

# CHAPTER OVERVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

Although political parties may not be highly regarded by all, many observers of politics agree that political parties are central to representative government because they provide meaning to citizens' choices between competing candidates in elections. The alternating of power and influence between the two major parties is one of the most important elements in American politics. **Party competition** is the battle between Democrats and Republicans for the control of public offices. Historically, changes in party control of government have been associated with substantial changes in the nature and scope of government. The recent trend toward divided government—where Congress is controlled by one party and the president represents the other—seems to have blocked any major changes in the scope of government.

## THE MEANING OF PARTY

As linkage institutions, **political parties** nominate candidates for office, coordinate campaigns, provide cues for voters, articulate policies, and coordinate policy-making. It is not always easy to distinguish between the parties since each rationally chooses to stay near the center of public opinion.

Political scientists often view parties as “*three-headed political giants*”—the party-in-the-electorate, the party as an organization, and the party-in-government. The **party-in-the-electorate** are voters who identify with a political party. Unlike many European political parties, American parties do not require dues or membership cards to distinguish members from nonmembers. One needs only to *claim to be a member* to be a member of a party in the United States. The **party as an organization** has a national office, a full-time staff, rules and bylaws, and budgets. These are the people who keep the party running between elections and make its rules. The **party-in-government** consists of elected officials who call themselves members of the party, such as the president and Congress. These leaders are the main spokespersons of the party.

In a large democracy, **linkage institutions** *translate inputs from the public into outputs from the policymakers*. Linkage institutions help ensure that public preferences are heard. The *four main linkage institutions* in the United States are *parties, elections, interest groups, and the media*. Parties perform five main functions. They pick candidates, run campaigns, give cues to voters, articulate policies, and coordinate policymaking.

Economist Anthony Downs has provided a working model of *the relationship among citizens, parties, and policy*, employing a rational-choice perspective. **Rational choice theory** assumes that parties and political actors have pragmatic goals (such as winning elections) that are more important to the party than ideology. A party that wants to win office will pursue policies that have broad public appeal.

## THE PARTY-IN-THE-ELECTORATE

The *party-in-the-electorate* consists largely of symbolic images. There is no formal “membership” in American parties, and the party is a psychological label for most people. Party images help shape people’s **party identification**—the *self-proclaimed preference* for one of the parties. The clearest trend in party identification over the last five decades has been *the decline of both parties* and the resultant *upsurge of Independents* (mostly at the expense of the Democrats). Party identification still remains strongly linked to the voter’s choice, but **ticket-splitting** is near an all-time high, with many people voting with one party for one office and another for other offices. *Divided government* has often been the result (frequently with Republican control of the White House and Democratic control of Congress).

## THE PARTY ORGANIZATIONS: FROM THE GRASS ROOTS TO WASHINGTON

American political parties are *decentralized and fragmented*. Unlike many European parties, formal party organizations in America have little power to enforce their decisions by offering rewards to officeholders who follow the party line and punishing those who do not. American national parties are a loose aggregation of state parties, which in turn are a fluid association of individuals, groups, and local organizations. There are fifty state party systems, no two exactly alike.

At one time, the urban political party was the basis of political party organization in America, but urban party organizations are no longer very active. From the late nineteenth century through the New Deal of the 1930s, scores of cities were dominated by **party machines** (a party organization that depends on material inducements such as **patronage**, in which jobs are awarded for political reasons rather than for merit or competence). Urban party organizations are also no longer very active as a rule. Progressive reforms that placed jobs under the merit system rather than at the machine’s discretion weakened the machine’s power. Filling in the void created by the decline of the inner-city machines has been a revitalization of party organization at the county level—particularly in affluent suburbs.

Some states give parties greater power than others to limit who can participate in their nomination contests. In **closed primaries**, only people who have registered in advance with the party can vote in its primary, thus encouraging greater party loyalty. In contrast, **open primaries** allow voters to decide on election day whether they want to participate in the Democratic or Republican contests. And most antiparty of all are **blanket primaries**, which present voters with a list of candidates from all the parties and allow them to pick some Democrats and some Republicans if they like. Organizationally, state parties are on the upswing throughout the country. Though no study of state parties has been conducted recently, it is almost certain that their financial resources have increased.

The **national convention** of each party meets every four years to write the party’s platform and nominate its candidates for president and vice president. The **national committee**, composed of representatives from the states and territories, keeps the party

operating between conventions. Day-to-day activities of the national party are the responsibility of the **national chairperson**, who hires the staff, raises the money, pays the bills, and attends to the daily duties of the party.

## THE PARTY-IN-GOVERNMENT: PROMISES AND POLICY

Party control *does matter* because each party and the elected officials who represent it generally try to turn campaign promises into action. Voters and **coalitions** of voters are attracted to different parties largely (though not entirely) by their performance and policies. The parties have done a fairly good job over the years of *translating their platform promises into public policy*; the impression that politicians and parties never live up to their policy promises is largely erroneous.

