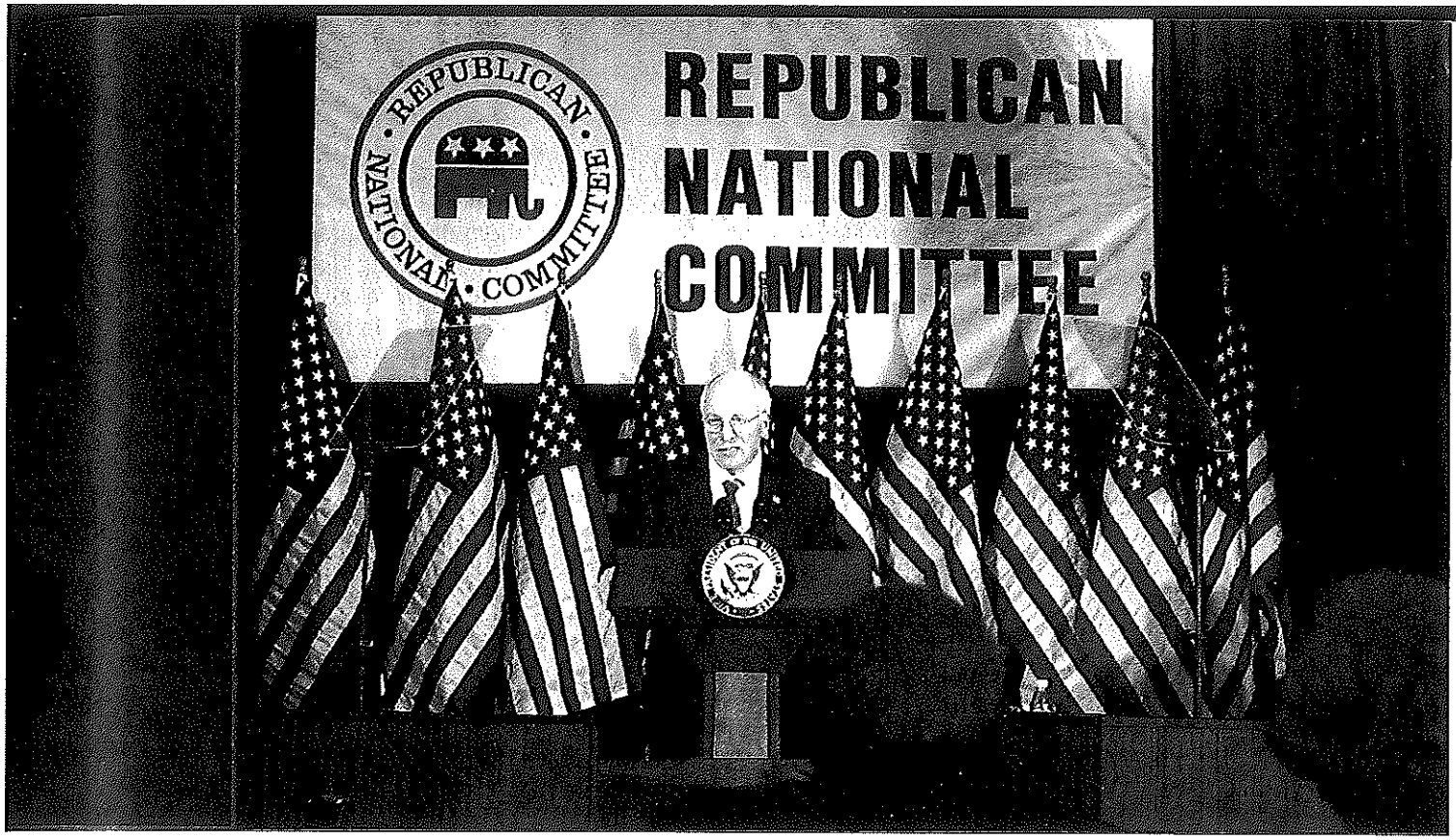
8

Political Parties

Chapter Outline

■ In the 2002 midterm elections the Democrats were expecting to gain seats in the House of Representatives, as the party opposing the incumbent president generally does in midterm elections. When they ended up losing seats instead, many analysts blamed the Democrats' poor performance in 2002 on their seeming failure to offer clear alternatives to the president's policies.

The story of the 2002 midterms differed greatly from that of 1994, when the Republicans took control of the House of Representatives after 40 years of Democratic control. In that year, 367 House Republican candidates stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in late September of 1994 to sign a document they entitled "Contract With America." This document outlined reforms the Republicans promised to pass on the first day of the new Congress, as well as ten bills they agreed would be brought to the floor for a vote within the first 100 days of the new Republican-controlled House of Representatives. The contract was the brainchild of Newt Gingrich and Richard Armey, both of whom were college pro-



fessors before they were elected to Congress. Gingrich and Armey thought the Republicans needed a stronger message in 1994 than simply saying they opposed President Clinton's policies. The contract was an attempt to offer voters a positive program for reshaping American public policy and reforming how Congress works. Without actually knowing much about the individual candidates themselves, voters would know what to expect of the signers of the contract and would be able to hold them accountable for these promises in the future. In this sense, the contract endeavored to make politics user-friendly for the voters.

America's Founding Fathers were more concerned with their fear that political parties could be forums for corruption and national divisiveness than they were with the role that parties could play in making politics user friendly for ordinary voters. Thomas Jefferson spoke for many when he said, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." In his farewell address, George Washington also warned of the dangers of parties.

Today, most observers would agree that political parties have contributed greatly to American democracy. In one of the most frequently—and rightly—quoted observations about American politics, E. E. Schattschneider said that "political parties created democracy . . . and democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."[1] Political scientists and politicians alike believe that a strong party system is desirable.

The strength of the parties has an impact not only on how we are governed but also on what government does. The major historical developments in the expansion or contraction of the scope of government have generally been accomplished through the implementation of one party's platform. Currently, the Democrats and Republicans differ greatly on the issue of the scope of government. Which party controls the presidency and whether or not the same party also controls the Congress makes a big difference.

party competition

The battle of the parties for control of public offices. Ups and downs of the two major parties are one of the most important elements in American politics.

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. Without this competition there would be no choice, and without choice there would be no democracy. Americans have had a choice between two major political parties since the early 1800s, and this two-party system remains intact more than two centuries later.

The Meaning of Party

Almost all definitions of political parties have one thing in common: Parties try to win elections. This is their core function and the key to their definition. By contrast, interest groups do not nominate candidates for office, though they may try to influence elections. For example, no one has ever been elected to Congress as the nominee of the National Rifle Association, though many nominees have received the NRA's endorsement. Thus, Anthony Downs defined a **political party** as a "team of men [and women] seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election."[2]

political party

According to Anthony Downs, a "team of men [and women] seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election."

The word *team* is the slippery part of this definition. Party teams may not be so well disciplined and single-minded as teams fielded by top football coaches. Party teams often run every which way and are difficult to lead. Party leaders often disagree about policy, and between elections the party organizations seem to all but disappear. So who are the members of these teams? A widely adopted way of thinking about parties in political science is as "three-headed political giants." The three heads are (1) the party in the electorate, (2) the party as an organization, and (3) the party in government.[3]

The *party in the electorate* is by far the largest component of an American political party. Unlike many European political parties, American parties do not require dues or membership cards to distinguish members from nonmembers. Americans may register as Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, or whatever, but registration is not legally binding and is easily changed. To be a member of a party, you need only claim to be a member. If you call yourself a Democrat, you are one—even if you never talk to a party official, never work in a campaign, and often vote for Republicans.

The *party as an organization* has a national office, a full-time staff, rules and bylaws, and budgets. In addition to a national office, each party maintains state and local headquarters. The party organization includes precinct leaders, county chairpersons, state chairpersons, state delegates to the national committee, and officials in the party's Washington office. These are the people who keep the party running between elections and make its rules. From the party's national chairperson to its local precinct captain, the party organization pursues electoral victory.

The *party in government* consists of elected officials who call themselves members of the party. Although presidents, members of Congress, governors, and lesser officeholders may share a common party label, they do not always agree on policy. Presidents and governors may have to wheedle and cajole their own party members into voting for their policies. In the United States, it is not uncommon to put personal principle—or ambition—above loyalty to the party's leaders. These leaders are the main spokespersons for the party, however. Their words and actions personify the party to millions of Americans. If the party is to translate its promises into policy, the job must be done by the party in government.

Political parties are everywhere in American politics—present in the electorate's mind, as an organization, and in government offices—and one of their major tasks is to link the people of the United States to their government and its policies.

Tasks of the Parties

The road from public opinion to public policy is long and winding. All 295 million Americans cannot raise their voices to the government and indicate their policy preferences in unison. In a large democracy, **linkage institutions** translate inputs from the public into outputs from the policymakers. Linkage institutions sift through all the issues, identify the most pressing concerns, and put these onto the governmental agenda. In other words, linkage institutions help ensure that public preferences are heard loud and clear. In the United States, there are four main linkage institutions: parties, elections, interest groups, and the media.

linkage institutions
The channels through which people's concerns become political issues on the government's policy agenda. In the United States, linkage institutions include elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media.

Kay Lawson writes that "parties are seen, both by the members and by others, as agencies for forging links between citizens and policymakers."[4] Here is a checklist of the tasks parties perform, or should perform, if they are to serve as effective linkage institutions:

Parties Pick Candidates. Almost no one above the local level (and often not even there) gets elected to a public office without winning a party's endorsement.[5] A party's endorsement is called a *nomination*. Up until the early twentieth century, American parties chose their candidates with little or no input from the voters: Progressive reformers led the charge for primary elections, in which citizens would have the power to choose nominees for office. The innovation of primary elections spread rapidly, transferring the nominating function from the party organization to the party identifiers.

Parties Run Campaigns. Through their national, state, and local organizations, parties coordinate political campaigns. However, television has made it easier for candidates to campaign on their own, without the help of the party organization. For example, Ross Perot received 18.9 percent of the presidential vote in 1992 and 8.5 percent in 1996 with hardly any organizational support at all.

party image
The voter's perception of what the Republicans or Democrats stand for, such as conservatism or liberalism.

Parties Give Cues to Voters. Most voters have a party image of each party; that is, they know (or think they know) what the Republicans and Democrats stand for. Liberal, conservative, probusiness, prolabor—these are some of the elements of each party's image. Even in the present era of weakened parties, many voters still rely on a party to give them cues for voting.

Parties Articulate Policies. Within the electorate and within the government, each political party advocates specific policy alternatives. For example, the Democratic Party has clearly supported abortion rights, and the Republican Party has repeatedly called for restrictions on abortion.

Parties Coordinate Policymaking. In America's fragmented government, parties are essential for coordination among the branches of government. Virtually all major public officials are also members of a party. When they need support to get something done, the first place they look is to their fellow partisans.

The importance of these tasks makes it easy to see why most political scientists accept Schattschneider's famous assertion that modern democracy is unthinkable without competition between political parties.

