

# Political Parties

## Chapter Summary

I. Introduction (234-236) The founding fathers feared that political parties could be forums of corruption and national divisiveness. Today, most observers agree that political parties have contributed greatly to American democracy. Parties have an impact on how we are governed and what government does. Party competition is the battle between Democrats and Republicans for the control of public offices

II. The Meaning of Party (236-240)

A. Introduction

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.”**

Political parties are like three-headed political giants.

**First**, the party-in-the-electorate is the largest component of an American party. Americans join a party simply by identifying with it no need to register. No dues.

**Second**, a party as an organization has a national office, a full-time staff, rules and bylaws, and budgets. Precinct leaders, County and State chairpeople and D.C. officials. Job to run party in between elections.

**Third**, the party-in-government consists of elected officials who label themselves as members of the party. May not always agree on policy. Led by President and Governors.

B. Tasks of the Parties

Linkage institutions translate inputs from the public into outputs from the policymakers.

In the United States the **four main linkage institutions are parties, elections, interest groups, and the media.**

Political parties perform the following tasks: pick candidates, run campaigns, give cues to voters through party image (what people believe the party generally stands for), articulate policies, and coordinate policymaking. Television and internet has made this easier.

C. Parties, Voters, and Policy: **The Downs Model**

Anthony Downs' **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.”

In the American electorate a few voters are very liberal and a few very conservative, but most are in the middle; therefore, in order to survive, both parties must stay near the center. From a rational-choice perspective, one should expect the parties to differentiate themselves somewhat. Democrats and Republicans have to forge different identities to build voter loyalty. More people see major differences between the major parties than they used to.

### III. The Party in the Electorate (240-241)

For most people the party is a psychological concept. Party images help shape people's party identification (the self-proclaimed preference for one party or the other). The clearest trend in party identification has been the decline of both parties and upsurge of independence. African Americans are the only major social group that has not moved toward a position of increased independence. The abandonment of either party for a nonpartisan stance is well advanced for many white Americans, especially younger voters. Those who still identify with a party are no longer as loyal in the voting booth. **Ticket-splitting** (voting with one party for one office and another for other offices) is on the rise.

### IV. The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots to Washington (241-245)

#### A. Introduction

As organizations, American political parties are **decentralized and fragmented**. In America the formal party organizations have little power. Candidates in the United States can get elected on their own.

#### B. Local Parties

From the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, many cities were dominated by **party machines** ("party organization that depends crucially on inducements that are both specific and material"). **Patronage** is one of the most important inducements used by machines. Patronage jobs are given for political reasons rather than for merit or competence alone.

Urban party organizations are no longer very active as a rule. There has been a revitalization of party organization at the county level. Examples: Boss Tweed, and Daley in Chicago.

#### C. The Fifty State Party Systems

American parties are a loose aggregation of fifty state parties, which are themselves a loose association of individuals, groups, and local organizations. States are allowed wide discretion in the regulation of party activities including primary elections. Some states give parties greater power than others to limit who can participate in their nomination contests by using closed, open, or blanket primaries. In terms of headquarters and budgets, state parties are better organized than they used to be, but still pale when compared to other national interest groups.

#### D. The National Party Organizations

The supreme power within each of the parties is its **national convention** that meets every four years to write the party's platform and nominate its candidates for president and vice president.

The **national committee** keeps the party operating between conventions.

The day-to-day activities of the national party are the responsibility of the **national chairperson**.

## V. The Party in Government: Promises and Policy (245-247)

Party control matters because each party and the elected officials who represent it try to turn campaign promises into policy. Voters are usually attracted to different parties because of their performance and policies. What the party does in office greatly influences who will join its **coalition**.

Examples of kept promises :     Regan  
  Clinton  
  Bush

Ex. Broken promises:           LBJ  
  Reagan  
  Bush  
  Clinton

Contrary to popular impression, research shows that parties and presidents usually try to keep their promises. Party platforms are excellent predictors of a party's actual policy performance once in office.

## VI. Party Eras in American History (247-253)

### A. Introduction

Party eras consist of long periods of time when one party has been the dominant majority party. Party eras are punctuated by a critical election that is characterized by an electoral upheaval resulting in new coalitions formed for each party. This process is called **party realignment**.

