either major party) typically do not get to vote in the primary election.

In contrast, in an **open primary**, voters do not need to declare their party affiliation prior to going to the polls (indeed, in some states with open primaries, voters do not declare a party affiliation when they register). Citizens can vote in the primary of either party, but they can only vote in one party's primary (i.e., you can vote in the Democratic or the Republican primary, but not the Democratic *and* the Republican primary). One concern with open primaries is that there can be crossover voting: Voters from one party can vote in the other party's primary, and this may affect the outcome. While such crossover voting does occur, however, it typically does not decide the election outcomes.²⁰

In recent years, some states have also experimented with the "top-two" primary election system. In these types of systems, all candidates compete on one primary election ballot, and the top two candidates—regardless of party—advance to the general election. So in this type of primary, a voter could vote for a Democrat for one office but a Republican for another, giving voters even more freedom than in an open primary. This system is used in California, Washington, and the Nebraska state legislature. A similar procedure is used in Louisiana: All candidates

appear on the same primary ballot, and if a candidate receives 50 percent of the vote, they are directly elected to the office. If not, there is a runoff election with the top two finishers.

Scholars of primary systems argue that two consequences flow from a state's choice of primary system. First, states with closed primaries tend to have stronger parties. The primary system is probably both a cause and an effect of the strength of the parties. Having strong parties means that the parties can mobilize in the state to prevent opening the primary process. A closed primary is also beneficial to party leaders: Because

voters register with a party, party leaders know which voters will be most receptive to their political messages. Unsurprisingly, many party leaders favor closed primaries for just this reason.

Second, many reformers argue that open or top-two primaries favor moderate candidates. They claim that because all voters—rather than just members of one party—vote in these primaries, candidates will adopt more centrist positions. While intuitively appealing, there is little empirical support for this claim. It seems that the types of voters who actually vote in open (or top-two) primaries is not much different than in closed primaries,

What Would You Do?

NEWS

Memorandum

To: Elizabeth Ramos, state senator

From: Isaac Marx, legislative assistant

Subject: Open vs. Closed Primary Elections

Some in your state have proposed changing the primary election from a closed primary (where only those registered with the party can vote in the primary) to an open primary (where all registered voters, regardless of party, could vote in the primary).

> Changing the Primary System?

State legislators are currently debating a measure to change the state's electoral system from a closed primary (where only registered party members can vote) to an open primary (where any registered voter can vote). Supporters claim this allows more voters a voice in the process and supports moderate candidates, but opponents claim this is unfair to party members, who should decide their party's nominee, and opens the possibility for mischief from party "raiding."

Arguments for:

1. An open primary lets all voters—not just party members—decide which candidates run in the general election.
2. By appealing to all voters, not just voters from one party, open primaries might produce more moderate candidates

Arguments against:

1. The party members themselves should decide who runs under the party's label in the general election.
2. Members of the other party can "raid" a party's primary to support the least appealing candidate, unfairly helping their own party.

Your decision

☐ Keep closed primary

☐ Support open primary

super-delegates Party leaders and elected officials who become delegates to the national convention without having to run in primaries or caucuses.

so the candidates they produce are not very different.²¹ Hence, the type of primary system (open vs. closed vs. top two) does not really affect candidate polarization.

Nominations via Convention

As we discussed above, in most places, nominations occur through primary elections (though a few places, such as Utah, do make some use of conventions). But there is one major election where the nomination occurs via a convention: the national conventions to nominate candidates for president.

The national committee selects the time and place of the next national convention and issues a “call” for the convention that sets forth the number of delegates each state and territory is to have and the rules under which delegates must be chosen. These delegates then select the party’s nominee at the convention.

There are two main types of delegates. First, there are the so-called pledged delegates. These are the delegates awarded through the presidential primaries and caucuses, with the understanding that they will support a particular candidate at the convention. So when you vote in a presidential primary or a caucus, you are actually voting for delegates pledged to one candidate or another. Each party has a formula for awarding delegates based on the results of the election: Democrats award delegates proportionately, Republicans use a mix of proportional representation and winner-take-all systems.

Each party has a given number of pledged delegates, and uses complex formulas to determine how many come from each state (and territory). For the Democrats, it takes into account the vote each state cast for Democratic candidates in past elections and the number of electoral votes of each state; for the Republicans, it takes into account the number of representatives in Congress and whether the state in past elections cast its electoral votes for the Republican presidential candidate and elected Republicans to the Senate, the House, and the governorship. Thus, the Democrats give extra delegates to large states, while the Republicans give extra ones to loyal states.

But pledged delegates are not the only type of delegates. Second, there are unpledged delegates, who are party leaders and elected officials not committed to vote for any particular candidates. Such delegates are often called “**super-delegates**.” To win the nomination, a candidate must have support in both camps, though super-delegates typically follow the lead of the pledged delegates. Super-delegates can be crucial, however, if the pledged delegate count is very close, as it was in 2008 between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Reformers designed this system to weaken the power of party bosses. If delegates chosen through primaries and caucuses largely elect the candidate, party bosses implicitly have less power. Previously, party leaders chose the nominees in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms. Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and Hubert Humphrey in 1968 won the Democratic presidential nominations without even entering a single primary—party bosses chose them. Reformers wanted to weaken the power of the party bosses, so both parties designed reforms to reshape how delegates were chosen in the 1970s and 1980s. These reforms were designed to give power to the people, rather than to party elites.

While these reforms did make the nomination process more democratic, they had an unintended consequence: they empowered activists. Candidates choose the people who will serve as their pledged delegates to the convention, and they often choose people who are active in local politics and will be loyal to that candidate. Many of these people are activists, who are deeply involved with particular issues. Their views are not like the views of ordinary voters. Since 1972, scholars have done extensive surveys of convention delegates, and they have uncovered a consistent pattern of results: Democratic delegates are more liberal than Democratic voters, and Republican delegates are more conservative than Republican voters. Activists, unlike ordinary voters, are deeply divided.

