

CHAPTER 12 POLITICAL PARTIES

Narrative Lecture Outline

What is a Political Party?

At the most basic level, a political party is a group of office holders, candidates, activists, and voters who identify with a group label and seek to elect to public office individuals who run under that label. This is a practical definition in keeping with the practical nature of American politics. Our parties tend not to be as ideological as parties in other countries. Ours is a centrist party system.

Our system contains two major parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. We also have a number of minor or third parties at any given time. Among the more important third parties today are the Reform Party and the Libertarian Party.

Parties are made up of three types of 'members'--

- governmental party--the office holders and candidates
- organizational party--workers and activists
- party-in-the-electorate--those who vote for the party or consider themselves to be allied or associated with it

The Evolution of American Party Democracy

Americans have had a love-hate relationship with parties since the beginning of the republic. George Washington despised parties and used his Farewell Address to warn against them. However, Hamilton and Jefferson, as heads of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist groups respectively, are often considered 'fathers' of the modern party system. By 1800, this country had a party system with two major parties that has remained relatively stable ever since. We have had doomsayers sound the death knell for both parties on a variety of occasions but they always seem to survive somehow.

The Early Parties Fade

From 1817 to 1825 was called the Era of Good Feelings, and party politics practically disappeared at the national level. However, parties were alive and well at lower levels. The electorate expanded dramatically at this time--the U.S. pushed westward, most states abolished property requirements, and immigration continued.

Nomination processes and the electoral college also opened up to additional participation. This broadened the base of the parties. Conventions were held beginning with the 1832 Democratic Convention to nominate presidential candidates. Andrew Jackson was the first so nominated.

Jackson's populism and strong personality polarized politics, and the Whig Party emerged to oppose him. The Whig Party was descended from the Federalists and its early leaders included Henry Clay (Speaker of the House). The

Whigs and Democrats were fiercely competitive. However, the issue of slavery plagued the Whigs and they soon dissolved to be replaced by the Republican Party formed in 1854. The Republicans set their sights on the abolition of slavery and by 1860, elected Abraham Lincoln as president.

Democrats and Republicans: The Golden Age

From the presidential elections of 1860 to the present, the same two major parties have contested elections in the United States: Republicans and Democrats. Control of the major institutions of government has seesawed between them.

Reconstruction--Republican dominance
1876-1896--closely competitive system
1896-1929--Republican dominance
1930s and 1940s--Democratic dominance
1950s and 1960s--mixed
1970-present--neither party dominant

The Modern Era Versus the Golden Age

The 'Modern Era' followed the 'Golden Age' (1870-1920). Party and government in large cities seemed interchangeable. This was the era of political machines, bosses, and patronage. Political machines--party organizations that recruit members by offering tangible incentives such as jobs, money, favors, and so on--were central to the lives of millions of people. They helped new immigrants settle in, they provided social services, jobs, sponsored community events, and gave food and housing to the poor. All in exchange for votes.

Is the Party Over?

Government has gradually taken over many of the functions that were performed by the party-based political machines. Government now prints ballots, provides social welfare monies, conducts elections, and so on. So party organizations have fewer functions and less ability to enforce party-line votes and strict discipline.

Several other developments have decreased the power of parties:

- direct primary -- the selection of candidates was moved out of the smoked filled room and into a more public setting. Qualified voters now determine who runs
- civil service laws -- have removed patronage or the spoils system from the control of parties. Now government jobs go to people who pass merit based tests not loyal party workers
- the rise of issue-oriented politics -- social changes and broad based education has led to more thoughtful voters and issues that cut across traditional party lines like environmentalism and ticket-splitting has become commonplace
- television -- TV emphasizes individuals and personalities over party labels

- the rise of political consultants -- these hired guns often work for both sides and use whatever works. They are the new intermediary between the voter and candidate and thus weaken the parties

The Parties Endure

Political parties have changed a lot over the years but remain reliable vehicles of mass participation. Parties have adapted to changing conditions just as the Constitution has adapted.

The Roles of the American Parties

For 150 years the two party system has been used to organize and resolve political and social conflicts. They are less popular today than at earlier points in history but remain a vital agent of change and representation in our system. One of the most important roles the parties fulfill is that they convert a huge array of ideas and opinions (of millions of voters) into a comprehensible pair of ideas. They aggregate public opinion to a manageable level.