Why It Matters

Political Parties
Parties perform many important tasks in American politics. Among the most important are: generating symbols of identification and loyalty, mobilizing majorities in the electorate and in government, recruiting political leaders, implementing policies, and fostering stability in government. Hence, it has often been argued that the party system has to work well for the government to work well.

Parties, Voters, and Policy: The Downs Model

The parties compete, at least in theory, as in a marketplace. A party is in the market for voters; its products are its candidates and policies. Anthony Downs has provided a working model of the relationship among citizens, parties, and policy, employing a

rational-choice theory

A popular theory in political science to explain the actions of voters as well as politicians. It assumes that individuals act in their own best interest, carefully weighing the costs and benefits of possible alternatives.

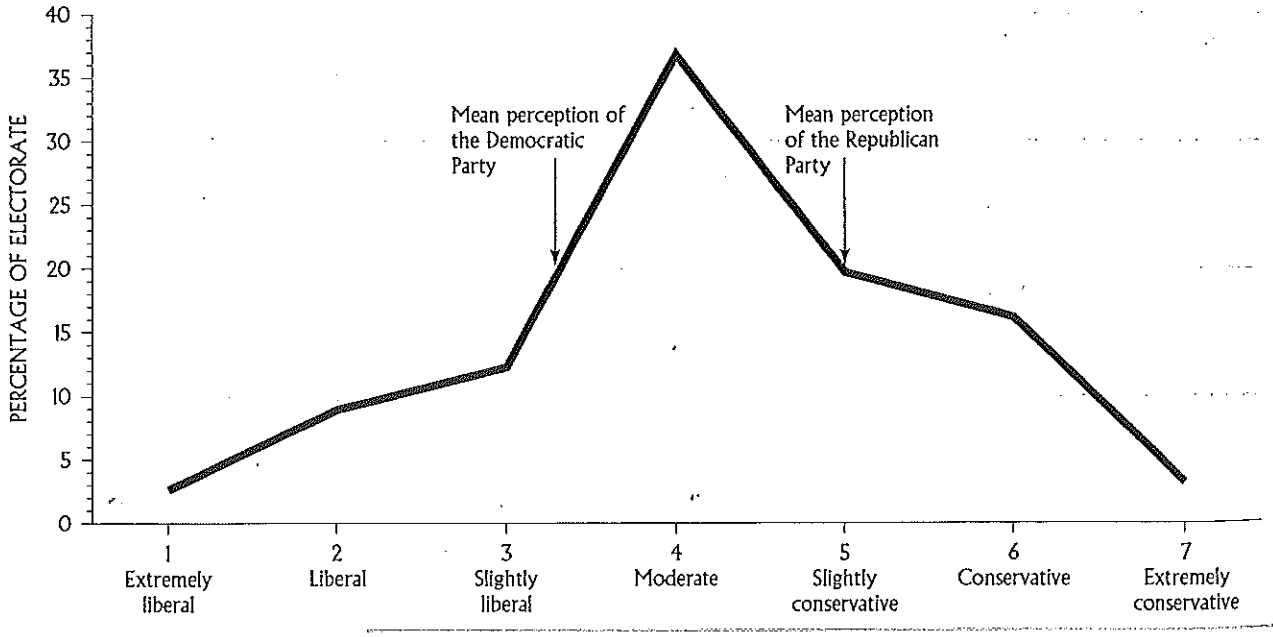
rational-choice perspective.[6] Rational-choice theory "seeks to explain political processes and outcomes as consequences of purposive behavior. Political actors are assumed to have goals and to pursue those goals sensibly and efficiently."[7] Downs argues that (1) voters want to maximize the chance that policies they favor will be adopted by government, and (2) parties want to win office. Thus, in order to win office, the wise party selects policies that are widely favored. Parties and candidates may do all sorts of things to win—kiss babies, call opponents ugly names, even lie and cheat—but in a democracy they will primarily use their accomplishments and policy positions to attract votes. If Party A figures out what the voters want more accurately than does Party B, then Party A should be more successful.

The long history of the American party system has shown that successful parties rarely stray far from the midpoint of public opinion. In the American electorate, a few voters are extremely liberal and a few are extremely conservative, but the majority are in the middle (see Figure 8.1). If Downs is right, then centrist parties will win, and extremist parties will be condemned to footnotes in the history books. Indeed, occasionally a party may misperceive voters' desires or take a risky stand on a principle—hoping to persuade voters during the campaign—but in order to survive in a system where the majority opinion is middle-of-the-road, parties must stay fairly near the center.

We frequently hear criticism that there is not much difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. Given the nature of the American political market, however, these two parties have little choice. We would not expect two competing department stores to locate at opposite ends of town when most people live on Main Street. Downs also notes, though, that from a rational-choice perspective, one should expect the parties to differentiate themselves at least somewhat. Just as Chrysler tries to offer something different from and better than General Motors in order to build buyer loyalty, so Democrats and Republicans have to forge different identities to build voter

Figure 8.1 The Downs Model: How Rational Parties Match Voters' Policy Preferences

In 2000, the National Election Study asked a sample of the American electorate to classify themselves on a 7-point scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. The graph shows how the people located themselves in terms of ideology and how they perceived the ideology of the parties.



Source: From the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 2000.

loyalty. In recent years, the American National Election Study has found that two-thirds of the population believes that important differences exist between the parties. When asked what those differences are, respondents most frequently comment that the Republicans favor lower taxes and less domestic spending, whereas Democrats favor more government programs to help the working class and less-advantaged Americans.

Participation

Deciding on a Political Party

The Party in the Electorate

In most European nations, being a party member means formally joining a political party. You get a membership card to carry around, you pay dues, and you vote to pick your local party leaders. In America, being a party member takes far less work. There is no formal "membership" in the parties at all. If you believe you are a Democrat or a Republican, then you are a Democrat or a Republican. Thus the party in the electorate consists largely of symbolic images and ideas. For most people the party is a psychological label. They may never go to a party meeting, but they have images of the parties' stances on issues and of which groups the parties generally favor or oppose.

Party images help shape people's **party identification**, the self-proclaimed preference for one party or the other. Because many people routinely vote for the party they identify with (all else being equal), even a shift of a few percentage points in the distribution of party identification is important. Since 1952, the National Election Study surveys have asked a sample of citizens, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" Repeatedly asking this question permits political scientists to trace party identification over the past five decades (see Table 8.1). The clearest trend has been *the increasing percentage who decline to identify with either major party.* In 2000, 41 percent of the population called themselves Independents. As you can see in "Young People and Politics: The Parties Face an Independent Youth," survey data demonstrate that the younger one is the more likely he or she is to be a political independent.

party identification

A citizen's self-proclaimed preference for one party or the other.

Not only are there more Independents now, but those who still identify with a party are no longer so loyal in the voting booth. In recent years, **ticket-splitting**—voting with one party for one office and the other for other offices—has reached record proportions.[8] An examination of a random sample of over 8,000 actual 1994 ballots

ticket-splitting

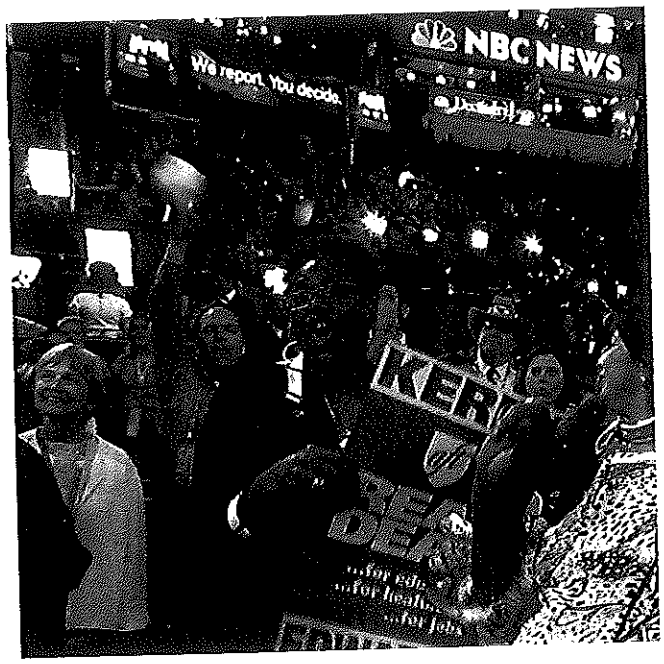
Voting with one party for one office and with another party for other offices. It has become the norm in American voting behavior.

Table 8.1 Party Identification in the United States, 1952–2004[a]

YEAR	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS	REPUBLICANS
1952	48.6	23.3	28.1
1956	45.3	24.4	30.3
1960	46.4	23.4	30.2
1964	52.2	23.0	24.8
1968	46.0	29.5	24.5
1972	41.0	35.2	23.8
1976	40.2	36.8	23.0
1980	41.7	35.3	23.0
1984	37.7	34.8	27.6
1988	35.7	36.3	28.0
1992	35.8	38.7	25.5
1996	39.3	32.9	27.8
2000	34.8	41.0	24.2
2004	34.6	33.6	31.8

[a]In percentage of people; the small percentage who identify with a minor party or who cannot answer the question are excluded.

Source: American National Election Studies, 1952–2000; National Annenberg Election Study, 2004.



The major parties have different demographic bases of support. Of all social groups, African Americans tend to be the most solidly aligned with one party. Ever since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they have voted overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. In 2004, African-American voters cast 88 percent of their votes for John Kerry.

Young People and Politics

The Parties Face an Independent Youth

Younger people have always had a tendency to be more independent of the major political parties than older people. But this has rarely been so evident in survey data as it is now. As you can see from the 2002 survey data displayed here, 55 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24 said they were political independents. In contrast, only about half as many of people over 65 called themselves independents. As one looks down the age groups in the table, it is clear that what varies by age is not the ratio of Democrats to Republicans, but rather the likelihood of someone being an independent. Data over time indicate that as people get older they become more likely to identify with one of the major parties. But whether this will be true for the current generation of youth remains to be seen.

Questions for Discussion

- Do you think that as the current generation of young people ages they will become more likely to identify with the major political parties?
- Because younger people are so likely to be independent, does this mean many young voters are particularly open to persuasion during campaigns? If so, why don't the Democrats and Republicans pay special attention to getting them on their side?
- In some states, such as New York and Florida, only voters who are registered with a party can participate in that party's primary. Given that younger people are less likely to identify with a party, does this mean that their influence in primary elections is diminished in such states?

AGE	DEMOCRAT	INDEPENDENT	REPUBLICAN
18–24	25	55	19
25–34	33	42	24
35–44	32	39	29
45–54	32	38	30
55–64	33	33	35
65+	41	28	31

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2002 General Social Survey.

from Los Angeles County compiled by Anthony Salvanto reveals that only 30 percent cast a complete and straight vote for all 11 partisan offices contested that year.[9] The result of voters failing to make an across-the-board choice between the parties has often been divided party government, at both the federal and state levels.