The fact that these activists are more polarized pushes candidates to take more polarized positions to win and maintain their support.²² By moving away from party bosses (who prioritize winning) to activists (who prioritize purity), the current system pushes candidates away from the center. While activists also want to nominate a candidate who is electable, they also want someone who takes the “right” position on the issues.

This creates a tension for party leaders: They too want a candidate who will excite activists, but they also want a candidate who can win in November. To avoid



Mitt Romney addresses the 2012 Republican convention.

nominating a candidate outside the mainstream, party leaders have worked to reassert themselves into the process. One way is by using super-delegates, which give party leaders and elected officials some say at the convention. Another is through the so-called invisible primary. Candidates who hope to win elected office, especially the presidency, must survive the **invisible primary**, the process of attracting key party and interest group figures to your camp.²³ The idea is that the key party elites—the elected officials in the party, the state and local party chairpersons, key interest group leaders, party fundraisers, senior staffers, and so forth—are trying to settle on which candidate they think will be the best nominee. They then tilt resources toward that person so they have an advantage in the actual primaries and caucuses. Those resources are certainly money, but they are also the best fundraisers and staffers, the key interest group leaders who will help supply volunteers, and so forth. So before activists get involved, party leaders have helped to narrow the field to candidates they support (and that they think can win).

Of course, we should be careful to push this argument too far: Elites play an important role in winnowing down the list of candidates, but what elites want is not always what happens. For instance, Hillary Clinton—the clear choice of many party insiders headed into 2008—was not the eventual nominee that year. This shows us that party leaders have an important say, but they have not become party bosses with the power to unilaterally select the candidate.

There is a certain irony here: Both parties reformed their system several decades ago to give power to ordinary people, yet the reforms have instead tended to empower party elites and issue activists. This is not the only time we will see a reform designed to do one thing actually result in another.

Helping Candidates Win Elections

Finally, once candidates have been recruited to run, and they have been nominated, the party has to help them win in the general election. First, parties help their candidates by giving them a party label. As we discuss shortly, voters overwhelmingly vote for the candidate who shares their party label: In recent years, more than 90% of Democratic (Republican) voters have supported the Democratic (Republican) nominee for president. This means that candidates typically can count on their party's supporters to vote for them if they show up to the polls.

But not all of a party's supporters get to the polls, however. The second factor parties do to help candidates win elections is engage in get-out-the-vote campaigns. In Chapter 8, we discussed the Obama campaign's groundbreaking efforts to mobilize volunteers to register and then turn out voters for President Obama. While



Democratic volunteers conduct a voter registration drive during the 2012 election.

other campaigns have not been as large or as sophisticated, conducting get-out-the-vote campaigns has become a key role played by parties and affiliated groups in recent years.

invisible primary process by which candidates try to attract the support of key party leaders before the election begins.

Third, parties also provide a variety of services to their candidates. One important service is the type of get-out-the-vote drive discussed above, but they also gather additional resources that they can share with candidates: lists of supporters (say, from the lists of those who declare a party affiliation to vote in a closed primary), polling and other public opinion data, campaign staffers, and so forth. Parties are in service to their candidates.

Given the escalating cost of campaigns, perhaps the most important resource campaigns can provide candidates is money. While there are rules limiting how much money a party can contribute directly to candidates (in federal elections, the national parties may only donate \$5,000 per candidate per election), these donations have value beyond the amount given. When a party gives a donation to a candidate, they are signaling to other donors—individuals, interest groups, political action committees (see Chapter 10), and so forth—that this is a high-quality candidate whom they should support. A donation from a party, while not much in dollar amounts, can be a powerful signal to other donors.²⁴

9-4 Parties as Organizations

Since political parties exist at the national, state, and local levels, you might suppose they are arranged like a big corporation, with a national board of directors giving orders to state managers who in turn direct the activities of rank-and-file workers at the county and city level. For better or for worse, that is not the case. The various levels

national convention

A meeting of party delegates held every four years.

national committee

Delegates who run party affairs between national conventions.

congressional campaign committee

A party committee in Congress that provides funds to members and would-be members.

national chair Day-to-day party manager elected by the national committee.

political machines A party organization that recruits members by dispensing patronage.

are independent of one another, and while they do coordinate for some activities, as we have seen, there is nothing like a top-down, hierarchical system in place.

The national Democratic and Republican Parties are structured quite similarly. In both parties, ultimate authority is in the hands of the **national convention** that meets every four years to nominate a presidential candidate. Between these conventions, party affairs are managed by a **national committee** made up of delegates from each

state and territory. In Congress, each party has a **congressional campaign committee** that helps members of Congress running for reelection or would-be members running for an open seat or challenging a candidate from the opposition party. The day-to-day work of the party is managed by a full-time, paid **national chair** elected by the committee.

Beneath them are the state parties, and then the local parties. In every state, a Democratic and a Republican state party is organized under state law. Each typically consists of a state central committee, below which are county committees and sometimes city, town, or even precinct committees. The members of these committees are chosen in a variety of ways—sometimes in primary elections, sometimes by conventions, sometimes by a building-block process whereby people elected to serve on precinct or town committees choose the members of county committees, who in turn choose state committee members.

The National Parties

The national parties main responsibility is to call the national party convention, which we discussed in detail previously. In between the convention, the national party primarily serves to represent the party in the media and to raise money. As mentioned, the party's fundraising apparatus is an important component of candidate success. And given changes in the political environment, parties now raise large sums of money. During the 2012 election cycle, the presidential candidates raised \$1.4 billion, but the parties raised \$1.6 billion.²⁵ Some of this party money is transferred to specific candidates, but other parts are distributed to state and local parties as well.

The resurgent strength of the national party has also strengthened state and local parties as well, a point we return to below.²⁶

State and Local Parties

One of the difficulties in writing about state and local parties is that there is not just one state party but 100 (one for each party in each of the 50 states), and there are literally thousands of local parties, and no two are exactly alike. Some states and locales have strong parties, while others are weak and more a party in name than anything else.

