

CH. 7 – POLITICAL PARTIES

Today many Americans take pride in their status as independent voters, partly because they see parties as lacking vision for the country. Since many people think that each of the major parties only cares about defeating or humiliating the other, they avoid identification as a loyal Democrat or a staunch Republican. These negative attitudes toward parties are rooted in the roles that they play in American politics.

In most democracies political parties are important institutions that link citizens to their government. The founders of the U.S. political system hoped to avoid the mischief of political factions when they envisioned a government with enough points of influence to make parties unnecessary. James Madison reflected in his famous *Federalist #10* that political factions are necessary evils to be controlled by federalism and separation of powers, but the founders still believed that political parties such as those that dominated British politics could and should be avoided at all costs. Of course, parties appeared almost as soon as the new government was created, with their origins in the disagreements between two of Washington's cabinet members, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

Some observers believe that modern avoidance of political party labels may have been reversed by the election of 2004. Voter participation increased dramatically in that year, partly because of almost unprecedented efforts by both Republicans and Democrats, again reflecting that parties are an integral part of the American political system.

FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties fulfill the following functions in the American political system:

- **Connecting citizens to their government** - Parties are one of several **linkage institutions** that connect people in a large democracy to the government. In any country with a population large enough to form a representative democracy, institutions that link the people to government are a necessity. Modern linkage institutions include interest groups, the media, elections, and political parties. Party ideology and organization increase **political efficacy** by helping citizens to make sense of government decisions and processes and to feel that government listens to them.
- **Running candidates for political office** - Parties pick policymakers and run campaigns. Most elected officials, whether at the local, state, or national level, run as nominees of a major political party. Whereas personal wealth certainly helps, most candidates rely on the party organization to coordinate and fund their political campaigns.
- **Informing the public** - Parties articulate policies and give cues to voters. Although both major parties are by necessity broadly based, they each convey an image and endorse policies that help voters decide which candidates to support.
- **Organizing the government** - Parties often coordinate governmental policy-making that would be more fragmented among the three branches and the local, state, and federal levels. Informal relationships between officials in different parts of government but with similar partisan ties can make policy-making go more smoothly.

WHY A TWO PARTY SYSTEM?

Most modern democracies have a multi-party system, so the United States is definitely in the minority with its two party system, one of only about fifteen in the world today. Even though a number of third parties have emerged in the course of U.S. history, none have endured, and with the exception of a short period in the early 1800s, two major political parties have always competed with one another for power in the system. Three important reasons for the American two-party system are:

- **Consensus of values** - It is easy to complain about petty bickering between Democrats and Republicans. What we sometimes forget is that Americans share a broad consensus, or agreement, of many basic political values. Both parties believe in liberty, equality, and individualism. Neither advocates that the Constitution be discarded, and both accept the election process by conceding defeat

to the winners. In many countries with multi-party systems, the range of beliefs is greater, and disagreements run deeper.

- **Historical influence** - The nation began with two political parties - the Federalists and the anti-Federalists. During early American history politicians tended to take sides, starting with the debate over the constitution, and continuing with the disagreements within George Washington's cabinet. The tendency has persisted throughout American history.
- **The Winner-Take-All System** - The single most important reason for a two-party system is the **winner-take-all** or **pluralist** electoral system. This system contrasts to those with **proportional representation** where the percentage of votes for a party's candidates is directly applied as the percentage of representatives in the legislature. The winner in American elections is the one who receives the largest number of votes in each voting district. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent, but only one vote more than his or her closest competitor. This process encourages parties to become larger, embracing more and more voters. So third parties have almost no hope of getting candidates into office, and their points of view tend to fall under the umbrella of one or both of the big parties.

ORGANIZATION OF THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

In contrast to most large economic organizations, such as corporations, the people at the top of the party organizations do not have a lot of power over those at the lower levels. Instead, the parties have strong **grass roots**, or state and/or local control over important decisions. To be sure, each has a national committee that organizes a convention every four years to nominate a president. Each party has a national chairperson who serves as spokesperson, and it least nominally coordinates the election campaign for the presidential candidate. In reality, however, the candidate runs his own campaign, with the help of multiple advisers, including the party chairman.

Local party organizations are still very important in political campaigns because they provide the foot soldiers that hand out party literature, call on citizens to register and to come to the polls on election day. In 2004 both parties ran active get-out-the-vote campaigns at the grass roots level, resulting in a very high voter turnout. The organization of both parties looks very much the same on paper. Both have:

- a national committee composed of representatives from each state and territory.
- a full-time, paid national chairman that manages the day-to-day work of the party.
- a national convention that meets formally every four years during the summer before a presidential election in November.
- a congressional campaign committee that assists both incumbents and challengers
- a broad, not always consistent, ideological base since they must appeal to a large number of voters.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTIES

Historically, the two-party system has been characterized by long periods of dominance by one party followed by a long period of dominance by the other. The eras begin and end with shifts in the voting population called **realignments** that occur because issues change, and new schisms form between groups.