The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots to Washington

An organizational chart is usually shaped like a pyramid, with those who give orders at the top and those who carry them out at the bottom. In drawing an organizational chart of an American political party, you could put the national committee and national convention of the party at the apex of the pyramid, the state party organizations in the middle, and the thousands of local party organizations at the bottom. Such a chart, however, would provide a misleading depiction of an American political party. The president of General Motors is at the top of GM in fact as well as on paper. By contrast, the chairperson of the Democratic or Republican national committee is on top on paper, but not in fact.

As organizations, American political parties are decentralized and fragmented. One can imagine a system in which the national office of a party resolves conflicts among its state and local branches, states the party's position on the issues, and then passes orders down through the hierarchy. One can even imagine a system in which the party leaders have the power to enforce their decisions by offering greater influence and resources to officeholders who follow the party line and by punishing those who do not. Many European parties work just that way, but in America the formal party organizations have little such power. Candidates in the United States can get elected on their own. They do not need the help of the party most of the time, and hence the party organization is relegated to a comparatively limited role.

Local Parties

The urban political party was once the main political party organization in America. From the late nineteenth century through the New Deal of the 1930s, scores of cities were dominated by **party machines**. A machine is a kind of party organization, very different from the typical fragmented and disorganized political party in America today. It can be defined as a party organization that depends on rewarding its members in some material fashion.

party machines

A type of political party organization that relies heavily on material inducements, such as patronage, to win votes and to govern.

Patronage is one of the key inducements used by party machines. A patronage job is one that is awarded for political reasons rather than for merit or competence alone. In the late nineteenth century, political parties routinely sold some patronage jobs to the highest bidder. Party leaders made no secret of their corruption, openly selling government positions to raise money for the party. Some of this money was used to buy votes, but a good deal went to line the pockets of the politicians themselves. The most notable case was that of Boss Tweed of New York, whose ring reportedly made between $40 million and $200 million from tax receipts, payoffs, and kickbacks.

patronage

One of the key inducements used by party machines. A patronage job, promotion, or contract is one that is given for political reasons rather than for merit or competence alone.

At one time, urban machines in Albany, Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City, and elsewhere depended heavily on ethnic group support. Some of the most fabled machine leaders were Irish politicians, including New York's George Washington Plunkett, Boston's James Michael Curley, and Chicago's Richard J. Daley. Daley's Chicago machine was the last survivor, steamrolling its opposition amid charges of racism and corruption. Even today there are remnants of the Chicago machine, particularly in White and ethnic neighborhoods. The survival of machine politics in Chicago can be traced to its ability to limit the scope of reform legislation. A large proportion of city jobs were classified as "temporary" even though they had been held by the same person for decades, and these positions were exempted from the merit system of hiring. At its

height, the Daley machine in Chicago dispensed 40,000 patronage jobs, the recipients of which were expected to deliver at least 10 votes each on Election Day and to kick back 5 percent of their salary in the form of a donation to the local Democratic Party.[10]

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 machines' power. Regulations concerning fair bidding on government contracts also took away much of their ability to reward the party faithful. As ethnic integration occurred in big cities, the group loyalties that the machines often relied on no longer seemed very relevant to many people.

Partly 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. These county organizations distribute yard signs and campaign literature, get out the vote on Election Day, and help state and local candidates any way they can. Traditionally, local organizations relied on personal knowledge of individuals in the neighborhood who could be persuaded to support the party. Today, these organizations have access to computerized lists with all sorts of details about registered voters that they use to try to tailor their appeals to each individual. You can read more about this issue in "Issues of the Times: Should the Political Parties Be Gathering Data About You?" on pages 248–249.

The 50 State Party Systems

Visual Literacy
State Control and National Platforms

American national parties are a loose aggregation of state parties, which are themselves a fluid association of individuals, groups, and local organizations. There are 50 state party systems, and no two are exactly alike. In a few states, the parties are well organized, have sizable staffs, and spend a lot of money. Pennsylvania is one such state. In other states, however, parties are weak. California, says Kay Lawson, "has political parties so weak as to be almost nonexistent; it is the birthplace of campaigning by 'hired guns'; and it has been run by special interests for so long that Californians have forgotten what is special about that."[11]

The states are allowed wide discretion in the regulation of party activities, and how they choose to organize elections influences the strength of the parties profoundly. 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. (See "You Are the Policymaker: Was the Blanket Primary a Good Idea?")

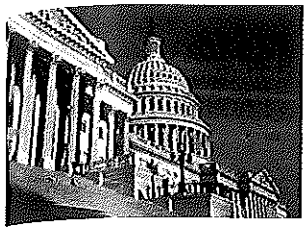
closed primaries
Elections to select party nominees in which only people who have registered in advance with the party can vote for that party's candidates, thus encouraging greater party loyalty.

open primaries
Elections to select party nominees in which voters can decide on Election Day whether they want to participate in the Democratic or Republican contests.

blanket primaries
Elections to select party nominees in which voters are presented with a list of candidates from all the parties. Voters can then select some Democrats and some Republicans if they like.

When it comes to the general election, some states promote voting according to party by listing the candidates of each party down a single column, whereas others place the names in random order. About a third of the states currently have a provision on their ballots that enables a voter to cast a vote for all of one party's candidates with a single act. This option clearly encourages straight-ticket voting and makes the support of the party organization more important to candidates in these states.

Organizationally, state parties are on the upswing throughout the country. As recently as the early 1960s, half the state party organizations did not even maintain a permanent headquarters; when the state party elected a new chairperson, the party organization simply shifted its office to his or her hometown.[12] In contrast, almost all state parties today have a permanent physical headquarters, typically in the capital city or the largest city. State party budgets have also increased greatly, as parties have acquired professional staffs and high-tech equipment. As of 1999, the typical state party budget for an election year was more than eight times greater than it was 20 years earlier.[13]



You Are the Policymaker

Was the Blanket Primary a Good Idea?

In the 1996 California primary, voters were presented with an initiative to change the state's closed primary process to a blanket primary. Proponents of this initiative argued that a closed primary system favors the election of party hard-liners, contributes to legislative gridlock, and stacks the deck against moderate problem solvers. By opening up the primary process to allow voters to vote for any set of candidates they like regardless of partisanship, advocates of the blanket primary argued that politicians would be encouraged to focus on the median voter rather than a narrow group of partisans. They also noted that participation in primary elections would increase by allowing Independents a chance to take part, and by giving minority party voters in noncompetitive districts a real say in selecting their representatives.

Both the Democratic and Republican state parties of California came out strongly against this initiative. They argued that the blanket primary would be an invitation to political mischief, with political consultants and special interests manipulating the system to help the candidate they'd most like to face in November get the other party's nomination. A frequently used analogy during the campaign was that allowing members of one party a large voice in choosing another party's nominee was like letting UCLA's football team choose USC's head coach. Rather than seeing this reform as giving voters more choice, opponents argued that it would diminish choice in the long run by muddling the differences between major parties.

In the end, the voters approved the blanket primary by a margin of 60 to 40. The exit polls showed that the initiative was supported by Democrats and Republicans alike. However, the party organizations immediately took the case to federal court, arguing that the blanket primary infringed on their constitutional rights of freedom of association by giving nonmembers a say in their activities. U.S. District Judge David Levy listened to a variety of testimony from political consultants, party leaders, and political scientists (including one of the coauthors of this book). In *Democratic Party et al. v. Jones* he ruled that although the blanket primary weakened the parties it was what the voters wanted and shouldn't be overruled by the courts. Subsequently, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the ruling. But the Supreme Court had the final word in June of 2000, ruling that the blanket primary violated the parties' right to freedom of association. Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia stated that the blanket primary forces the parties "to adulterate their candidate-selection process—the basic function of a political party—by opening it up to persons wholly unaffiliated with the party."

Upon hearing of the Supreme Court decision, California's Democratic governor and Republican secretary of state both pledged to try to retain a blanket primary system by making primary elections nonpartisan, as currently practiced in Louisiana. In his opinion, Justice Scalia indicated that such a system is constitutional because party nominees are not chosen through such a process; indeed, sometimes this system leads to a general election between two members of the same party. It would be ironic if the parties' court victory led them to be excluded from the primary process in some states altogether.

You be the policymaker: Should the Supreme Court have outlawed California's blanket primary? Is the nonpartisan blanket primary an idea that should now be tried in a number of states?

In terms of headquarters and budgets, state parties are better organized than they used to be. Nevertheless, as John Bibby points out, they mostly serve to supplement the candidates' own personal campaign organizations; thus, state party organizations rarely manage campaigns. The job of the state party, writes Bibby, is merely "to provide technical services" within the context of a candidate-centered campaign.[14]

The National Party Organizations

The supreme power within each of the parties is its **national convention.** The convention meets every four years, and its main task is to write the party's platform and then nominate its candidates for president and vice president. (Chapter 9 will discuss conventions in detail.) Keeping the party operating between conventions is the job of the **national committee,** composed of representatives from the states and territories.

national convention

The meeting of party delegates every four years to choose a presidential ticket and write the party's platform.

national committee

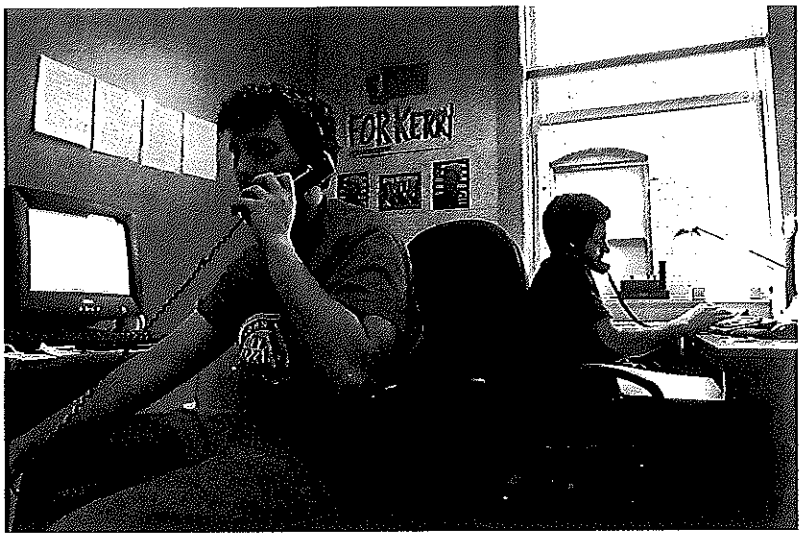
One of the institutions that keeps the party operating between conventions. The national committee is composed of representatives from the states and territories.

Issues of the Times

The New York Times nytimes.com

The Issue: Should the Political Parties Be Gathering Data About You?

Until the advent of television, the heart of political party activity revolved around an army of activists going door-to-door to try to persuade and mobilize their friends and neighbors to support the party's candidates. A good party organization would consist of activists who really knew the people they were contacting and how to best approach them. Then, television allowed candidates to speak directly to the people, so personal contacts were no longer necessary. Today, as this article discusses, detailed computer databases have made it possible to communicate *individualized* messages to people once again. Whether or not this is a positive development for American party politics remains to be seen, as this article makes clear.