But regardless of the exact form of state and local parties, they have all undergone a fundamental change from earlier generations. Before, state and local parties were often **political machines** (see the earlier discussion of the historical evolution of the party system). Political machines are party organizations that recruit their members by the use of tangible incentives—money, political jobs, an opportunity to get favors from government—and are characterized by a high degree of leadership control over member activity. At one time, many local party organizations were machines, and the struggle over political jobs—patronage—was the chief concern of their members.

Such machines were long a core component of American party politics, especially in the 19th century. For example, the famous Tammany Hall machine in New York City famously wielded patronage as a powerful tool: During the 1870s, it was estimated that one out of every eight voters in New York City had a federal, state, or city job.²⁷ The federal bureaucracy was one important source of those jobs. The New York Customhouse alone employed thousands of people, virtually all of whom were replaced if their party lost the presidential election. The postal system was another source, and it was frankly recognized as such. When James N. Tyner became postmaster general in 1876, he was “appointed not to see that the mails were carried, but to see that Indiana was carried.”²⁸ Elections and conventions were so frequent and the intensity of party competition so great that being a party worker was for many a full-time paid occupation.

Well before the arrival of vast numbers of poor immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and elsewhere, old-stock Americans had perfected the machine, run up the cost of government, and systematized voting fraud. Kickbacks on contracts, payments extracted from officeholders, and funds raised from businesspeople made some politicians rich but also paid the huge bills of the elaborate party organization. When the immigrants began flooding the eastern cities, the party machines were there to provide them with all manner of services in exchange for their support at the polls: the machines were a vast welfare organization operating before the creation of the welfare state.

The abuses of the machine were well known and gradually curtailed. Stricter voter registration laws reduced



Ex-Senator George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall explains machine politics from atop the bootblack stand in front of the New York County Courthouse around 1905.

fraud, civil service reforms cut down the number of patronage jobs, and competitive bidding laws made it harder to award overpriced contracts to favored businesses. The Hatch Act (passed by Congress in 1939) made it illegal for federal civil service employees to take an active part in political management or political campaigns by serving as party officers, soliciting campaign funds, running for partisan office, working in a partisan campaign, endorsing partisan candidates, taking voters to the polls, counting ballots, circulating nominating petitions, or being delegates to a party convention. (They may still vote and make campaign contributions.)

These restrictions gradually took federal employees out of machine politics, but they did not end the machines. In many cities—Chicago, Philadelphia, and Albany—ways were found to maintain the machines even though city employees were technically under the civil service. Far more important than the various progressive reforms that weakened the machines were changes among voters. As voters grew in education, income, and sophistication, they depended less and less on the advice and leadership of local party officials. And as the federal government created a bureaucratic welfare system, the parties' welfare systems declined in value.

It is easy either to scorn the political party machine as a venal and self-serving organization or to romanticize it as an informal welfare system. In truth, it was a little of both. Above all, it was a frank recognition of the fact that politics requires organization; the machine was the supreme expression of the value of organization. Even allowing for voting fraud, in elections where party machines were active, voter turnout was huge: More people participated in politics when mobilized by a party machine than when appealed to via television or good-government associations.²⁹

By the mid-1980s, the traditional party organization (one based on machine-style politics with strong,

hierarchical organization) existed in only a few places.³⁰ In the intervening years, even those have largely died out, though vestiges survive in a few places, such as the Democratic machine in Cook County, Illinois (Chicago), or the Republican machine in Nassau County, New York.

Today, most state and local parties take a far different form. Without the staffing of the machines, they have come to be dominated by intense policy demanders, particularly those from social movements such as civil rights, peace, feminism, environmentalism, libertarianism, abortion, and so forth. The result is that in many places, the party has become a collection of people drawn from various social movements.³¹ For a candidate to win the party's support, he or she often has to satisfy the "litmus test" demands of the ideological activists in the party. Democratic senator Barbara Mikulski put it this way: "The social movements are now our farm clubs." People who feel intensely about particular issues have replaced machines in most places.

In the years following the decline of the machine parties, many argued that state and local parties were effectively dead, and could exert little influence. Yet more recent research suggests that today's parties are actually quite effective and powerful, albeit not to the same extent as political machines of the previous era. This is largely due to the influence of money. As the national parties have become more adept at fundraising, they (and their donors) have channeled money to state parties to help boost state parties, and state parties themselves have become more adept fundraisers (and as we discuss in the next chapter, recent campaign finance rule changes have helped to make this shift possible).³² States and local parties have used this increased money to build stronger infrastructures and provide more services to candidates.³³ As a result, today's state and local parties have become important political players.

partisan identification a voter's long-term, stable attachment to one of the political parties.

partisanship another name for partisan identity.

9-5 Parties in the Electorate: Partisanship

Above, we saw how parties are organized, how they recruit candidates, and so forth. Going back to our three-part categorization of parties from the beginning of the chapter, this described parties as organizations. But parties also exist as powerful symbols in the minds of voters. Voters have a **partisan identification**: a stable, long-term attachment to a political party (this is sometimes also called a voter's **partisanship**).



POLICY DYNAMICS: INSIDE/OUTSIDE THE BOX

The Auto Industry Bailout: Party-Based Client Politics?

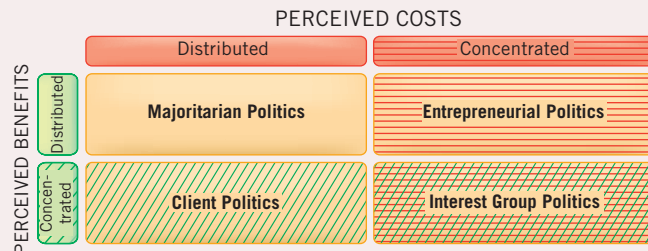
Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors are known as the “Big Three” American auto companies. When the Big Three ran into big financial trouble in 2008, they asked the federal government for billions of dollars in loans. Most Americans opposed the bailout, but the majorities against helping the auto industry were not as wide as those against bailing out the “too big to fail” banks, insurance companies, and investment firms.