THE EARLY YEARS

The first two political parties to emerge during Washington's term of office were the **Federalists** and the **Anti-Federalists**. The major issue in the beginning was the ratification of the Constitution, with the Federalists supporting it and the Anti-Federalist wanting guarantees of individual freedoms and rights not included in the original document. The issue was resolved with the addition of the Bill of Rights, but the parties did not disappear with the issue.

The Federalists were led by Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, and they came to represent urban, business-oriented men who favored elitism and a strong central government. The Federalists supported Hamilton's establishment of the Bank of the United States because they saw it as forwarding their interests and beliefs. The Anti-Federalists came to be known as the **Democratic-Republicans**, led by Thomas Jefferson. They favored strong state governments, rural interests, and a weaker central government. They opposed the bank as an enemy of state control and rural interests.

With Hamilton's death and John Adams' unpopularity as president, Jefferson emerged as the most popular leader at the turn of the nineteenth century. As president he gradually became more accepting of stronger central government, and the two parties' points of view seemed to merge most notably in the "**Era of Good Feeling**" presided over by James Monroe, one of Jefferson's protégés. The Democratic-Republicans emerged as the only party, and their dominance lasted until the mid-1800's, though under a new name, the **Democrats**.

JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY

The two-party system reemerged with the appearance of Andrew Jackson, who represented to many the expanding country, in which newer states found much in common with the rural southern states but little with the established northeast. A new party emerged, the **Whigs**, who represented many of the interests of the old Federalist party.

Jackson's election in 1828 was accomplished with a coalition between South and West, forming the new **Democratic Party**. Jackson's Democrats were a rawer sort than Jefferson's, who were primarily gentlemen farmers from the South and Middle Atlantic states. With the Jacksonian era's **universal manhood suffrage**, virtually all men could vote, so rural, anti-bank, small farmers from the South and West formed the backbone of the Democratic Party. During this era the Democrats initiated the tradition of holding a **national convention** to nominate a presidential candidate. Delegates selected from state and local parties would vote for the candidate, rather than a handful of party leaders who met in secret (called a caucus). The Whigs were left with not only the old Federalist interests, but other groups, such as wealthy rural Southerners, who had little in common with other Whigs. The party was not ideologically coherent, but found some success by nominating and electing war heroes, such as William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor.

NORTH/SOUTH TENSIONS

As economic and social tensions developed between North and South by the 1840's and 50's, Whig party unity was threatened by splits between the southern and northern wings. As the Whigs were falling apart, a new **Republican Party** emerged from the issue of expansion of slavery into new territories. The election of 1860 brought the first Republican - Abraham Lincoln - into office, setting off the secession of southern states, and with them, many supporters of the Democratic Party. The Civil War, then, ended the era of dominance of the Democrats, and ushered in a new Republican era. Voters realigned, then, according to regional differences and conflicting points of view regarding expansion of slavery and states rights.

THE REPUBLICAN ERA: 1861-1933

With the exception of Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, all presidents from Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) through Herbert Hoover (1929-1933) were Republicans. During most of that time, Republicans dominated the legislature as well. By 1876 all of the southern states had been restored to the Union, but their power, as well as that of the Democratic Party, was much diminished.

The Republicans came to champion the new era of the Industrial Revolution, a time when prominent businessmen, such as John Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, dominated politics as well as business. The Republican Party came to represent laissez-faire, a policy that advocated the free market and few government regulations on business. Ironically, laissez-faire, meaning "to leave alone", was the old philosophy of the Jacksonian farmers, who wanted government to allow them to make their own prosperity. The Republican philosophy of the late 1800's favored the new industrialists, not the small farmer of the earlier era.

THE SECOND DEMOCRATIC ERA: 1933-1969

The prosperous, business-oriented era survived several earlier recessions but not the Great Depression that gripped the country after the stock market crash of 1929. The cataclysmic economic downturn caused major realignments of voters that swung the balance of power to the Democrats. The Republican president, Herbert Hoover, was rejected in the election of 1932 in favor of the Democrat's Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt's victory was accomplished through forging the **Roosevelt Coalition** of voters, a combination of many different groups that wished to see Herbert Hoover defeated. The coalition was composed of eastern workers, southern and western farmers, blacks, and the ideologically liberal.