Read All About It

The Very, Very Personal Is the Political

By Jon Gertner
February 15, 2004

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you are called into the boss's office and asked to help sell the citizens of the United States on one of two presidential candidates in the 2004 campaign. Hard work, but what makes it especially tough is that you've been directed to try something experimental, something that's never been done before in a national election. Instead of creating a traditional political narrative for your candidate—one that highlights charisma or character, for instance, or one that hews to a message on taxes or Social Security—you've been told to focus on nothing but the people who might be persuaded to vote. Think about what they like, what they do, what they consume. Think about them one by one. Name by name, address by address, phone by phone.

These are the customers you have to get to buy your Brand A over Brand B. So who are they? Where are they? Are they rich, with three kids and a jumbo mortgage? Do they own fly rods and drive minivans? Do they go to church or temple? And maybe most important,

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Continued from Page 248

who among them has never voted, or rarely voted, or voted in ways that may deserve the special status of swing voter? To do the job right, of course, to really win this thing, you've got to find them, woo them and get them to the polls. Where to start?

These days, the first stop is a comprehensive database of U.S. voters. There are fewer than half a dozen of them. One, named Voter Vault, belongs to the Republican National Committee; another, named Datamart, belongs to the Democratic National Committee. Over the past few years, thanks to technological advances and an escalating arms race between the parties, Republicans and Democrats have gone to great lengths to make campaigning more like commercial marketing. Moreover, both parties have begun to sort through their troves of information in order to identify and then court individual voters. Variations on the new political sharpshooting have been tested successfully by the Republican and Democratic Parties in several recent statewide elections. . . .

Each party's databank has the name of every one of the 168 million or so registered voters in the country, cross-indexed with phone numbers, addresses, voting history, income range and so on—up to as many as several hundred points of data on each voter. The information has been acquired from state voter-registration rolls, census reports, consumer data-mining companies and direct marketing vendors. The parties have also amassed detailed information about the political and social beliefs that you might have shared with canvassers who have phoned or knocked on the door over the past few years. . . .

Both national committees see their detailed breakdown of the American electorate as a high-tech variation of pretelevision techniques—from the 1930s, say, or even the 1950s—when politics was driven by the one-to-one contact of a precinct worker who might know how to deliver an individualized political message simply because he knew your family, your job, your ethnicity, your values. Within the Republican Party, the 72-Hour Task Force and Voter Vault are considered proof of its return to grassroots organizing, whereby the party will get to better understand, and keep track of, its supporters. . . .

Among privacy advocates the new databases are almost uniformly viewed as a trespass into our zone of political privacy.

[D]ata-mining technology offers three significant advantages. First, by locating likely voters with greater accuracy, it enables campaigns to spend their dollars more wisely and efficiently. Second, it opens up innovative ways of discovering and turning out new voters. Third, it creates the option of creating a narrow or individualized message—delivered by a friend, through the mail, over the phone or on cable TV—so that parties can talk to potential supporters about exactly the things they care about most. . . .

Among privacy advocates the new databases are almost uniformly viewed as a trespass into our zone of political privacy. Oscar Gandy of the University of Pennsylvania has further noted that political targeting may effectively disenfranchise portions of the electorate that are less likely to vote, or less likely to be persuadable. Why reach out to someone a statistician or a computer program does not consider a viable target?

Meanwhile, other privacy advocates say they worry about the dangers of assembling an individualized message from voter data—a message to that 50-year-old Ford Explorer driver who likes gardening and cares about tort reform, for example. "The nightmare scenario is that the databases create puppet masters," Peter Swire, a privacy expert who worked at the Office of Management and Budget during the Clinton administration, told me. "In the nightmare, every voter will get a tailored message based on detailed information about the voter. . . . The candidate knows everything about the voter, but the media and the public know nothing about what the candidate really believes. . . .

Think About It

- After this article was printed the *New York Times* asked online: "Should the political parties be compiling data about you?" Seventy-nine percent of those who responded clicked "no." How would you respond?
- What about young people? Given the information laid out in this article concerning how these computerized lists are created, do you think young people are substantially less likely to be on them? If so, might this mean that the parties will soon be concentrating even more on older people if they rely on such technology?

Making a Difference

Maria Cino and the Republican Party

In 2004, Maria Cino served as the deputy chair of the Republican National Committee. Though unknown to the public at large before being appointed to this important position, she had toiled on behalf of Republican campaigns for 20 years, working in a variety of staff positions. Most notably she had managed the National Republican Congressional Committee's daily operations in 1994 when the GOP stunned the political world by winning the majority of seats for the House. And in 2000 she was national political director for the Bush campaign, a job that gave her responsibility for hiring and supervising a vast national field operation.

Typically, each state has a national committeeman and a national committeewoman as delegates to the party's national committee. The Democratic committee also includes assorted governors, members of Congress, and other party officials.

Day-to-day activities of the national party are the responsibility of the party's **national chairperson**. The national party chairperson hires the staff, raises the money, pays the bills, and attends to the daily duties of the party. When asked what their biggest organizational challenge was at a 1998 joint appearance, the chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties both promptly responded "money."[15]

The chairperson of the party that controls the White House is normally selected by the president (subject to routine ratification by the national committee). In the early 1970s, two of the people who served for a while as chair of the Republican Party at the request of President Nixon were Bob Dole and George Bush, both of whom used this position as a means of political advancement. These days the party chairs and deputy chairs are typically career staffers who have worked their way up through a series of behind-the-scenes jobs to the role of a visible spokesperson for the party. (See "Making a Difference: Maria Cino and the Republican Party").

national chairperson

The national chairperson is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the party and is usually hand-picked by the presidential nominee.

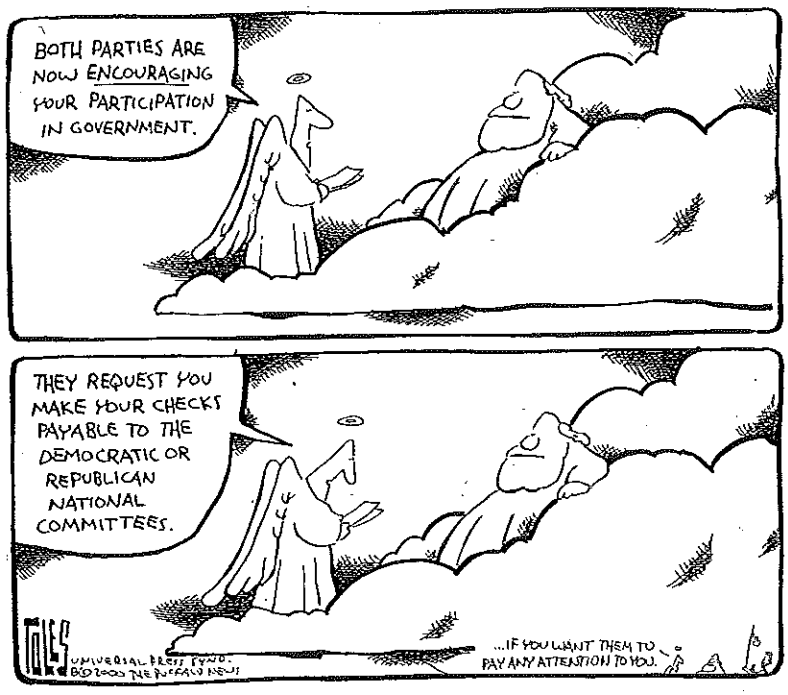
coalition

A group of individuals with a common interest upon which every political party depends.

The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

Which party controls which of America's many elected offices matters because each party and the elected officials who represent it generally try to turn campaign promises into action. As a result, the party that has control over the most government offices will have the most influence in determining who gets what, where, when, and how.

Voters are attracted to a party in government by its performance and policies. What a party has done in office, and what it promises to do greatly influences who will join its **coalition**—a set of individuals and groups supporting it. Sometimes voters suspect



that political promises are made to be broken. To be sure, there are notable instances in which politicians have turned—sometimes 180 degrees—from their policy promises. Lyndon Johnson repeatedly promised in the 1964 presidential campaign that he would not "send American boys to do an Asian boy's job" and involve the United States in the Vietnam War, but he did. In the 1980 campaign, Ronald Reagan asserted that he would balance the budget by 1984, yet his administration quickly ran up the largest deficit in American history. Throughout the 1988 campaign George Bush proclaimed, "Read my lips—no new taxes," but he reluctantly changed course two years later when pressured on the issue by the Democratic majority in Congress. Bill Clinton promised a tax cut for the middle class during the 1992 campaign, but after he was elected he backed off, saying that first the deficit would have to be substantially reduced.

It is all too easy to forget how often parties and presidents do exactly what they say they will do. For every broken promise, many more are kept. Ronald Reagan promised to step up defense spending and cut back on social welfare expenditures, and his administration quickly delivered on these pledges. Bill Clinton promised to support bills providing for family leave, easing voting registration procedures, and tightening gun control that had been vetoed by his predecessor. He lobbied hard to get these measures through Congress again and proudly signed them into law once they arrived on his desk. George W. Bush promised a major tax cut for every taxpayer in America and he delivered just that in 2001. In sum, the impression that politicians and parties never produce policy out of promises is largely erroneous.

In fact, the parties have done a fairly good job over the years of translating their platform promises into public policy. Gerald Pomper has shown that party platforms are excellent predictors of a party's actual policy performance in office. He tabulated specific pledges in the major parties' platforms over a number of years, tabulating 3194 specific policy pronouncements. Pomper then looked to see whether the party that won the presidency actually fulfilled its promises. Nearly three-fourths of all promises resulted in policy actions. Others were tried but floundered for one reason or another. Only 10 percent were ignored altogether.[16]

If parties generally do what they say they will, then the party platforms adopted at the national conventions represent blueprints, however vague, for action. Consider what the two major parties promised the voters in 2004 (see Table 8.2). There is little doubt that the choice between Democratic and Republican policies in 2004 was a clear one on many important issues facing the country.

Party Eras in American History

While studying political parties, remember the following: *America is a two-party system and always has been.* Of course, there are many minor parties around—Libertarians, Socialists, Reform, Greens—but they rarely have a chance of winning a major office. In contrast, most democratic nations have more than two parties represented in their national legislature. Throughout American history, one party has been the dominant majority party for long periods of time. A majority of voters identify with the party in power; thus this party tends to win a majority of the elections. Political scientists call these periods **party eras**.

Punctuating each party era is a **critical election**.[17] A critical election is an electoral earthquake: Fissures appear in each party's coalition, which begins to fracture; new issues appear, dividing the electorate. Each party forms a new coalition—one that endures for years. A critical election period may require more than one election before change is apparent, but in the end, the party system will be transformed.

This process is called **party realignment**—a rare event in American political life that is akin to a political revolution. Realignments are typically associated with a major crisis or trauma in the nation's history. One of the major realignments, when the Republican Party emerged, was connected to the Civil War. Another was linked to the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the majority Republicans were displaced by

party eras

Historical periods in which a majority of voters cling to the party in power, which tends to win a majority of the elections.

critical election

An electoral "earthquake" where new issues emerge, new coalitions replace old ones, and the majority party is often displaced by the minority party. Critical election periods are sometimes marked by a national crisis and may require more than one election to bring about a new party era.

party realignment

The displacement of the majority party by the minority party, usually during a critical election period.