Mobilizing Support and Gathering Power

Members of the party can usually be counted on to support office holders elected under the party banner. Party is a fairly simple way of determining how much support one has in Congress or among the electorate.

A Force for Stability

Parties promote stability and act to moderate public opinion due to their pragmatic drive to win elections.

Unity, Linkage, Accountability

Parties provide linkages among branches and levels of government. They allow the often disparate parts of our political system to work together. Parties also link voters and elected officials and parties can hold office holders accountable at periodic party meetings.

Because parties must win national elections, they can also function as unifiers of the country. They dampen sectionalism and give people in remote parts of the country something in common with other Americans far away.

The Electioneering Function

Parties organize and compete in elections. The parties recruit candidates, provide staffing, give money, and provide numerous other important services during election cycles.

Party as a Voting and Issue Cue

A voter's party identification acts as a filter for information. It provides the single most important cue for voting. If a citizen does not know much about a candidate or race, they generally vote for the party they prefer.

Policy Formulation and Promotion

Parties formulate and convey their ideas about public policy through the national party platform. Every four years, the party gathers and writes a lengthy document explaining their positions on key issues in advance of the presidential nominating convention. About two-thirds of platform promises have usually been implemented when the party's candidate wins the election.

One-Partyism and Third-Partyism

One of the most significant political trends of recent times is the demise of one-partyism or one party dominance of elections in a given area. The formerly "Solid South" is no longer solidly Democratic. There are no truly Republican or Democratic states at this time. This growth in competition among the parties seems to be a sign of party weakness. More and more individuals split their vote between the parties, and sometimes vote for third parties.

Minor Parties: Third-Partyism

Third parties appear sporadically. These minor parties are not a threat to the two major parties. As a matter of fact, only eight third parties have ever won any electoral votes in a presidential contest, and only five have ever won more than 10% in a presidential election. Among the third parties that have had some success are:

- 2000 Ralph Nader and the Green Party
- 1996 and 1992: Ross Perot's Reform Party
- 1968: George Wallace and the American Independent Party
- 1924: Robert LaFollette's Progressive Party
- 1912: Teddy Roosevelt and the Bull Moose Party
- 1856: Millard Fillmore's American Party

Third parties generally arise from one of the following causes:

- sectionalism--Dixiecrats in 1948
- economic protest--Populists in 1892
- specific issues--Green Party and the environment
- ideology--Socialists, Communists, Libertarians
- charismatic personalities--George Wallace's American Independent Party
- failures of the major parties--Ross Perot arose out of the major parties' failures to deal with the deficit and debt as key issues

Although third parties form for a variety of reasons, usually the issues are almost always coopted by the major parties. Third parties help the major parties change and force them to acknowledge alienated groups, incorporate new ideas, and nominate more attractive candidates.

Why Third Parties Tend to Remain Minor

Institutional Reasons

- "single-member plurality" electoral system--this system, also called first-past-the-post, means that only the winner gets elected. In proportional representation systems, there tend to be more parties because parties are rewarded (with seats in parliament for example) for as little as 1% or 5% of the vote.
- most states allow Democrats and Republicans an automatic place on the ballot, but have laws requiring third parties to gather signatures and petition
- state and national legislatures are organized on a party basis and aim to perpetuate that
- public funding of campaigns is more generous for the two major parties, third party candidates must get more than 5% of the vote and major party candidates do not
- the news media ignores minor parties since they are perceived as 'non-winners.'

Other Reasons

- dualist theory states that there is a binary nature to American politics
- we have non-ideological, centrist politics

Third parties play a valuable role in American politics. They popularize new ideas, serve as vehicles of popular discontent, induce change in the major parties, assist party realignments, and allow the expression of dissent and opposition.

The Basic Structure of American Political Parties

- **National Committees**--The Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC) are the national policy organs of the parties. They choose national chairpersons and run the quadrennial conventions. In addition, the Senate and House parties also have committees that are located with the national committees in D.C.
- **Leadership**--The party chairpersons are usually selected by the sitting president for the party in power, and the party national committee usually selects the other national chairperson. The chair is an important spokesperson for party interests.
- **National Conventions**--Every four years, the national committees put together the presidential nominating conventions. Until 1984, they got gavel-to-gavel coverage by media outlets. Today, coverage is more selective. The conventions allow parties to nominate candidates, but also to discuss party organizational matters.