### B. 1796-1824: The First Party System

America's first and shortest-lived major party was the **Federalist Party**. During this time, most party leaders did not regard themselves as professional politicians. The Federalists were defeated by the Democratic-Republicans (also known as the Jeffersonians). The Democratic-Republican Party was a coalition of agrarian interests rather than industrialists who supported the Federalists.

### C. 1828-1856: Jackson and the Democrats versus the Whigs

General Andrew Jackson founded the **modern American political party**, changing the Democratic-Republican Party to the Democratic Party and forging a new coalition that included westerners as well as southerners, new immigrants as well as settled Americans. Martin Van Buren was the behind-the-scenes architect of the Democratic Party. The Whigs composed of northern industrialists and southern planters provided opposition.

### D. 1860-1932: The Two Republican Eras

The slavery issue split the Democrats and Whigs in the 1850s, leading to the first Republican era. The Republicans rose as the antislavery party, forging a coalition that put them in ascendancy for more than sixty years.

A second Republican era was initiated with the watershed election of 1896 over the issue of the gold standard, a realigning election that shifted the party coalitions and entrenched the Republicans for another generation.

## E. 1932-1968: The New Deal Coalition

The Republican Party declined with President Herbert Hoover's handling of the Great Depression. Franklin Roosevelt defeated Hoover in 1932, promising a **New Deal**. Democrats forged a **New Deal coalition** of urban dwellers, labor unions, Catholics and Jews, the poor, southerners, African Americans, and intellectuals. The Democratic Party remained the clear majority for decades. Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War policies tore the Democratic Party apart in 1968.

## F. 1968-Present: The Era of Divided Government

The first time in the twentieth century that a newly elected president did not have his party in control of both houses of Congress was when Nixon won the 1968 election. Since then, with few exceptions, voters have opted to continue divided-party government.

Divided government is also common at the state level. In realignment people change from one party to another; in a party dealignment citizens gradually move away from both. The recent dealignment has been characterized by growing party neutrality. It is the independent-minded voters who will determine the ups and downs of party fortunes in the twenty-first century.

## VII. Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics (254-256)

Third parties occasionally attract the public's attention. There are **three varieties of third parties**: parties that promote certain causes or ideologies (Prohibition),

**splinter parties** (Progressives T. Roosevelt) that are offshoots of a major party

parties that are extensions of a popular individual with presidential aspirations (Ross Perot).

Third parties have brought new groups into the electorate and have served as safety valves for popular discontent. The most obvious consequence of two-party governance is the moderation of political conflict. With only two parties, both parties follow a centrist position in order to maximize their appeal to voters. The result is often political ambiguity.

## VIII. Understanding Political Parties (256-260)

- A. Democracy and Responsible Party Government in an ideal democracy candidates should say what they mean to do if elected and be able to do what they promised once elected.

According to the responsible party model, parties should

- 1) present distinct, comprehensive programs,
- 2) each party candidate must be committed to the program,
- 3) the majority party must implement its program, and
- 4) the majority party must accept responsibility for the performance of government.

American political parties fall short of these conditions because they are too decentralized to take a national position and enforce it and most candidates are self-selected. ( ex. David Duke) There is no mechanism for a party to discipline their officeholders and ensure cohesion.

Critics of the responsible party model argue that American society is too complex and diverse to capture such a simple model. Local differences need an outlet for expression. Decentralized parties are appropriate for a limited government.

## B. Individualism and Gridlock

The founding fathers were concerned that political parties would violate individual rights and wanted to preserve individual freedom of action by elected officials. A consequence of allowing individualism is **gridlock** in American policymaking. The lack of a strong party structure makes it easier for politicians to pass the buck. When one party controls both the executive and legislative branches there is less open conflict. Nevertheless, the party in control typically has a hard time maintaining sufficient unity to accomplish major changes.

## C. American Political Parties and the **Scope of Government**

The lack of disciplined parties in America helps explain why the scope of governmental activity is narrower in the United States than in other established democracies.

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.

D. Is the Party Over? The key problem of American political parties today is that they are no longer the main source of political information, attention, and affection. The media and interest groups, for example, are major rivals to political parties. There are indications that parties are trying to adapt to the high-tech age. State and national party organizations have become more visible and active than ever. Political parties will probably continue to play an important, but significantly diminished, role in American politics.