Table 8.2 Party Platforms, 2004

Although few people actually read party platforms, they are one of the best written sources for what the parties believe in. A brief summary of some of the contrasting positions in the Democratic and Republican platforms of 2004 illustrates major differences in beliefs between the two parties.

REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS
The War in Iraq The best intelligence available at the time indicated that Saddam Hussein was a threat. While the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction we expected to find in Iraq have not yet materialized, we have confirmed that Saddam Hussein had the capability to reconstitute his weapons programs and the desire to do so. . . . President Bush had a choice to make: Trust a madman or defend America. He chose defending America.	**The War in Iraq** People of good will disagree about whether America should have gone to war in Iraq, but this much is clear: this administration badly exaggerated its case, particularly with respect to weapons of mass destruction and the connection between Saddam's government and Al Qaeda. This administration did not build a true international coalition. Ignoring the advice of military leaders, this administration did not send sufficient forces into Iraq to accomplish the mission.
Fighting Terrorism President Bush recognized that to overcome the dangers of our time, America would have to take a new approach in the world. That approach is marked by a determination to challenge new threats, not ignore them, or simply wait for future tragedy—and by a commitment to building a hopeful future in hopeless places, instead of allowing troubled regions to remain in despair and explode in violence.	**Fighting Terrorism** The Bush doctrine of unilateral preemption has driven away our allies and cost us the support of other nations. With John Kerry as Commander-in-Chief, we will never wait for a green light from abroad when our safety is at stake, but we must enlist those whose support we need for ultimate victory.
Abortion We say the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life that cannot be infringed.	**Abortion** We stand proudly for a woman's right to choose, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, and regardless of ability to pay.
Gay Marriage We strongly support President Bush's call for a constitutional Amendment that fully protects marriage, and we believe that neither federal nor state judges nor bureaucrats should force states to recognize other living arrangements as equivalent to marriage.	**Gay Marriage** In our country, marriage has been defined at the state level for 200 years, and we believe it should continue to be defined there. We repudiate President Bush's divisive effort to politicize our Constitution by pursuing a "Federal Marriage Amendment."
Health Care We must attack the root causes of high health care costs by: aiding small businesses in offering health care to their employees; empowering the self-employed through access to affordable coverage; putting patients and doctors in charge of medical decisions; and reducing junk lawsuits and limiting punitive damage awards that raise the cost of health care.	**Health Care** We believe that health care is a right and not a privilege. We will offer individuals and businesses tax credits to make quality, reliable health coverage more affordable. We will provide tax credits to Americans who are approaching retirement age and those who are between jobs so they can afford quality, reliable coverage. We will expand coverage for low income adults through existing federal-state health care programs.
Taxes We believe that good government is based on a system of limited taxes and spending. . . . Our party endorses the president's proposals to make tax-relief permanent, so that families and businesses can plan for the future with confidence.	**Taxes** We must restore our values to our tax code. We want a tax code that rewards work and creates wealth for more people, not a tax code that hoards wealth for those who already have it. We should set taxes for families making more than $200,000 a year at the same level as in the late 1990s.
Education The President and Republicans in Congress recognize that states and local communities are most directly responsible for the quality of education in their schools. That is why the No Child Left Behind Act stipulates that the states, not the federal government, develop an accountability plan that will work best for them.	**Education** Under Kerry and Edwards, we will offer high quality early learning opportunities, smaller classes, more after school activities, and more individualized attention for our students. . . . The federal government will meet its financial obligations for elementary and secondary education and for special education.

Source: Excerpts from party platforms as posted on the websites of each organization.

the Democrats. The following sections look more closely at the various party eras in American history.

1796–1824: The First Party System

In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison warned strongly against the dangers of "factions," or parties. But Alexander Hamilton, one of the coauthors of the *Federalist Papers*, did as much as anyone to inaugurate our party system.[18] Hamilton was the nation's first secretary of the treasury, for which service his picture appears on today's $10 bill. To garner congressional support for his pet policies, particularly a national bank, he needed votes. From this politicking and coalition building came the rudiments of the Federalist Party, America's first political party. The Federalists were also America's shortest lived major party. After Federalist candidate John Adams was defeated in his reelection bid in 1800, the party quickly faded. The Federalists were poorly organized, and by 1820 they no longer bothered to offer up a candidate for president. In this early period of American history, most party leaders did not regard themselves as professional politicians. Those who lost often withdrew completely from the political arena. The ideas of a loyal opposition and rotation of power in government had not yet taken hold.[19] Each party wanted to destroy the other party, not just defeat it—and such was the fate of the Federalists.

The party that crushed the Federalists was led by Virginians, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, each of whom was elected president for two terms in succession. They were known as the Democratic-Republicans, or sometimes as the Jeffersonians. The Democratic-Republican Party derived its coalition from agrarian interests rather than from the growing number of capitalists who supported the Federalists. This made the party particularly popular in the largely rural South. As the Federalists disappeared, however, the old Jeffersonian coalition was torn apart by factionalism as it tried to be all things to all people.

1828–1856: Jackson and the Democrats Versus the Whigs

More than anyone else, General Andrew Jackson founded the modern American political party. In the election of 1828, he forged a new coalition that included Westerners as well as Southerners, new immigrants as well as settled Americans. Like most successful politicians of his day, Jackson was initially a Democratic-Republican, but soon after his ascension to the presidency his party became known as simply the Democratic Party, which continues to this day. The "Democratic" label was particularly appropriate for Jackson's supporters because their cause was to broaden political opportunity by eliminating many vestiges of elitism and mobilizing the masses.

Aaron Burr dealt a near-death blow to the Federalist Party when he killed its leader, Alexander Hamilton, in this 1804 duel. Burr, then vice president, challenged Hamilton to the duel after the former treasury secretary publicly called him a traitor.

Whereas Jackson was the charismatic leader, the Democrats' behind-the-scenes architect was Martin Van Buren, who succeeded Jackson as president. Van Buren's one term in office was relatively undistinguished, but his view of party competition left a lasting mark. He "sought to make Democrats see that their only hope for maintaining the purity of their own principles was to admit the existence of an opposing party."[20] A realist, Van Buren argued that a party could not aspire to pleasing all the people all the time. He argued that a governing party needed a loyal opposition to represent parts of society that it could not. This opposition was provided by the Whigs. The Whig Party included such notable statesmen as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, but it was able to win the presidency only when it nominated aging but popular military heroes such as William Henry Harrison (1840) and Zachary Taylor (1848). The Whigs had two distinct wings—Northern industrialists and Southern planters—who were brought together more by the Democratic policies they opposed than by the issues on which they agreed.

1860–1928: The Two Republican Eras

In the 1850s, the issue of slavery dominated American politics and split both the Whigs and the Democrats. Slavery, said Senator Charles Sumner, an ardent abolitionist, "is the only subject within the field of national politics which excites any real interest."[21] Congress battled over the extension of slavery to the new states and territories. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford,* the Supreme Court of 1857 held that slaves could not be citizens and that former slaves could not be protected by the Constitution. This decision further sharpened the divisions in public opinion, making civil war increasingly likely.

The Republicans rose in the late 1850s as the antislavery party. Folding in the remnants of several minor parties, in 1860 the Republicans forged a coalition strong enough to elect Abraham Lincoln president and to ignite the Civil War. The "War Between the States" was one of those political earthquakes that realigned the parties. After the war, the Republican Party thrived for more than 60 years. The Democrats controlled the South, though, and the Republican label remained a dirty word in the old Confederacy.

A second Republican era was initiated with the watershed election of 1896, perhaps the most bitter battle in American electoral history. The Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan, populist proponent of "free silver" (linking money with silver, which was more plentiful than gold, and thus devaluing money to help debtors). The Republican Party made clear its positions in favor of the gold standard, industrialization, the banks, high tariffs, and the industrial working classes, as well as its positions against the "radical" Western farmers and "silverites." "Bryan and his program were greeted by the country's conservatives with something akin to terror."[22] The *New York Tribune* howled that Bryan's Democrats were "in league with the Devil." On the other side, novelist Frank Baum lampooned the Republicans in his classic novel, *The Wizard of Oz.* Dorothy follows the yellow brick road (symbolizing the gold standard) to the Emerald City (representing Washington) only to find that the Wizard (whose figure resembles McKinley) is powerless. But by clicking on her *silver* slippers (the color was changed to ruby for technicolor effect in the movie), she finds that she can return home.

Political scientists call the 1896 election a realigning one because it shifted the party coalitions and entrenched the Republicans for another generation. (For more on the election of 1896, see Chapter 10.) For the next three decades the Republicans continued as the nation's majority party, until the stock market crashed in 1929. The ensuing Great Depression brought about another fissure in the crust of the American party system.

1932–1964: The New Deal Coalition

President Herbert Hoover's handling of the Depression turned out to be disastrous for the Republicans. He solemnly pronounced that economic depression could not be cured by legislative action. Americans, however, obviously disagreed, and voted for

Franklin D. Roosevelt, who promised the country a *New Deal.* In his first 100 days as president, Roosevelt prodded Congress into passing scores of anti-Depression measures. Party realignment began in earnest after the Roosevelt administration got the country moving again. First-time voters flocked to the polls, pumping new blood into the Democratic ranks and providing much of the margin for Roosevelt's four presidential victories. Immigrant groups in Boston and other cities had been initially attracted to the Democrats by the 1928 campaign of Al Smith, the first Catholic to be nominated by a major party for the presidency.[23] Roosevelt reinforced the partisanship of these groups, and the Democrats forged the **New Deal coalition.**

New Deal coalition

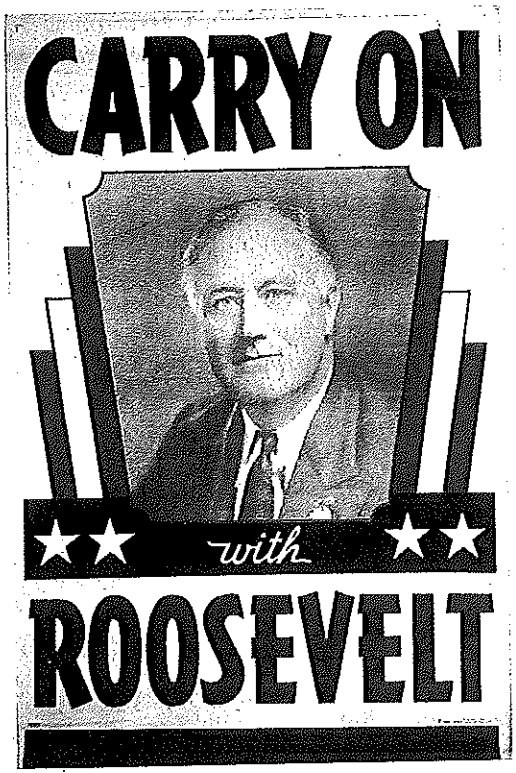
A coalition forged by the Democrats, who dominated American politics from the 1930s to the 1960s. Its basic elements were the urban working class, ethnic groups, Catholics and Jews, the poor, Southerners, African Americans, and intellectuals.