- **States and Localities**--Parties are structurally based at the state and local levels. Much of the work of the party is carried out at the precinct, city, county, and state levels.
- **Informal Groups**--Parties are supplemented by a number of other groups such as the National Federation of Democratic Women, the Young Republicans, State Governor's Associations, interest groups, PACs, and many more. In addition, there are think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation for the Republicans and the Progressive Policy Institute for the Democrats.

The Party in Government

The Congressional Party

The party is highly important and very visible in Congress. Party groups select the leadership of both houses, arrange committees, and organize and operate the Congress.

Congressional party leaders have some methods of enforcing party discipline such as good committee assignments, prime office assignments, fund raising help, legislative assistance (favorable treatment for a pork barrel project), endorsements, electoral help by popular party leaders, and much more. Party discipline, however, is not terribly effective in most cases. Most elections are candidate centered and individualistic, and in those cases many party sanctions cannot have that much influence.

Party unity and cohesion seem to be growing recently. Electoral insecurity caused by the increasing competitiveness of the party system seems to be partially the cause. Also parties may be more homogeneous than in earlier years. The carrot and stick of party money as well as the growth of party-based advertising and polling also play a role.

The Presidential Party

The president is an important party leader. His successes and failures reflect on his party. The president raises money, campaigns, and sometimes his "coattails" help party nominees. Some presidents are very interested in party building and are very helpful to the party organization and its candidates. They are called pro-party presidents. Other presidents act as if they are 'above the fray' and are almost nonpartisan.

The Parties and the Judiciary

Members of the judiciary do follow election returns and are influenced by public opinion. They are also products of their own party identification and have the same partisan perceptual screens as the rest of us.

Many judgeships are electoral positions and though officially nonpartisan, there is usually an undercurrent of party affiliation. Judges are also appointed. These positions are patronage and usually go to judges who agree politically with the elected official (an active party member) who appoints him/her.

The Parties and State Government

Most of the same logic of the party's relationship to the national legislature, executive, and judiciary apply at the state level as well. Occasionally, a third party will dominate at the state level. A good example of this is Jesse Ventura winning the governorship of Minnesota.

There are a few differences. Governors have more patronage available to them than a president does. These material rewards and incentives help the governor maintain party discipline and promote his/her agenda. Forty-one governors have the line-item veto that gives the governor considerable powers to wield against partisan enemies and for partisan allies. In legislatures, state legislatures generally have more party unity and cohesion than the national Congress and state legislative leaders generally have more power than their federal counterparts.

The Modern Transformation of Party Organization

Republican Strengths

Until 1992, the Republicans outclassed the Democrats in most categories of campaign service and fundraising. The Republican Party staff was more developed and more creative since the Republicans were a minority party from 1932 to 1980 in Congress, and did not have incumbency and other advantages. The Republicans have developed a particularly effective direct mail fundraising organization, and the party often has trouble legally spending all the money it collects.

The Republican Party supports a large array of activities and services including:

- party staff
- voter contact
- polling
- media advertising
- campaign staff training and research

Democratic Party Gains

The national Democratic Party remained quite weak and disorganized until they suffered massive defeats in the 1980s. This catalyzed the party to learn about Republican successes and try to craft some of their own. Democrats still trail Republicans in most campaign and fundraising functions but they are improving dramatically. In 1992, they won the presidency for the first time in 16 years. The Democrats now have their own direct mail program and a multi-million dollar media center for producing TV and radio spots at very low rates. They also created the Democratic National Training Institute.

The Party-In-The-Electorate

The party-in-the-electorate is the mass of potential voters who identify with party labels. This group is self-identified and seems to exhibit ever lower levels of party loyalty.

Party Identification

American voters identify with a party, but rarely belong to it. They tend not to physically join and pay dues; instead they simply assert they are a Republican or a Democrat. The party label becomes a voter's central political reference symbol and a way of interpreting a complex world.

Party loyalties generally come from one's parents, but can be affected by a number of factors such as peers, charismatic personalities, cataclysmic events, and intense social issues.