## PARTY ERAS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

America has always had two parties, in contrast to most democratic nations. Throughout American history, one party has been the dominant majority party for long periods of time (referred to as **party eras**). Party eras were punctuated by **critical elections**—in which new issues appeared that divided the electorate—and *party coalitions underwent realignment*. A **party realignment** (a rare event) is typically associated with a major crisis or trauma in the nation’s history, such as the Civil War and the Great Depression, both of which led to realignments. A new coalition is formed for each party, and the coalition endures for many years.

Alexander Hamilton was probably the person most instrumental in establishing the first party system. The foundation of the **Federalist Party** developed from his politicking and coalition building while he tried to get congressional support for policies he favored (particularly a national bank). The **Democratic-Republicans** (also known as *Jeffersonians*), which replaced the Federalists, were based on a coalition derived from agrarian interests. This made the party popular in the rural South, but the coalition was torn apart by *factionalism*.

General Andrew Jackson founded the modern American political party when he forged a new coalition in 1828. Jackson was originally a Democratic-Republican, but soon after his election his party became known simply as the **Democratic Party** (which continues to this day). Jackson’s successor, Martin Van Buren, was a realist who argued that a governing party needed a loyal opposition to represent other parts of society. This opposition was provided by the **Whigs**, but the Whig party was only able to win the presidency when it nominated popular military heroes such as William Henry Harrison (1840) and Zachary Taylor (1848).

The **Republican Party** rose in the late 1850s as the antislavery party. The Republicans forged a coalition out of the remnants of several minor parties and elected Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860. The Civil War brought a *party realignment*, and the Republican party was in ascendancy for more than sixty years (though the Democrats controlled the South). The election of 1896 was a watershed event during this era—a

period when party coalitions shifted and the Republicans were entrenched for another generation.

The Republicans continued as the nation's majority party until the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. President Herbert Hoover's handling of the Great Depression was disastrous for the Republican Party. Franklin D. Roosevelt promised a *New Deal* and easily defeated Hoover in 1932. Congress passed scores of Roosevelt's anti-Depression measures during his *first 100 days* in office. Party realignment began in earnest after the Roosevelt administration got the country moving again, and Roosevelt forged the **New Deal coalition** from such diverse groups as union members, southerners, intellectuals, liberals, the poor, and African Americans.

Roosevelt's New Deal coalition made Democrats the majority party, although it steadily weakened, particularly beginning in the mid-1960s. Much of the loss was due to the erosion of the former "Solid [Democratic] South," as conservative Democrats became increasingly unsatisfied with their national party over issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights for women and minorities, and social welfare programs. Today the south is now strongly Republican, whereas there are fewer Republicans in the northeast and Pacific coast.

An unprecedented period of **divided government** (when the executive and legislative branches are controlled by different parties) has existed frequently since the mid-1960s. Many political scientists believe that this means that the party system has **dealigned**, with people gradually moving away from *both* political parties. Many scholars fear that the parties are becoming useless and ineffective through the pattern of divided government and dealignment.

### THIRD PARTIES: THEIR IMPACT ON AMERICAN POLITICS

Although the United States has a two-party system, **third parties** have controlled enough votes in one-third of the last 36 presidential elections to have decisively tipped the electoral college vote. Third parties have brought new groups into the electorate, have served as "safety valves" for popular discontent, and have brought new issues to the political agenda.

The *most obvious consequence of two-party governance* is the *moderation of political conflict*. With just two parties, both will cling to a centrist position to maximize their appeal to voters. The result is often political ambiguity—parties will not want to risk taking a strong stand on a controversial policy if doing so will only antagonize many voters.

Election rules in the United States tend to favor a two-party system. For example, the **winner-take-all system** has meant that the party that receives a plurality is declared the winner and the other parties get nothing. By contrast, in a system that uses **proportional representation** (used in most European countries), legislative seats are allocated according to each party's percentage of the nationwide vote. A small party may use its seats to combine with one of the larger parties to form a coalition government.

## UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are essential components of democratic government. Ideally, candidates in a democracy should say what they mean to do if elected and be able to carry out what they promised once they are elected. Critics of the American party system complain that this is all too often not the case, and have called for a more **responsible party** system. The responsible party model calls for each party to present distinct, comprehensive programs; carry out its program if elected; implement its programs if it is the majority party or state what it would do if it were in power; and accept responsibility for the performance of the government. American parties do not meet the criteria of the responsible party model. They are too *decentralized* to take a single national position and then enforce it; parties *do not have control* over those who run under their labels; and there is no mechanism for a party to discipline officeholders and ensure cohesion in policymaking.

There are also supporters of America's two-party system who criticize the responsible party model. They argue that the complexity and diversity of American society needs a different form of representation, and that local differences need an outlet for expression. Advocates of America's decentralized parties consider them appropriate for the type of *limited government* the founders sought to create and most Americans wish to maintain.

Because no single party in the United States can ever be said to have firm control over the government, the hard choices necessary to limit the growth of government are rarely addressed. Divided government has meant that neither party is really in charge, and each tries to blame the other for failures and limitations of government.

Parties are no longer the main source of political information. More and more political communication is through the mass media rather than face-to-face. However, there are indications that the parties are beginning to adapt to the high-tech age. State and national party organizations have become more visible and active. Although more people than ever before call themselves independent and split their tickets, the majority still identify with a party (and this percentage seems to have stabilized).