The basic elements of the New Deal coalition were:

- *Urban dwellers.* Big cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia were staunchly Republican before the New Deal realignment; afterward, they were Democratic bastions.
- *Labor unions.* FDR became the first president to support unions enthusiastically, and they returned the favor.
- *Catholics and Jews.* During and after the Roosevelt period, Catholics and Jews were strongly Democratic.
- *The poor.* Though the poor had low turnout rates, their votes went overwhelmingly to the party of Roosevelt and his successors.
- *Southerners.* Ever since pre-Civil War days, White Southerners had been Democratic loyalists. This alignment continued unabated during the New Deal. For example, Mississippi voted over 90 percent Democratic in each of FDR's four presidential election victories.
- *African Americans.* The Republicans freed the slaves, but under FDR the Democrats attracted the majority of African Americans.

As you can see in Figure 8.2, many of the same groups that supported FDR's New Deal continue to shape the party coalitions today.

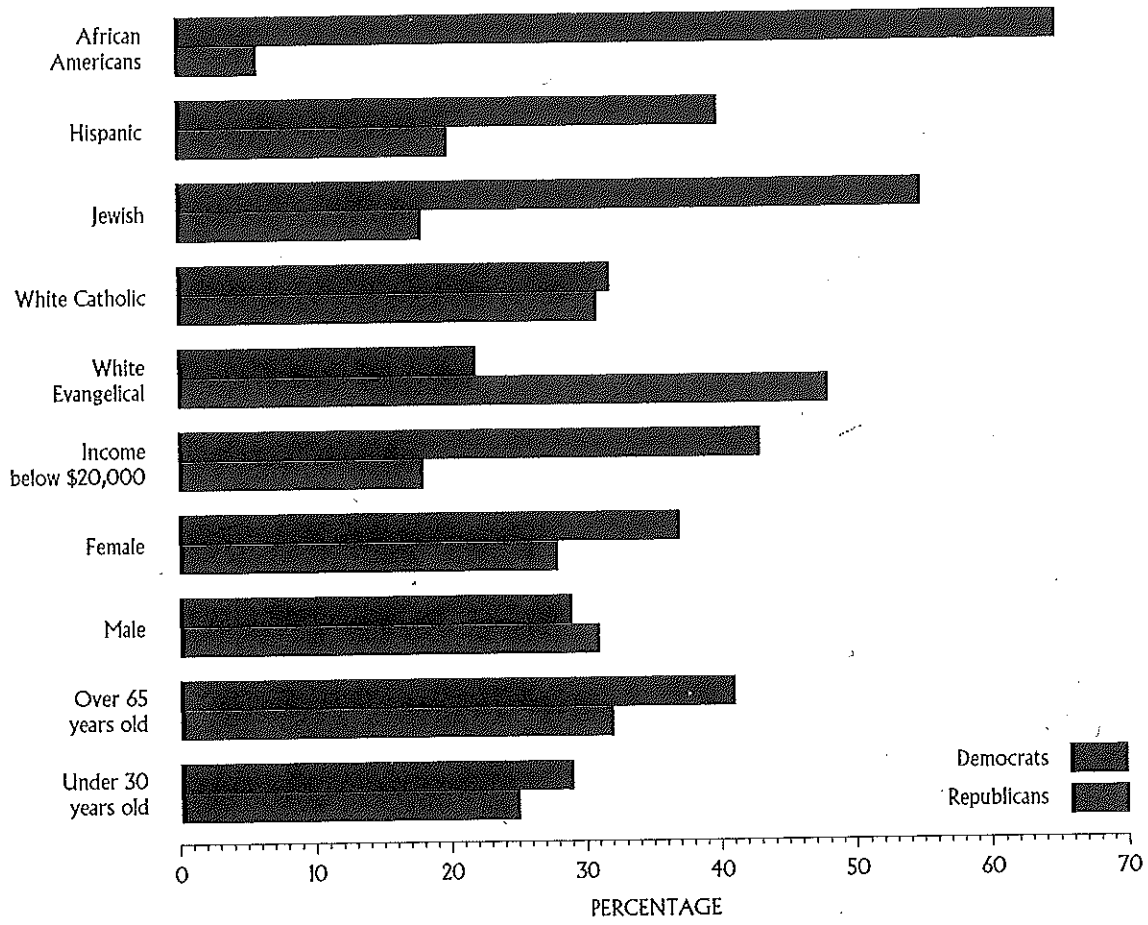
The New Deal coalition made the Democratic Party the clear majority party for decades. Harry S Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt in 1945, promised a Fair Deal.



Franklin Roosevelt reshaped the Democratic Party, bringing together a diverse array of groups that had long been marginalized in American political life. Many of the key features of the Democratic Party today, such as support from labor unions, can be traced to the FDR era.

Figure 8.2 Party Coalitions Today

The two parties continue to draw support from very different social groups, many of which have existed since the New Deal era. This figure shows the percentage identifying as Democrats and Republicans for various groups in 2004.



Source: Pew Research Center *[http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=95].*

World War II hero and Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower broke the Democrats' grip on power by being elected president twice during the 1950s, but the Democrats regained the presidency in 1960 with the election of John F. Kennedy. His New Frontier was in the New Deal tradition, with platforms and policies designed to help labor, the working classes, and minorities. Lyndon B. Johnson, picked as Kennedy's vice president because he could help win Southern votes, became president upon Kennedy's assassination and was overwhelmingly elected to a term of his own in 1964. Johnson's Great Society programs included a major expansion of government programs to help the poor, the homeless, and minorities. His War on Poverty was reminiscent of Roosevelt's activism in dealing with the Depression. Johnson's Vietnam War policies, however, tore the Democratic Party apart in 1968, leaving the door to the presidency wide open for Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon.

1968–Present: The Era of Divided Party Government

Throughout most of American history, newly elected presidents have routinely swept a wave of their fellow partisans into office with them. For example, the Democrats gained 62 seats in the House when Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1912 and 97 when FDR was elected in 1932. The first time in the twentieth century that a newly elected

president moved into the White House without having his party in control of both houses of Congress was when Nixon won the 1968 election. Nixon's election was not to be an exception, however, but rather the beginning of a common pattern—repeated in the presidential elections won by Ronald Reagan and George Bush. For a time, it seemed that the normal state of affairs in Washington was to have a Republican president and a Democratic Congress.

Bill Clinton's election in 1992 briefly restored united party government until the Republicans won both houses of Congress in the 1994 elections. After the 1994 elections, Republican leaders were optimistic that they were at last on the verge of a new Republican era in which they would control both the presidency and Congress simultaneously. On the other side, Democratic leaders were hopeful that voters would not like the actions of the new Republican Congress and would restore unified Democratic control of the government. In the end, the ambitions of both sides were frustrated as voters opted to continue divided party government in 1996. The election of George W. Bush in 2000 led to a very brief period of united Republican control of the White House in Congress. But four months after Bush took the inaugural oath, Senator James Jeffords of Vermont defected from the GOP, thereby giving the Democrats the majority in the upper chamber. The 2002 election restored GOP control of the Senate by a narrow margin. And in 2004, unified Republican government was ratified by the people when President George W. Bush was reelected with partisan majorities in both the House and the Senate.

With fewer voters attached to the two major parties, it may well be difficult for either one to gain a strong enough foothold to maintain simultaneous control of both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue for very long. All told, both houses of Congress and the presidency have been simultaneously controlled by the same party for just 10.3 of the 38 years from 1969 to 2006.[24] The discrepancy between the patterns of presidential and congressional voting during this era of divided party government is unprecedented in American history.

Divided party government is frequently seen not only at the federal level but at the state level as well. As Morris Fiorina shows, the percentage of states that have unified party control of the governorship and the state legislature has steadily declined for over four decades.[25] Whereas 85 percent of state governments had one party controlling both houses of the legislature and the governorship in 1946, by 2005 this was the case in only 40 percent of the states (see Figure 8.3). Divided government, once an occasional oddity in state capitols, is now commonplace.

The recent pattern of divided government has caused many political scientists to believe that the party system has dealigned rather than realigned. Whereas realignment involves people changing from one party to another, **party dealignment** means that people are gradually moving away from both parties. When your car is realigned, it is adjusted in one direction or another to improve its steering. Imagine if your mechanic were to remove the steering mechanism instead of adjusting it—your car would be useless and ineffective. This is what many scholars fear has been happening to the parties.

In the parties' heyday, it was said that people would vote for a yellow dog if their party nominated one. Now, more than 90 percent of all Americans insist that "I always vote for the person whom I think is best, regardless of what party they belong to."[26] Rather than reflecting negative attitudes toward the parties, the recent dealignment has been characterized by a growing **party neutrality**. For example, 25 percent of the 2000 National Election Study respondents answered as follows to a set of four open-ended questions about the parties:

Q. *Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party?*
A. *No.*
Q. *Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Democratic Party?*
A. *No.*
Q. *Is there anything in particular that you like about the Republican Party?*
A. *No.*
Q. *Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Republican Party?*
A. *No.*

Why It Matters

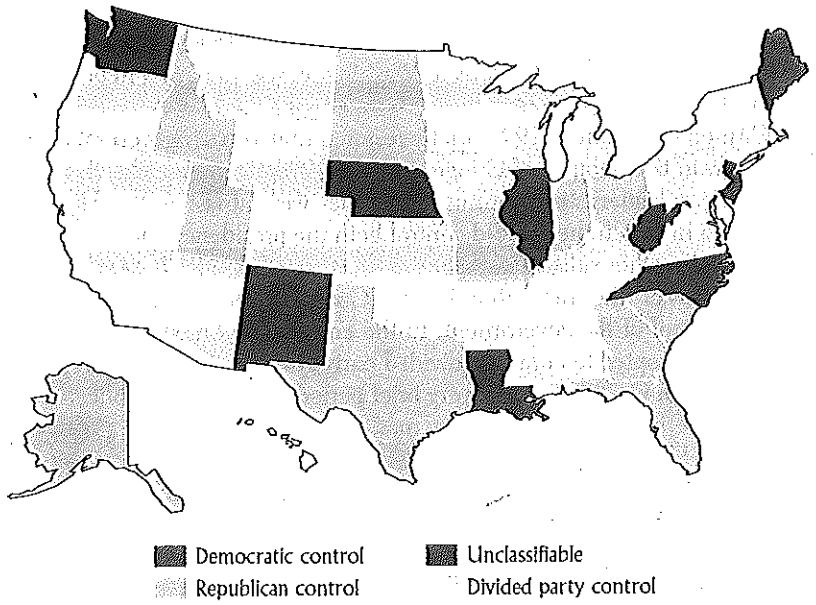
Divided Party Government
When one party controls the White House and the other party controls one or both houses of Congress, divided party government exists. Given that one party can check the other's agenda, it is virtually impossible for a party to say what it is going to do and then actually put these policies into effect. This situation is bad if you want clear lines of accountability on policy, but it is good if you prefer that the two parties be forced to work out compromises.

party dealignment
The gradual disengagement of people and politicians from the parties, as seen in part by shrinking party identification.

party neutrality
A term used to describe the fact that many Americans are indifferent toward to two major political parties.