Reactions to various auto industry bailout bills broke down along party lines. Most “Big Three” blue-collar employees have been represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW), a labor union that has favored Democrats. Many Republican leaders, and most self-identified GOP voters, opposed any auto industry bailout by Washington. Instead, they favored having the Big Three enter bankruptcy proceedings. By contrast, many Democratic leaders, and most self-identified Democratic voters, favored the federal government loaning money to the “Big Three” to tide them over provided that executive bonuses were curtailed, and that taxpayers, functioning as shareholders, were paid back fully once the economy recovered and car sales improved.

But the pro-bailout policy had one supremely important Republican ally: President George W. Bush. Several top Republicans in Congress insisted that any bailout would cost taxpayers billions and benefit “the unions” without

either saving the industry or benefitting most consumers. Rejecting such claims, in 2008 Bush directed that \$17.4 billion from the anti-recession Troubled Asset Relief Program go to bail out Chrysler and General Motors; and, in December 2008, he supported various bills in Congress that succeeded his own initial plan.

In 2009, President Barack Obama, a Democrat, made \$60 billion more available to the companies. In the end, the companies ended up repaying much of what the government loaned them, though the bailout did cost the public about \$12.3 billion. Public opinion toward the bailout remained starkly different by party: While 63% of Democrats approved of the bailout, only 25% of Republicans did.



Sources: ProPublica, “Failed Bailout Investments,” <http://projects.propublica.org/bailout/list/losses>, accessed February 2015); Gallup, “Republicans, Democrats Differ Over U.S. Automaker Bailout,” February 2012.

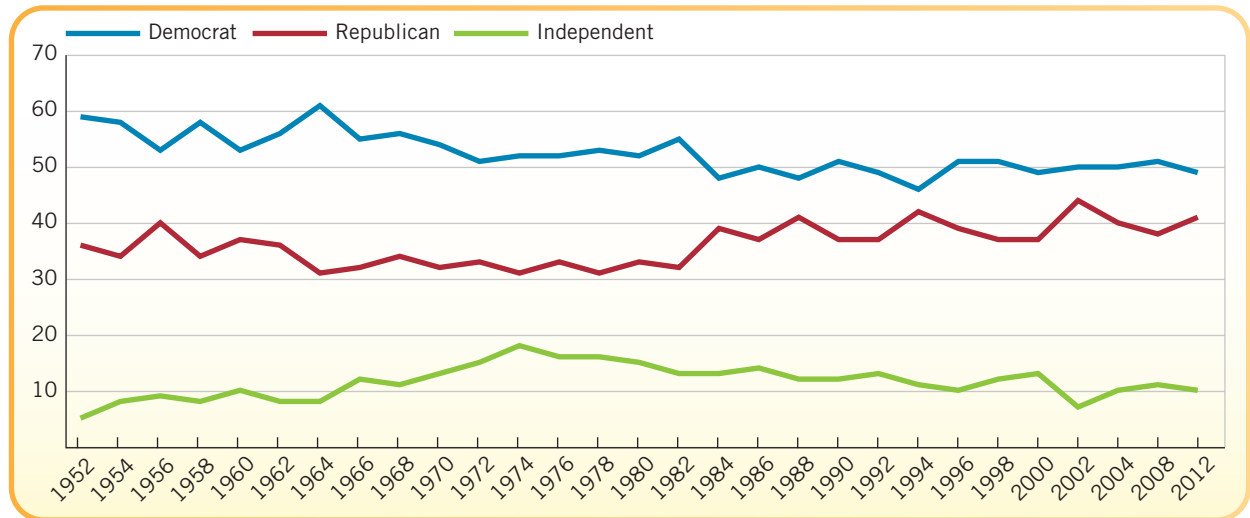
As we discussed in Chapter 7, two major factors help explain who is a Democrat and who is a Republican: parents’ partisanship, and the political environment as one comes of age politically (refer back to the discussion of socialization in Chapter 7). First, a voter’s partisanship is heavily influenced by her parents’ partisanship: Parents who are Republicans (typically) have children who are Republicans.³⁴ Second, the political environment as one comes of age politically also powerfully shapes one’s partisanship: Voters who came of age under Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush are more Republican than those who first experienced politics under Bill Clinton. Such partisanship is remarkably stable: Voters who were Democratic at age 18 tend to be Democratic at age 75, despite all that happened in between.³⁵ Partisanship is akin to being part of a like-minded group or political team.³⁶

Of course, to say that partisanship is stable is not to say that it never changes. Partisanship is a stable identity, but in response to major events, it can—and does—change.³⁷ In response to the economic boom of the 1990s, voters moved toward the Democratic Party. In

response to the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing focus on terrorism and national security—two issues where voters think Republicans are more competent than Democrats—more voters identified as Republicans.³⁸ More recently, in the wake of the economic downturn and the unpopular war in Iraq, Americans moved away from the Republican Party after 2004.

If we look at the distribution of partisanship in the electorate over time, we see this same pattern: underlying stability with changes in response to major events. Figure 9.2 shows the rise and fall of partisan identification from the 1950s to today.

Several patterns stand out. First, in the 1950s, the Democrats had a substantial partisan advantage over Republicans: While almost 60 percent of the population identified as Democrats, only about 40 percent identified as Republicans. Over time, as the party coalitions shifted, that edged has declined sharply. Today, that gap in identification is only about 10 percentage points, about half of what it was some 60 years ago. There are many reasons for this shift, but perhaps the most important one is the

FIGURE 9.2 Voters' Partisanship, 1952–2012

Source: ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, 1952–2008; 2012 provided by author's analysis of NES Cumulative Data File, 1952–2012.

decline of the solid South. In the 1950s, nearly all white Southerners would have identified as Democrats (as they'd done since the Civil War, see the historical discussion above). As the parties moved apart on the issues, most notably civil rights, white Southerners gradually became Republicans.³⁹

Second, and more strikingly, is the relatively modest number of Independents. In the popular press, we hear reports of how Independents are the largest group in the electorate, making up sometimes as much as 40 percent of Americans.⁴⁰ However, in Figure 9.2 there are considerably fewer Independents, and their numbers have declined from their high of approximately 20 percent in the early 1970s (they have stabilized in recent years around 10 percent of the public).