Declining Loyalty

The number of independents in the U.S. is rising; from 19% in 1958 to almost 38% twenty years later. Identification with the two major parties today is in the mid 80% range. However, party loyalty is not in that much trouble. If pollsters go beyond simply asking affiliation, they often find that many self-declared independents often 'lean' quite strongly in one direction or the other. These 'leaners' do feel party affiliations, but choose not to self-identify with a party.

In addition, new issues have cut across traditional party lines and weakened party affiliation. So do the personality politics fostered by television and political consultants.

So who remains in the party stables? In general, the following trends seem to hold true:

- group affiliation--labor unions tend to vote Democratic, Chambers of Commerce tend to vote Republican
- geographic region--the South still tends to vote Democratic in presidential races, the West seems to be strongly Republican
- gender--the Democrats seem to have a slight lead in garnering the women's vote
- race and ethnicity--over 80% of African Americans and many Hispanics vote Democratic except for Cuban Americans who are generally Republicans
- age--young people are again becoming more Democratic
- social and economic factors--the GOP remains the party of professionals, executives, and white collar workers and the Democrats lead among blue collar workers and the unemployed
- religion--Protestants tend to favor the Republican Party and Catholics and Jews are mostly Democrats
- marital status--married folks tend to lean Republican and the widowed are mostly Democrats
- ideology--liberals tend to be Democrats and conservatives tend to be Republicans

Websites for Students

University of Michigan, as well as links to congressional party leadership and platforms.
www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/Documents.center/psusp.html#party

Third Party Central offers links to third parties.
www.3pc.net/index.html

Politics 1 offers links to political parties, campaign information, candidate information, and more. They also offer a free email newsletter.
www.politics1.com

Major Parties

The **Democratic National Committee** site.
www.democrats.org/index.html

The **Republican National Committee** site.
www.rnc.org

Third Parties

The **Reform Party**.
www.reformparty.org/

The **Libertarian Party**.
www.lp.org

The **Green Party**
www.greenparty.org

Web Activities for Classes

- 1) Congress currently has three independent members. Assign students to do some research to determine whether their independent status truly makes them different from the Democrats and Republicans. What kinds of compromises must an independent member of Congress make? How about independent governors? What can this tell us about the role of parties?
- 2) Have students use the Internet to look up state party organizations in three states that have the potential to be different from one another (for example a Southern state, a New England state, and a Western state). Have them compare the Democratic and Republican parties from those states on a variety of indicators

including issue positions, platforms, and organization. Are they different? How and Why?

- 3) Have students use the Web to research the Republican and Democratic stands on various issues or have them compare and contrast the platforms.
- 4) Find copies of the most recent national platforms for the two major parties. Compare them on a variety of issues. Then look at public opinion polls to see how the party positions correspond to those of average Americans. What do you find? Why do you think that is the case?

General Class Activities and Discussion Assignments

- 1) During the 1980s, the Democrats had serious problems and until Clinton had not been elected to the presidency for two consecutive terms since FDR. In 1994, the Democrats looked dead in the water and in 1999, the Republicans struggled on a variety of fronts. By 2001, the Republicans seemed to have recovered. Hold a class discussion on party decline and resurgence dealing with these and other issues.
- 2) Hold a discussion on the role of the national platform or using discussion compare and contrast the Republican and Democratic platforms.
- 3) The election of Minnesota Governor Jesse "the Body" Ventura has breathed fresh air into the hopes of many third parties. Break the students into groups of 3-4 students and have them devise a new third party that they believe could have success similar to Ventura. They should choose a name, a candidate for some offices, and write up a platform of issues to present to the class. Do the groups come up with similar parties? Discuss widely.
- 4) Have students debate the desirability of the two-party system. You can frame it in a variety of ways: as a proposal for proportional representation; as a statement about third parties and how they show the 'bankruptcy' of the current American system; etc.
- 5) In 1998, Jesse Ventura--a former professional wrestler--won the governorship of Minnesota under the banner of the Reform Party. At the same time, the lower and upper houses of the state legislature were captured by different parties (one is Democratic, the other Republican). Discuss how this might affect policymaking and political parties in the state. Would having a third party governor make a difference? Check on the web to determine if you were right.
- 6) Have students go and visit, or you can invite to class, some local party activists. Ask them to talk to you about what they do in the party, why and how they got