Figure 8.3 Partisan Control of State Governments: 2005

This map shows which states as of 2005 were totally under Democratic or Republican control—that is, had one party controlling both Houses of the legislature as well as the governorship. Divided party control means that either one or both Houses of the legislature are controlled by a party different than the governor. Nebraska has a nonpartisan legislature and hence cannot be classified.



When these questions were first asked in the 1950s, only about 10 percent of respondents answered in this neutral way, generally indicating that they were not following politics at all. Now, many of those who say nothing about the parties are quite aware of the candidates. Lacking any party anchoring, though, they are easily swayed one way or the other. As a result, they are often referred to as "the floating voters." More than any other group, these independent-minded voters will determine the ups and downs of party fortunes in the twenty-first century.

Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics

third parties

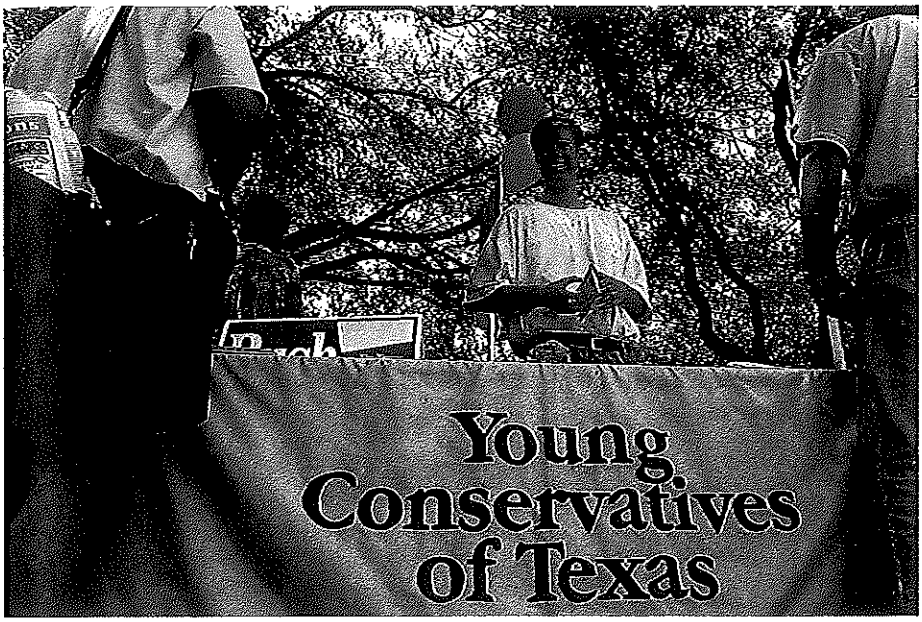
Electoral contenders other than the two major parties. American third parties are not unusual, but they rarely win elections.

The story of American party struggle is primarily the story of two major parties, but third parties are a regular feature of American politics and occasionally attract the public's attention. Third parties come in three basic varieties. First are parties that promote certain causes—either a controversial single issue (prohibition of alcoholic beverages, for example) or an extreme ideological position such as socialism or libertarianism. Second are splinter parties, which are offshoots of a major party. Teddy Roosevelt's Progressives in 1912, Strom Thurmond's States' Righters in 1948, and George Wallace's American Independents in 1968 all claimed they did not get a fair hearing from Republicans or Democrats and thus formed their own new parties. Finally, some third parties are merely an extension of a popular individual with presidential aspirations. Both John Anderson in 1980 and Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 offered voters who were dissatisfied with the Democratic and Republican nominees another option.

Timeline

Third Parties in American History

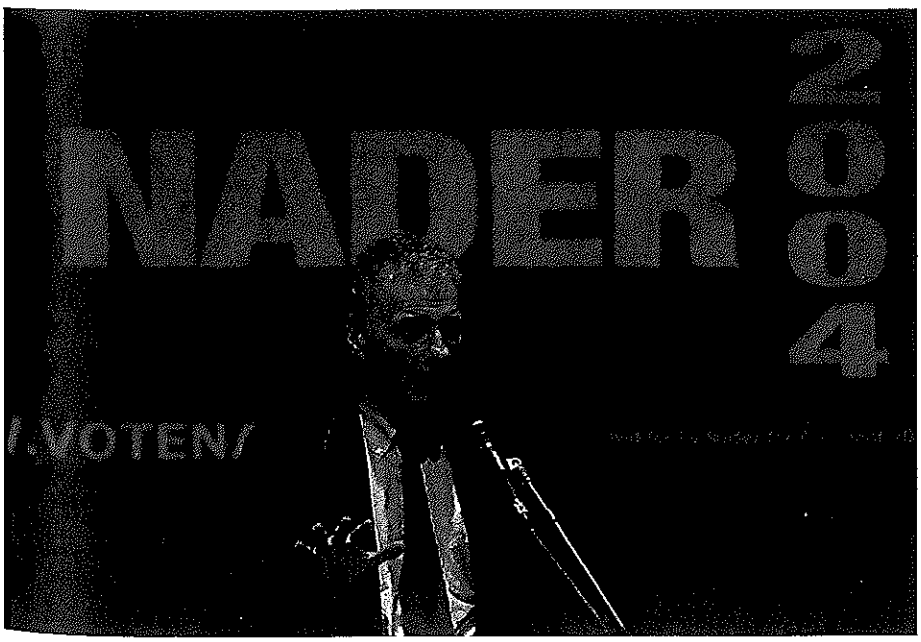
Although third party candidates almost never win office in the United States, scholars believe they are often quite important.[27] They have brought new groups into the electorate and have served as "safety valves" for popular discontent. The Free Soilers of the 1850s were the first true antislavery party; the Progressives and the Populists put many social reforms on the political agenda. George Wallace told his supporters in 1968 they had the chance to "send a message" to Washington—a message of support for tougher law and order measures, which is still being felt to this day. Ross Perot used his saturation of the TV airwaves in 1992 to ensure that the issue of the federal deficit was not ignored in the campaign. In 1998, a former professional



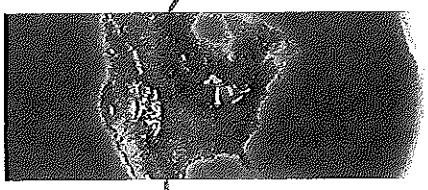
One's party affiliation is an important part of one's political identity. Although clubs of college Republicans and college Democrats are common on campuses around the country, roughly half of college-age Americans do not have a party affiliation, preferring to call themselves Independents.

wrestler stunned the political world when he won the governorship of Minnesota as a third party candidate. And in 2000 Green Party candidate Ralph Nader forced more attention on environmental issues and ultimately cost Gore the presidency by drawing away a small percentage of liberal votes.

Despite the regular appearance of third parties, the two-party system is firmly entrenched in American politics. Would it make a difference if America had a multiparty system, as so many European countries have? The answer is clearly yes. The most obvious consequence of two-party governance is the moderation of political conflict. If America had many parties, each would have to make a special appeal in order to stand out from the crowd. It is not hard to imagine what a multiparty system might look like in the United States. Quite possibly, African-American groups would form their own party, pressing vigorously for racial equality. Environmentalists could constitute another party, vowing to clean up the rivers, oppose nuclear power, and save the wilderness. America



Ralph Nader challenged the two-party system in 2000 by running for president on the ticket of the Green Party. Exit polls show his voters preferred Gore over Bush by a margin of five to two. With the margin being as close as it was in 2000, it seems readily apparent that Nader's presence in the race influenced the outcome. In 2004, Nader's Independent candidacy garnered only 0.3 percent of the vote.



America in Perspective

Multiparty Systems in Other Countries

One of the major reasons why the United States has only two parties represented in government is structural. America has a **winner-take-all system**, in which whoever gets the most votes wins the election. There are no prizes awarded for second or third place. Suppose there are three parties; one receives 45 percent of the vote, another 40 percent, and the third 15 percent. Though it got less than a majority, the party that finished first is declared the winner. The others are out in the cold. In this way, the American system discourages small parties. Unless a party wins, there is no reward for the votes it gets. Thus, it makes more sense for a small party to form an alliance with one of the major parties than to struggle on its own with little hope. In this example, the second- and third-place parties might merge (if they can reach an agreement on policy) to challenge the governing party in the next election.

In a system that employs **proportional representation**, however, such a merger would not be necessary. Under this system, which is used in most European countries, legislative seats are allocated according to each party's percentage of the nationwide vote. If a party wins 15 percent of the vote, then it receives 15 percent of the seats. Even a small party can use its voice in Parliament to be a thorn in the side of the government, standing up strongly for its principles. Such has often been the role of the Greens in Germany, who are ardent environmentalists. After the 2002 German election they formed a **coalition government** along with Germany's Social Democratic Party. Together the coalition controls over half the seats. Coalition governments are common in Europe. Italy has regularly been ruled by a coalition since the end of World War II, for example.

Even with proportional representation, not every party gets represented in the legislature. To be awarded seats, a party must always achieve a certain percentage of votes, which varies from country to country. Israel has one of the lowest thresholds at 1.5 percent. This explains why there are always so many parties represented in the Israeli Knesset. The founders of Israel's system wanted to make sure that all points of view were represented, but sometimes this has turned into a nightmare, with small extremist parties holding the balance of power.

Parties have to develop their own unique identities to appeal to voters in a multiparty system. This requires strong stands on the issues, but after the election compromises must be made to form a coalition government. If an agreement cannot be reached on the major issues, the coalition is in trouble. Sometimes a new coalition can be formed; other times the result is the calling of a new election. In either case, it is clear that proportional representation systems are more fluid than the two-party system in the United States.

winner-take-all system
An electoral system in which legislative seats are awarded only to the candidates who come in first in their constituencies. In American presidential elections, the system in which the winner of the popular vote in a state receives all the electoral votes of that state.

proportional representation
An electoral system used throughout most of Europe that awards legislative seats to political parties in proportion to the number of votes won in an election.

coalition government
When two or more parties join together to form a majority in a national legislature. This form of government is quite common in the multiparty systems of Europe.

could have religious parties, union-based parties, farmers' parties, and all sorts of others. As in some European countries, there could be half a dozen or more parties represented in Congress (see "America in Perspective: Multiparty Systems in Other Countries").

The American two-party system contributes to political ambiguity. Why should parties risk taking a strong stand on a controversial policy if doing so will only antagonize many voters? Ambiguity is a safe strategy,[28] as extremist candidates Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern in 1972 found out the hard way. The two-party system thus throttles extreme or unconventional views.

Understanding Political Parties

Political parties are considered essential elements of democratic government. Indeed, one of the first steps taken toward democracy in formerly communist Eastern European countries was the formation of competing political parties to contest elections. After years of one-party totalitarian rule, Eastern Europeans were ecstatic to be able to adopt a multiparty system like those that had proved successful in the West. In contrast, the founding of the world's first party system in the United States was seen as a risky adventure in the then uncharted waters of democracy. Wary of having parties at all, the Founders designed a system that has greatly restrained their political role to this day. Whether American parties should continue to be so loosely organized is at the heart of today's debate about their role in American democracy.