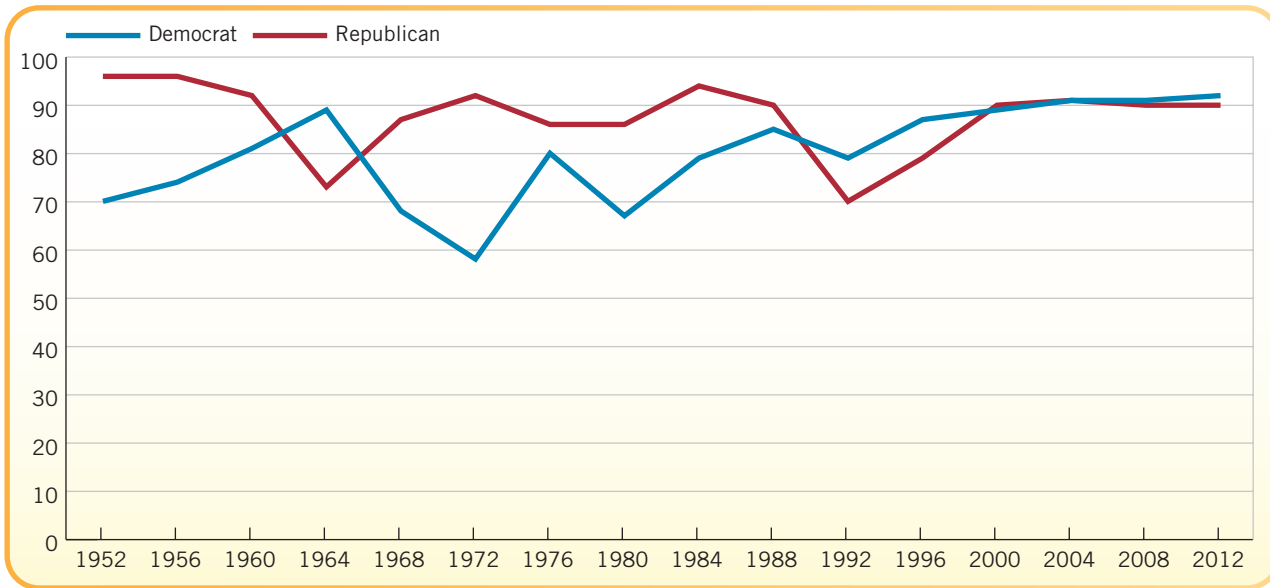
What explains this difference? Here, we have grouped so-called Independent “leaners” in with the parties. When political scientists (and most major polling firms) ask someone about their partisanship, they first ask them if they are a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent. If they identify as an Independent, they are asked whether they lean toward the Democratic or Republican parties. It turns out that almost all Independents lean toward one party or the other. In 2012, 44 percent of Americans initially identified as Independents. But when we asked them the follow-up leaner item, 16 percent leaned toward the Democrats, 18 percent leaned toward the Republicans, and the remaining 10 leaned toward neither party. Most Independents actually are closer to one party or the other.

Why do we group such leaners with partisans? When political scientists study their behavior, these Independent leaners look a great deal like partisans in attitudes and vote choice.⁴¹ If they look and act so

much like partisans, why do Independent leaners call themselves Independent? For many, calling oneself an “Independent” seems to signal that they are moderate and not beholden to a particular party (even if they consistently vote for one party or the other). It reflects the positive valence of the word “Independent” as much as anything about their political beliefs.⁴² It turns out that most Independents aren't really that Independent, so here we treat them as partisans.

If this partisanship was only a label that voters applied to themselves, but it did not affect their behavior, we would not need to worry ourselves with it. But as political scientists have shown, a voter's partisanship powerfully shapes their attitudes and behavior. As we saw in Chapter 7, partisanship has a powerful effect on one's opinions. This same power extends to vote choice as well. In Figure 9.3, we see that in recent years, partisanship has become an extremely powerful predictor of vote choice for president. For simplicity, we only put presidential vote here, but other votes—for Congress, governor, state legislator, and so on—would follow very similar patterns as well.

Until the 1990s, Republican voters were more loyal than Democratic ones, sometimes considerably more loyal. But since the 1990s, both parties have been (roughly) equally loyal to their party's presidential nominee, and today, party voting hovers around 90 percent; that is, about 90 percent of Democrats support the Democratic nominee, and about 90 percent of Republicans support the Republican nominee for president (again, party loyalty levels for other offices would be similar). As we see in Chapter 10, other factors (such as the economy, issues, etc.) also shape vote choice, but partisanship is the dominant factor.⁴³

FIGURE 9.3 Party Voting in Presidential Elections, 1952–2012

Source: Author's analysis of NES Cumulative Data File, 1952–2012.

Partisanship also colors how partisans evaluate the political world. In one very clever experiment, researchers asked Democrats and Republicans for their opinion about the economy just before and just after the 2006 elections (in the 2006 elections, Democrats took control of Congress from the Republicans). Before the elections, Republicans were optimistic about the economy, and Democrats pessimistic. After the election, just a few weeks later, the situation was reversed: Republicans were the pessimistic ones, whereas Democrats were more bullish. However, in that brief period, the underlying economy barely changed at all, except for which party was in power.⁴⁴ Similarly, in 2006, during the bird flu scare, Republicans were much more confident than Democrats that the government could respond appropriately to the issue. But in 2014 during the Ebola scare, it was Democrats who had greater confidence in the government to respond appropriately.⁴⁵ The difference between 2006 and 2014 was the party of the president: Republicans trusted the government with a Republican in the oval office, and Democrats did the same when their party was in power. The same is true of trust in government more generally: We trust the government to do what is right when “our” party is in power, but not when the opposing party is in power.⁴⁶ Partisans see the world through partisan-colored lenses.