In their efforts to bring the country out of the depression, Roosevelt's Democrats established a government more actively involved in promoting social welfare. Ironically, the formerly states rights oriented Democrats now

advocated a strong central government, but one dedicated to promoting the interests of ordinary people. Democrats dominated both legislative and executive branches. Even the Supreme Court had to rein in its conservative leanings, although it did check Roosevelt's power with the famous "court-packing" case. (In an effort to get more support for his New Deal programs from the Supreme Court, Roosevelt encouraged Congress to increase the number of justices from nine to fifteen and to require mandatory retirement of justices by the age of 70. Roosevelt eventually withdrew his plan).

Roosevelt was elected for an unprecedented four terms and was followed by another Democrat, Harry Truman. Even though a Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, was elected president in 1952, Congress remained Democratic. The Democrats regained the White House in 1960 and retained it throughout the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. But a new era began with the presidency of Richard Nixon in 1969.

THE ERA OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: 1969-2003

Richard Nixon's election in 1968 did not usher in a new era of Republican dominated government. Instead, a new balance of power between the Democrats and Republicans came into being. With a few exceptions, control of the legislature and the presidency has been "divided" between the two major political parties since the late 1940s. When one party holds the presidency, the other has dominated Congress, or at least the Senate. The division brings with it the problem of "**gridlock**", or the tendency to paralyze decision making, with one branch advocating one policy and the other another, contradictory policy. Scholars have various theories about the causes of the new division of power, but one cause may be the declining power of political parties in general.

The Republican Hold on the Presidency: 1969-1993

From 1969 through 1993, the Republicans held the Presidency except during the Carter Presidency from 1977-1981. Starting in the late 1960's, Republicans began to pay more attention to the power of electronic media and to the importance of paid professional consultants. They converted into a well-financed, efficient organization that depended heavily on professionals to help locate the best candidates for office.

Some experts believe that these changes were largely responsible for Richard Nixon's victory in 1968. Nixon was carefully coached and his campaign was carefully managed to take advantage of electronic media. The campaign made extensive use of public opinion polls to determine party strategy. The new emphasis also influenced the party's choice of candidates in 1980 and 1984, with former television and film actor Ronald Reagan as master of the media. The party also took advantage of new technology and generated computerized mailings to raise large sums of money for campaigns. By the mid-1980's, the Republicans were raising far more money than the Democrats were.

During the same time period, the Democrats were changing in many almost opposite ways from the Republicans. The Democrats became more concerned with grass roots, or common man, representation. The Democrats were reacting at least partly to the break-up of the old Roosevelt Coalition, but also to the disastrous 1968 convention in Chicago that showed the party as highly factionalized and almost leaderless. As a result, they gained a reputation for being unorganized and disunited.

In 1969, the Democratic party appointed a special **McGovern-Fraser Commission** to review the party's structure and delegate selection procedures. The commission determined that minorities, women, youth, and the poor were not adequately represented at the party convention. The party adopted guidelines that increased the representation and participation of these groups. The number of superdelegates, or governors, members of Congress, and other party leaders was reduced substantially. The 1972 convention selected as their candidate George McGovern, a liberal who lost in a landslide to Republican Richard Nixon. Although Democrat Jimmy Carter won the Presidency in 1976, he was defeated by Ronald Reagan in 1980, and the Republican Party held the Presidency until 1993.

Divided Government Today

During the Reagan presidency, the Democrats began to adopt some of the Republican strategies, including computerized mailing lists, opinion polls, and paid consultants. The party managed to get their candidate, Bill Clinton, to the White House in 1993, a position that he held for two terms. However, government remained divided because the Republicans won both houses of Congress in 1994 and held them until 2001, when the

Senate regained a Democratic majority. By this time, Republican George W. Bush had been elected President, so the tradition of divided government - established in 1969 - continued. However, Republicans regained control of the Senate in the election of 2002, and they swept the presidency and both houses of Congress in the election of 2004. These recent events have led some observers to speculate that a new Republican era is beginning, and that divided government as a persistent phenomenon may be ending.

MINOR PARTIES

Whereas two parties have always dominated the American system, minor or third parties have also played a role. Minor parties may be divided into two categories:

- **those dominated by an individual personality**, usually disappearing when the charismatic personality does. One example is Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose, or Progressive Party, that was largely responsible for splitting the Republicans and throwing the 1912 election to the Democrats. Another example is George Wallace's American Independent Party in 1968 and 1972, starting as a southern backlash to the civil rights movement, but eventually appealing to blue collar workers in other parts of the country.
- **those organized around a long-lasting goal or ideology**. Examples are the Abolitionists, the Prohibitionists, and the Socialists. The Abolitionists and Prohibitionists disappeared after their goals were accomplished. The Socialists have remained a minor ideological party throughout the twentieth century, winning almost a million votes in the election of 1912.