Democracy and Responsible Party Government

Ideally, in a democracy candidates should say what they mean to do if elected and, once they are elected, should be able to do what they promised. Critics of the American party system lament that this is all too often not the case, and have called for a "more responsible two-party system."[29] Advocates of the responsible party model believe the parties should meet the following conditions:

1. Parties must present distinct, comprehensive programs for governing the nation.
2. Each party's candidates must be committed to its program and have the internal cohesion and discipline to carry out its program.
3. The majority party must implement its programs, and the minority party must state what it would do if it were in power.
4. The majority party must accept responsibility for the performance of the government.

responsible party model

A view favored by some political scientists about how parties should work. According to the model, parties should offer clear choices to the voters, who can then use those choices as cues to their own preferences of candidates. Once in office, parties would carry out their campaign promises.

A two-party system operating under these conditions would make it easier to convert party promises into governmental policy. A party's officeholders would have firm control of the government, so they would be collectively, rather than individually, responsible for their actions. Voters would therefore know whom to blame for what the government does and does not accomplish.

As this chapter has shown, American political parties fall far short of these conditions. They are too decentralized to take a single national position and then enforce it.

Comparative

Comparing Political Parties

How You Can Make a Difference

Minor Political Parties

If you do not support either major political party, why not join one of the smaller political parties such as the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, or the Reform Party? Sometimes minor parties can win, such as when Jesse Ventura won the gubernatorial race in Minnesota in 1998. Minor parties suffer at the polls due to restrictive ballot access laws and lack of money. Many states will not let minor parties be on the ballot unless they demonstrate a lot of support in that state. Most states require a certain number of signatures of registered votes on petitions to allow a minor party on the ballot. You can help these parties get on the ballot in your state by carrying petitions and getting signatures. You can also help register new members of the party, distribute leaflets, write letters to the editors of newspapers, or in any other way your local party leaders need.

What you can do:

There are statewide organizations for most of the smaller political parties, and many local chapters as well. You can find the nearest one by checking the party's website.

- Green Party: *www.gp.org*. The Green Party is a progressive party that supports environmentalism, grassroots democracy, social justice, and peace/nonviolence. Ralph Nader was the Green Party candidate for the 2000 presidential election. Many believe his candidacy influenced the final outcome.
- Libertarian Party: *www.lp.org*. The Libertarian Party is both very liberal and very conservative. It favors absolute freedom in both the economic realm (free trade, nonintervention in foreign affairs, unrestricted free market, no government programs such as Social Security, welfare, interstate highways, or public schools) and in social/personal issues (no restrictions on abortions, drug use, prostitution, and so forth).
- Reform Party: *www.reformparty.org*. The Reform Party was started by Ross Perot and his followers in the early 1990s and reflects concerns such as favoring a balanced federal budget, campaign finance reform, a new tax system, and trade that protects American workers.
- Communist Party USA: *www.cpusa.org*. This party is a Marxist-Leninist working-class party that believes capitalism has failed and is angry at the continuing injustices and suffering they say it brings. They work for a socialist economy that puts people before profits and for full equality of all races and both genders.
- Constitution Party: *www.constitutionparty.com*. This conservative group wishes to return the U.S. government to its constitutional boundaries and limitations by restricting much current government activity.

Most candidates are self-selected, gaining their nomination by their own efforts rather than the party's. Virtually anyone can vote in party primaries; thus, parties do not have control over those who run under their labels. In 1991, for example, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, became the Republican nominee for governor of Louisiana despite denunciations from President Bush, who ultimately said he preferred the Democratic nominee. Had Duke won the election, the Republican Party would have been powerless to control his actions in office.

In America's loosely organized party system, there simply is no mechanism for a party to discipline officeholders and thereby ensure cohesion in policymaking. As David Mayhew writes, "Unlike most politicians elsewhere, American ones at both legislative and executive levels have managed to navigate the last two centuries of history without becoming minions of party leaders."[30] Thus, it is rare to find congressional votes in which over 90 percent of Democrats vote in opposition to over 90 percent of Republicans. Indeed, Mayhew's analysis of historic legislation from 1946 to 1990 failed to uncover a single case in which a major law was passed by such a clearly partisan vote.[31] The 1998 vote in the House to impeach President Clinton was unparalleled in recent times, with 98 percent of each party's members sticking to the party line.

Not everyone thinks that America's decentralized parties are a problem, however. Critics of the responsible party model argue that the complexity and diversity of American society are too great to be captured by such a simple model of party politics. Local differences need an outlet for expression, they say. One cannot expect Texas Democrats always to want to vote in line with New York Democrats. In the view of those opposed to the responsible party model, America's decentralized parties are appropriate for the type of limited government the Founders sought to create and most Americans wish to maintain.[32]

The Founding Fathers were very concerned that political parties would trample on the rights of individuals. They wanted to preserve individual freedom of action by various elected officials. With America's weak party system, this has certainly been the case. Individual members of Congress and other elected officials have great freedom to act as they see fit rather than toeing the party line.

American Political Parties and the Scope of Government

The lack of disciplined and cohesive European-style parties in America goes a long way to explain why the scope of governmental activity in the United States is not as broad as it is in other established democracies. The absence of a national health care system in America provides a perfect example. In Britain, the Labour Party had long proposed such a system, and after it won the 1945 election, all its members of Parliament voted to enact national health care into law. On the other side of the Atlantic, President Truman also proposed a national health care bill in the first presidential election after World War II. But even though he won the election and had majorities of his own party in both houses of Congress, his proposal never got very far. The weak party structure in the United States allowed many congressional Democrats to oppose Truman's health care proposal. Over four decades later, President Clinton again proposed a system of universal health care and had a Democratic-controlled Congress to work with. His experience in 1994 was much the same as Truman's: The Clinton health care bill never even came up for a vote in Congress because of the president's inability to get enough members of his own party to go along with him. Substantially increasing the scope of government in America is not something that can be accomplished through the disciplined actions of one party's members, as is the case in other democracies.

On the other hand, because no single party in the United States can ever be said to have firm control over the government, the hard choices necessary to cut back on existing government spending are rarely addressed. A disciplined and cohesive governing party would have the power to say no to various demands on the government.

America's decentralized political parties have little control over candidates, as shown by the Senate nomination of Oliver North, who figured prominently in the Iran-Contra scandal. North obtained the Republican nomination in Virginia despite being denounced by the state's senior Republican Senator, John Warner, as well as by former Presidents Reagan and Bush.

In contrast, America's loose party structure makes it possible for many individual politicians—Democrats and Republicans alike—to focus their efforts on getting more from the government for their own constituents.

Is the Party Over?

The key problem for American political parties is that they are no longer the main source of political information, attention, and affection. The party of today has rivals that appeal to voters and politicians alike, the biggest of which is the media. With the advent of television, voters no longer need the party to find out what the candidates are like and what they stand for. The interest group is another party rival. As Chapter 11 will discuss, the power of interest groups has grown enormously in recent years. Interest groups, not the parties, pioneered much of the technology of modern politics, including mass mailings and sophisticated fund-raising.

The parties have clearly been having a tough time lately, but there are indications that they are beginning to adapt to the high-tech age. Although the old city machines are largely extinct, state and national party organizations have become more visible and active than ever. More people are calling themselves Independents and splitting their tickets, but the majority still identify with a party, and this percentage seems to have stabilized.

For a time, some political scientists were concerned that parties were on the verge of disappearing from the political scene. A more realistic view is that parties will continue to play an important, but significantly diminished, role in American politics. Leon Epstein sees the situation as one in which the parties have become "frayed." He concludes that the parties will "survive and even moderately prosper in a society evidently unreceptive to strong parties and yet unready, and probably unable, to abandon parties altogether."[33]

Summary

Even though political parties are one of Americans' least beloved institutions, political scientists see them as a key linkage between policymakers and the people. Parties are pervasive in politics; for each party there is a *party in the electorate*, a *party organization*, and a *party in government*. Political parties affect policy through their platforms.

Despite much cynicism about party platforms, they are taken seriously when their candidates are elected.

America has a two-party system. This fact is of fundamental importance in understanding American politics. The ups and downs of the two parties constitute party competition. In the past, one party or the other has dominated the government for long periods of time. These periods were punctuated by critical elections, in which party coalitions underwent realignment. Since 1968, however, American government has experienced a unique period of party dealignment. Although parties are currently weaker at the mass level, they are somewhat stronger and richer in terms of national and state organization. Some would have them be far more centralized and cohesive, following the responsible party model. The loose structure of American parties allows politicians to avoid collective responsibility but also promotes individualism that many Americans value.

Key Terms

party competition
political party
linkage institutions
party image
rational-choice theory
party identification
ticket-splitting
party machines
patronage
closed primaries
open primaries
blanket primaries
national convention
national committee
national chairperson
coalition
party eras
critical election
party realignment
New Deal coalition
party dealignment
party neutrality
third parties
winner-take-all system
proportional representation
coalition government
responsible party model

Internet Resources

www.rnc.org
The official site of the Republican National Committee.

www.democrats.org
The Democratic Party online.

www.lp.org
Although Libertarians rarely get more than a few percent of the vote, they are consistently getting many of their candidates on the ballot for many offices. You can learn more about their beliefs at this official site.

www.gp.org
The official website for the Green Party, which emphasizes environmental protection over corporate profits. The Greens nominated Ralph Nader in 2000 and David Cobb in 2004.

Get Connected

Third Parties

Most people have heard of the Democratic and Republican Parties, but many people would be surprised to learn that there are many other parties besides these. The text notes that these other parties, called "minor parties" or "third parties," come in three basic varieties: those that promote certain causes, those that are offshoots of the major parties, and those organized around popular individuals. What do these third parties stand for? Should you identify with one of the third parties?

Search the Web

Go to the Party Matchmaking Service *http://www.3pc.net/matchmaker/* and take the quiz. Think about the questions carefully and try to answer honestly.

Questions to Ask

- According to the quiz, with which party do you have the highest compatibility? Do you already identify with this party?
- Were you surprised by the results? Why?

- Find out whether this party has had a candidate for federal office on the ballot in your state in recent elections. (You can try checking your state's Secretary of State or Election Board web pages, or even try a web search on Google.) If so, did the candidate win?

Why It Matters

Despite the fact that their candidates are rarely elected, third parties exist because of the diversity of ideas in America, and they play an important role in our system of government. Third parties propose policies that are often adopted by the two major parties and sometimes are enacted into law. Third parties also allow voters a "protest" vote when they don't like the Democratic or Republican candidate. In some parts of the country, third party candidates are the only opponents faced by Democratic or Republican candidates.

Get Involved

You can find the contact information and web page addresses of political parties at the Politics1.com website *http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm*. Research the party with which you are most compatible according to the quiz results. Are you interested in associating with this party? If so, find out how you can become an active member.

To see more Get Connected exercises for Chapter 8, go to www.ablongman.com/edwards.

For Further Reading

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