This partisan slant in interpreting the political world is most obvious in how Democrats and Republicans evaluate objective facts. In 1988, at the end of the Reagan presidency, researchers asked voters if the unemployment rate and the inflation rate had gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same while Reagan was

in office. During Reagan’s tenure, unemployment had gone from a high of 9.7 percent in 1982 to 5.5 percent when he left office,⁴⁷ and inflation fell from 13.5 in 1980 to 4 percent in 1988.⁴⁸ Clearly, both inflation and unemployment got better during Reagan’s tenure in office. While only about 25% of strong Democrats said inflation had gotten “much better” or “somewhat better,” about 70% of Republicans said that was the case (with similar results on unemployment). Almost as many strong Democrats said inflation got “much worse” as said it got “much better” or “somewhat better,” despite the clear improvement in the actual inflation rate. In 2000, at the end of the Clinton presidency, researchers repeated a similar exercise, asking about the budget deficit and crime rate (both of which had fallen sharply since Clinton took office). Here, we see the same pattern of partisan bias, but in the opposite direction: Democrats were accurate, Republicans were not.⁴⁹ Some interpret these sorts of patterns to mean that ordinary voters are stupid, but this is not correct. Instead, it is correct to say that such patterns reflect partisans’ engagement with the political world: They see important differences between the parties and are engaged in the process. They cheer when their side wins, and weep when it loses. Parties powerfully shape how ordinary Americans interpret the political world.

9-6 The Two-Party System

So far, we have seen how the U.S. political parties function, and how they differ from political parties elsewhere. But we have not really touched on the most striking difference between the United States and the rest of the

world: America has a two-party system, while most other democracies have multiple parties. In the world at large a **two-party system** is a rarity; by one estimate fewer than 30 nations have one.⁵⁰ Most European democracies are multiparty systems. We have only two parties with any chance of winning nationally, and these parties have been, over time, rather evenly balanced—between 1888 and 2012, the Republicans won 17 presidential elections and the Democrats 15. Furthermore, whenever one party has achieved a temporary ascendancy and its rival has been pronounced dead (as were the Democrats in the first third of the 20th century and the Republicans during the 1930s and the 1960s), the “dead” party has displayed remarkable powers of recuperation, coming back to win important victories.

At the state and congressional district levels, however, the parties are not evenly balanced. For a long time, the South was so heavily Democratic at all levels of government as to be a one-party area, while upper New England and the Dakotas were strongly Republican. All regions are more competitive today than once was the case.⁵¹

Scholars do not entirely agree on why the two-party system should be so permanent a feature of American political life, but two explanations are of major importance. The first has to do with the system of elections, the second with the distribution of public opinion.

Elections at every level of government are based on the plurality, winner-take-all method. The **plurality system** means that in all elections for representative, senator, governor, or president, and in almost all elections for state legislator, mayor, or city councilor, the winner gets the *most* votes, even if he or she does not get a *majority* of all votes cast. We are so familiar with this system that we sometimes forget there are other ways of running an election. For example, one could require that the winner get a majority of the votes, thus producing runoff elections if nobody got a majority on the first try. France does this in choosing its national legislature. In the first election, candidates for parliament who win an absolute majority of the votes cast are declared elected. A week later, remaining candidates who received at least one-eighth, but less than one-half of the vote go into a runoff election; those who then win an absolute majority are also declared elected.

The French method encourages many political parties to form, each hoping to win at least one-eighth of the vote in the first election and then to enter into an alliance with its ideologically nearest rival in order to win the runoff. In the United States, the plurality system means that a party must make all the alliances it can before the first election—there is no second chance. Hence, every party must be as broadly based as possible; a narrow, minor party has no hope of winning.

The winner-take-all feature of American elections has the same effect. Only one member of Congress is elected from each district. In many European countries, the elections are based on proportional representation. Each party submits a list of candidates for parliament, ranked in order of preference by the party leaders, and then the nation votes. A

party winning 37 percent of the vote gets 37 percent of the seats in parliament; a party winning 2 percent of the vote gets 2 percent of the seats. Since even the smallest parties have a chance of winning something, minor parties have an incentive to organize.

The most dramatic example of the winner-take-all principle is the electoral college (see Chapter 14). In every state but Maine and Nebraska, the candidate who wins the most popular votes in a state wins *all* of that state's electoral votes. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton won only 45 percent of the popular vote in Missouri, but he got all of Missouri's 11 electoral votes because his two rivals (George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot) each got fewer popular votes. Minor parties cannot compete under this system. Voters often are reluctant to “waste” their votes on a minor-party candidate who cannot win.

The presidency is the great prize of American politics; to win it, you must form a party with as broad appeal as possible. As a practical matter, this means there will be, in most cases, only two serious parties—one made up of those who support the party already in power, and the other made up of everybody else. Only one third party ever won the presidency—the Republican Party in 1860—and it had by then pretty much supplanted the Whig Party. No third party is likely to win, or even come close to winning, the presidency anytime soon.