Probably the most influential third party in American history was the **Populist Party** of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that first represented the interests of farmers, but was responsible for wide-ranging democratic reforms. The Populists' best known leader was William Jennings Bryan, who was enticed to accept the nomination of the Democratic party first in 1896. The fate of the Populists was the same as for most other third parties: their goals adopted by a major party, deferring to the "winner-take-all, or pluralist system, that supports a two party system.

In 1992 Ross Perot, a wealthy Texas businessman, tried to defy the two party system by running for president as an independent without the support of a political party. He hired professional campaign and media advisers, created a high profile on national television interviews, bought a massive number of TV ads, and built a nationwide network of paid and volunteer campaign workers. In the election, he gained 19% of the vote, but did not capture a single electoral vote. In 1996, he again entered the race, but also announced the birth of a third party that fizzled when he received less than half as many votes as he did in 1992. In 2000 Ralph Nader ran for the Green Party, but he won only about 3% of the vote. In 2004 Nader ran as an independent, and the Green Party fielded their own candidates for office, but neither managed to garner many votes.

Minor parties have sometimes had a big impact on American politics when their platforms have been taken over by major parties. For example, Populist reforms for 8-hour workdays for city workers and farm subsidies for rural areas were later pushed forward by the Democratic Party. Third parties have almost certainly affected election outcomes, most obviously in 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt ran for the Progressive Party, splitting the Republican vote and throwing the election to Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Many Democrats believe that Al Gore would have won the election of 2000 had Ralph Nader not run. Likewise, some Republicans claim that Ross Perot was responsible for George H. Bush's loss of the election of 1992.

PARTY POWER: THE EFFECTS OF DEALIGNMENT

In the modern era voter realignments do not appear to be as clear-cut as they once were, partly because of the phenomenon of **dealignment**. Over the past fifty years party identification appears to be weakened among American voters, with more preferring to call themselves "independents." Not only have ties to the two major parties weakened in recent years, but voters are less willing to vote a **straight ticket**, or support all candidates of one party for all positions. In the early 1950s only about 12% of all voters engaged in **ticket splitting**, or voting for candidates from both parties for different positions. In recent years, that figure has been between 20 and 40%. If dealignment indeed is occurring, does this trend indicate that parties are becoming weaker forces in the political system? Many political scientists believe so.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY REFORMS

During the late 1800s party machines, organizations that recruited members by the use of material incentives - money, jobs, places to live - exercised a great deal of control by party "bosses." These machines, such as Tammany Hall in New York City, dictated local and state elections and distributed government jobs on the basis of support for the party, or patronage. The reforms of the early twentieth century Progressive movement, first inspired by the Populist movement, took control of nominations from party leaders and gave it to the rank-and-file. Several important changes - the establishment of primary elections in many states, the establishment of the civil service, the direct election of senators, and women's suffrage - all gave more power to voters and less to the parties.

LATE 20TH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

The growing emphasis on electronic media campaigns, professional consultants, and direct-mail recruitment of voter support also may have decreased the importance of parties in the election process. In addition, partly as a result of media influence, candidate organizations, not party organizations, are the most powerful electoral forces today. Office seekers, supported by consultants and media, organize their personal following to win nominations. If they win office, they are more responsive to their personal following than to the party leadership. The result is less party clout over politicians and policy.

On the other hand, the national party organizations are significantly better funded than they were in earlier days and make use of electronic media and professional consultants themselves. They often function as advisers and all-important sources for campaign funds. Moreover, parties are deeply entrenched organizational blocks for government, particularly Congress. Although they may not be as strong an influence as they once were, parties form a basic building block for the American political system, and they still give candidates labels that help voters make decisions during election time.

THE REALIGNMENT OF 2004?

The Republican sweep of the presidency and Congress in 2004 may be an indication that a major realignment of Americans is underway. The split between the Red States (Republican) and the Blue States (Democrats) separated states along the west coast, the Northeast, and the Midwest (blue states) from the rest of the country that supported Republican George W. Bush. Voters of both parties appeared to have stronger party loyalties than in recent years, and divisions were especially apparent between rural (Republicans) and urban voters (Democrats). The breakup of the Solid South also appeared to be complete, with long-time Democratic senators resigning and being replaced by Republican. It is too early to tell whether the new divisions will be long-lasting.