The second explanation for the persistence of the two-party system is found in the opinions of the voters. National surveys have found that most Americans see “a difference in what Democratic and Republican parties stand for.” This percentage has increased in recent years as the parties have moved apart ideologically.⁵² The public sees the two parties as having different platforms and issues, with different policy specialties. For the most part, the majority has deemed Democrats better at handling such issues as poverty, the environment, and health care and the Republicans better at handling such issues as national defense,

two-party system An electoral system with two dominant parties that compete in national elections.

plurality system An electoral system in which the winner is the person who gets the most votes, even if he or she does not receive a majority; used in almost all American elections.

foreign trade, and crime; but voters generally have split on which party is best at handling the economy and taxes.⁵³

As we learned in Chapter 7, however, public opinion is often dynamic, not static. Mass perceptions concerning the parties are no exception. As voters see the parties handle the issues, they change their opinion about which party would do a better job with the issue. For instance, by 2004, a few years after President George W. Bush passed his No Child Left Behind education plan, Republicans cut into the Democrats' traditional edge concerning which party does better on public schools. After 2004, as the war in Iraq became unpopular, Republicans lost ground to Democrats on national defense. And on certain complicated or controversial issues, such as immigration policy, opinions can shift rapidly in response to real or perceived changes in policy by those the public views as each party's respective leaders or spokespersons.

While there have been periods of division in American politics, citizens still come together under the umbrella of the two major parties. There has not been a massive and persistent body of opinion that has rejected the prevailing economic system (and thus we have not had a Marxist party with mass appeal); there has not been in our history an aristocracy or monarchy (and thus there has been no party that has sought to restore aristocrats or monarchs to power). Churches and religion have almost always been regarded as matters of private choice that lie outside politics (and thus there has not been a party seeking to create or abolish special government privileges for one church or another). In some European nations, the organization of the economy, the prerogatives of the monarchy, and the role of the church have been major issues with long and bloody histories. In these countries, these issues have been so divisive that they have helped prevent the formation of broad coalition parties.

But Americans have had other deep divisions—between white and black, for example, and between North and South—and yet the two-party system has endured. This suggests that our electoral procedures are of great importance—the winner-take-all, plurality election rules have made it useless for anyone to attempt to create an all-white or an all-black national party except as an act of momentary defiance or in the hope of taking enough votes away from the two major parties to force the presidential election into the House of Representatives. (That may have been George Wallace's strategy in 1968.)

For many years, there was an additional reason for the two-party system: The laws of many states made it difficult, if not impossible, for third parties to get on the

ballot. In 1968, for example, the American Independent Party of George Wallace found that it would have to collect 433,000 signatures (15 percent of the votes cast in the last statewide election) in order to get on the presidential ballot in Ohio. Wallace took the issue to the Supreme Court, which ruled, six to three, that such a restriction was an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.⁵⁴ Wallace got on the ballot. In 1980, John Anderson, running as an Independent, was able to get on the ballot in all 50 states; in 1992, Ross Perot did the same. But for the reasons already indicated, the two-party system will probably persist even without the aid of legal restrictions.

Minor Parties

The electoral system may prevent minor parties from winning, but it does not prevent them from forming. Minor parties—usually called, erroneously, “third parties”—have been a permanent feature of American political life. Four major kinds of minor parties, with examples of each, are described in the box on page 209.

The minor parties that have endured are the ideological ones. Their members feel outside the mainstream of American political life and sometimes, as in the case of various Marxist parties, look forward to a time when a revolution or some other dramatic change in the political system will vindicate them. They usually are not interested in immediate electoral success and thus persist despite their poor showing at the polls. One such party, however, the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs, won nearly 6 percent of the popular vote in the 1912 presidential election. During its heyday, 1,200 candidates were elected to local offices, including 79 mayors. Part of the Socialist appeal arose from its opposition to municipal corruption, its opposition to American entry into World War I, and its critique of American society. No ideological party has ever carried a state in a presidential election.

Apart from the Republicans, who quickly became a major party, the only minor parties to carry states and thus win electoral votes were one party of economic protest (the Populists, who carried five states in 1892) and several factional parties (most recently, the States' Rights Democrats in 1948 and the American Independent Party of George Wallace in 1968). Though factional parties may hope to cause the defeat of the party from which they split, they have not always been able to achieve this. Harry Truman was elected in 1948 despite the defections of both the leftist progressives, led by Henry Wallace, and the right-wing Dixiecrats, led by J. Strom Thurmond. In 1968, it seems likely that Hubert Humphrey would have lost even if George Wallace had not been in the race

(Wallace voters would probably have switched to Nixon rather than to Humphrey, though of course one cannot be certain). It is quite possible, on the other hand, that a Republican might have beaten Woodrow Wilson in 1912 if the Republican Party had not split in two (the regulars supporting William Howard Taft, the progressives supporting Theodore Roosevelt).

What is striking is not that we have had so many minor parties but that we have not had more. There have been several major political movements that did not produce a significant third party: the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the antiwar movement of the same decade, and, most important, the labor movement of the 20th century. African Americans were part of the Republican Party after the Civil War and part of the Democratic Party after the New Deal (even though the southern wing of

that party for a long time kept them from voting). The antiwar movement found candidates with whom it could identify within the Democratic Party (Eugene McCarthy, Robert F. Kennedy, George McGovern), even though it was a Democratic president, Lyndon B. Johnson, who was chiefly responsible for the U.S. commitment in Vietnam. After Johnson only narrowly won the 1968 New Hampshire primary, he withdrew from the race. Unions have not tried to create a labor party—indeed, they were for a long time opposed to almost any kind of national political activity. Since labor became a major political force in the 1930s, the largest industrial unions have been content to operate as a part (a very large part) of the Democratic Party.

One reason some potential sources of minor parties never formed such parties, in addition to the dim chance



HOW THINGS WORK

Types of Minor Parties

1. **Ideological parties:** Parties professing a comprehensive view of American society and government radically different from the established parties. Most have been Marxist in outlook, but some are quite the opposite, such as the Libertarian Party.

Examples:

Socialist Party (1901 to 1960s)

Socialist Labor Party (1888 to present)

Socialist Workers Party (1938 to present)

Communist Party (1920s to present)

Libertarian Party (1972 to present)

Green Party (1984 to present)

2. **One-issue parties:** Parties seeking a single policy, usually revealed by their names, and avoiding other issues.

Examples:

Free-Soil Party—to prevent the spread of slavery (1848–1852)

American or “Know-Nothing” Party—to oppose immigration and Catholics (1856)

Prohibition Party—to ban the sale of liquor (1869 to present)

Woman’s Party—to obtain the right to vote for women (1913–1920)

3. **Economic-protest parties:** Parties, usually based in a particular region, especially involving farmers, that protest against depressed economic conditions. These tend to disappear as conditions improve.

Examples:

Greenback Party (1876–1884)

Populist Party (1892–1908)

4. **Factional parties:** Parties created by a split in a major party, usually over the identity and philosophy of the major party’s presidential candidate.

Examples:

Split off from the Republican Party:

“Bull Moose” Progressive Party (1912)

La Follette Progressive Party (1924)

Split off from the Democratic Party:

States’ Rights (“Dixiecrat”) Party (1948)

Henry Wallace Progressive Party (1948)

American Independent (George Wallace) Party (1968)

Split off from both Democrats and Republicans:

Reform Party (Ross Perot)

Tea Party movement

of success, is that the direct primary and the national convention made it possible for dissident elements of a major party—unless they become completely disaffected—to remain in the party and influence the choice of candidates and policies. The antiwar movement had a profound effect on the Democratic Conventions of 1968 and 1972; African Americans have played a growing role in the Democratic Party, especially with the candidacy of Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 and Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012; only in 1972 did the unions feel that the Democrats nominated a presidential candidate (McGovern) unacceptable to them.

The impact of minor parties on American politics is hard to judge. One bit of conventional wisdom holds that minor parties develop ideas that the major parties later come to adopt. The Socialist Party, for example, supposedly called for major social and economic policies that the Democrats under Roosevelt later embraced and termed the New Deal. It is possible the Democrats did steal the thunder of the Socialists, but it hardly seems likely that they did it because the Socialists had proposed these things or proved them popular. (In 1932, the Socialists received only 2 percent of the vote and in 1936 less than one-half of 1 percent.) Roosevelt probably adopted the policies in part because he thought them correct and in part because dissident elements within his own party—leaders such as Huey Long of Louisiana—were threatening to bolt the Democratic Party if it did not move to the left. Even Prohibition was adopted more as a result of the efforts of interest groups such as the Anti-Saloon League than as the consequence of its endorsement by the Prohibition Party.

The minor parties that have probably had the greatest influence on public policy have been the factional parties. Mugwumps and liberal Republicans, by bolting the regular party, may have made that party more sensitive to the issue of civil service reform; the Bull Moose and La Follette Progressive Parties probably helped encourage the major parties to pay more attention to issues of business regulation and party reform; the Dixiecrat and Wallace movements probably strengthened the hands of those who wished to go slow on desegregation. The threat of a factional split is a risk that both major parties must face, and it is in the efforts that each makes to avoid such splits that one finds the greatest impact of minor parties, or at least that was the case in the 20th century.



Tea Party members at a rally.

In 1992 and again in 1996, Ross Perot led the most successful recent third-party movement. It began as United We Stand America and was later renamed the Reform Party. Perot's appeal seemed to reflect a growing American dissatisfaction with the existing political parties and a heightened demand for bringing in a leader who would "run the government without politics." In 2000 and again in 2004, Ralph Nader led the Green Party and rallied supporters by promising to remain above partisan politics and avoid making compromises if elected. Of course, it is no more possible to take politics out of governing than it is to take churches out of religion. Though unrealistic, some people want policies without bargaining.

The Tea Party movement that has evolved in recent years is not a single national party, but it shares characteristics with minor parties: Tea Party supporters were active in the 2010 congressional midterm elections, and they seek to influence the national policy agenda. Although there are many groups within the movement with differing views, Tea Party activists seem to agree on the need to reduce taxes, government spending, budget deficits, and the national debt. They appear to have some influence within the Republican Party, where they have overturned a few establishment candidates for office whom they viewed as insufficiently dedicated to fiscal discipline. Whether the movement will turn into a cohesive minor party that shapes the major-party agenda remains to be seen.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

9-1 Describe the roles of American political parties and how they differ from parties in other democracies.

A political party is an organization that works to elect candidates to public office and identifies candidates by a clear name or label. American parties tend to be somewhat weaker than their counterparts elsewhere for several structural reasons (control of access to the ballot, divided legislative/executive power, and federalism).

9-2 Summarize the historical evolution of the party system in America.

Initially, there were no parties in America: George Washington called parties “factions.” But as soon as it was time to select his replacement, the republic’s first leaders realized they had to organize their followers to win the election, and parties were born. They gradually strengthened during the 19th century, before progressive reforms weakened their power in the early to mid 20th century. More recently, however, the parties have become both stronger and more polarized.

9-3 Explain the major functions of political parties.

Parties help candidates win office, and then coordinate their behavior once in office. To win office, they recruit candidates, nominate them (either via primaries or conventions), and then help them win the general election.

9-4 Explain how parties are organized in America.

The parties have a federalized structure: there is a national party, and state and local parties organized beneath them. While the different levels operate independently of one another, there are important areas of collaboration between them.

9-5 Define partisan identification, and explain how it shapes the political behavior of ordinary Americans.

Partisan identification refers to Americans’ attachment to a political party. For most people, it is like belonging to a political team. Party identification powerfully shapes vote choice in elections: more than 90 percent of partisans supported their party’s candidate in recent elections. It also influences their evaluation of political leaders and institutions, with partisans more trusting of the government when their party is in control.

9-6 Summarize the arguments for why America has a two-party system.

The United States has a two-party political system because of two structural features in American politics: single-member districts and winner-take-all elections. Both features encourage the existence of two major parties, as smaller parties face great difficulty in winning elective office.

TO LEARN MORE

Democratic National Committee: www.democrats.org

Republican National Committee: www.rnc.org

Green Party: www.gp.org

Libertarian Party: www.lp.org

Reform Party: www.reformparty.org

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