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Political Parties

Politics in Action: How Political Parties Can Make Elections User Friendly for Voters



In the 2010 elections, the Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives just two years after Barack Obama's historic election to the presidency. One of the strategies they pursued was to compile a list of proposals that most Republicans supported entitled "A Pledge to America." With unemployment hovering near 10 percent, the Republican proposals concentrated on specific agenda items that they argued would be better suited to revive the nation's economy than the agenda of Obama and the Democrats. Among the items in this list were extending the tax cuts passed under President Bush, providing for new tax deductions for small businesses, and repealing newly enacted health care mandates on business.

"A Pledge to America" was sometimes referred to in the media as the "Contract with America, Part II." In 1994, the original Contract with America was credited by many with helping the Republicans gain control of the House of Representatives after 40 years of Democratic majorities. It outlined 10 bills that the Republicans promised to focus on during the first 100 days of a Republican-controlled House of Representatives. The contract was the brainchild of Newt Gingrich and Richard Armey (both of whom were college professors before being elected to Congress). Gingrich and Armey thought the Republicans needed a stronger message in 1994 than a simple statement of opposition to 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.

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Identify the functions that political parties perform in American democracy, p. 259.	Determine the significance of party identification in America today, p. 263.	Describe how political parties are organized in the United States, p. 265.	Evaluate how well political parties generally do in carrying out their promises, p. 268.	Differentiate the various party eras in American history, p. 270.	Assess both the impact of third parties on American politics and their limitations, p. 277.	Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of responsible party government, p. 279.



Political party conventions are where the parties formalize their platforms, presenting their plan for governing the nation to the voters. Here, the Texas delegates to the 2012 Republican National Convention cheer after the national anthem was sung at the beginning of the day's proceedings.

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The Big Picture Should there be more than two major political parties in the United States, or are the Democrats and the Republicans enough? Author Martin P. Wattenberg argues that the two-party system—while not perfect—is an effective way to simplify politics for American voters.



The Basics Why do we have political parties in America? In this video, you will learn about the rise of political parties in the United States, the reasons why the two-party system continues to dominate American politics, and how the major parties differ from one another.



In Context Trace the development of political parties in the United States from the time of the ratification of the Constitution. Oklahoma State University political scientist Jeanette M. Mendez explains why political parties emerged and what role they play in our democratic system.



Thinking Like a Political Scientist How can we tell that Americans are increasingly polarized and what are the implications of this trend? In this video, Oklahoma State University political scientist Jeanette M. Mendez reveals how scholars measure party polarization at the elite and mass level and who is behind this phenomenon.



In the Real World Why do Americans only have two party choices—Democrats and Republicans? Real people evaluate the effectiveness of the “winner takes all” electoral system in the United States, and they weigh in on whether third parties—such as the Libertarians and the Green Party—should have more representation in national elections.



So What? Find out why compromise in politics does not seem to happen anymore. Author Martin P. Wattenberg lays out the negative and the positive effects of polarization between our two major political parties, and offers suggestions for what politicians could do to improve relationships across parties.



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. Major expansions or contractions 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 the same party also controls the Congress make a big difference.

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.

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.

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."

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The Meaning of Party

8.1 Identify the functions that political parties perform in American democracy.

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

The word *team* is the slippery part of this definition. Party teams may not be as well disciplined and single-minded as teams fielded by top football coaches. Individuals on a party's team often run every which way and are difficult to lead. 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 its 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

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.

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 necessarily 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. Millions of 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.

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 that parties perform—or should perform—if they are to serve as effective linkage institutions:

PARTIES PICK CANDIDATES Almost no one above the local level gets elected to a public office without winning a party's endorsement.⁵ A party's official endorsement is called a *nomination*; it entitles the nominee to be listed on the general election ballot as that party's candidate for a particular office. Up until the early twentieth century, American parties chose their candidates with little or no input from 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 and the Internet have made it easier for candidates to build their own personal campaign organization, and thus take their case directly to the people without the aid of the party organization.

PARTIES GIVE CUES TO VOTERS Just knowing whether a candidate is a Democrat or a Republican provides crucial information to many voters. Voters can reasonably assume that if a candidate is a Democrat, chances are good that he or she favors progressive principles and a broader scope of government. On the other side of the coin, it can be reasonably assumed that a Republican favors conservative principles and a more limited scope of government. A voter therefore need not do extensive research on the individual candidates but rather can rely on the informational shortcut provided by their party affiliations.

PARTIES ARTICULATE POLICIES Each political party advocates specific policy alternatives. For example, the Democratic Party platform has for many years advocated support for a woman's right to an abortion, whereas the Republican Party platform has repeatedly called for restrictions on abortion.

PARTIES COORDINATE POLICYMAKING When a president commits himself to a major policy goal, the first place he usually looks for support is from members of his own party. In America’s fragmented government, parties are essential for coordinating policymaking between the executive and legislative branches.

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.

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.

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Why It Matters to You

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

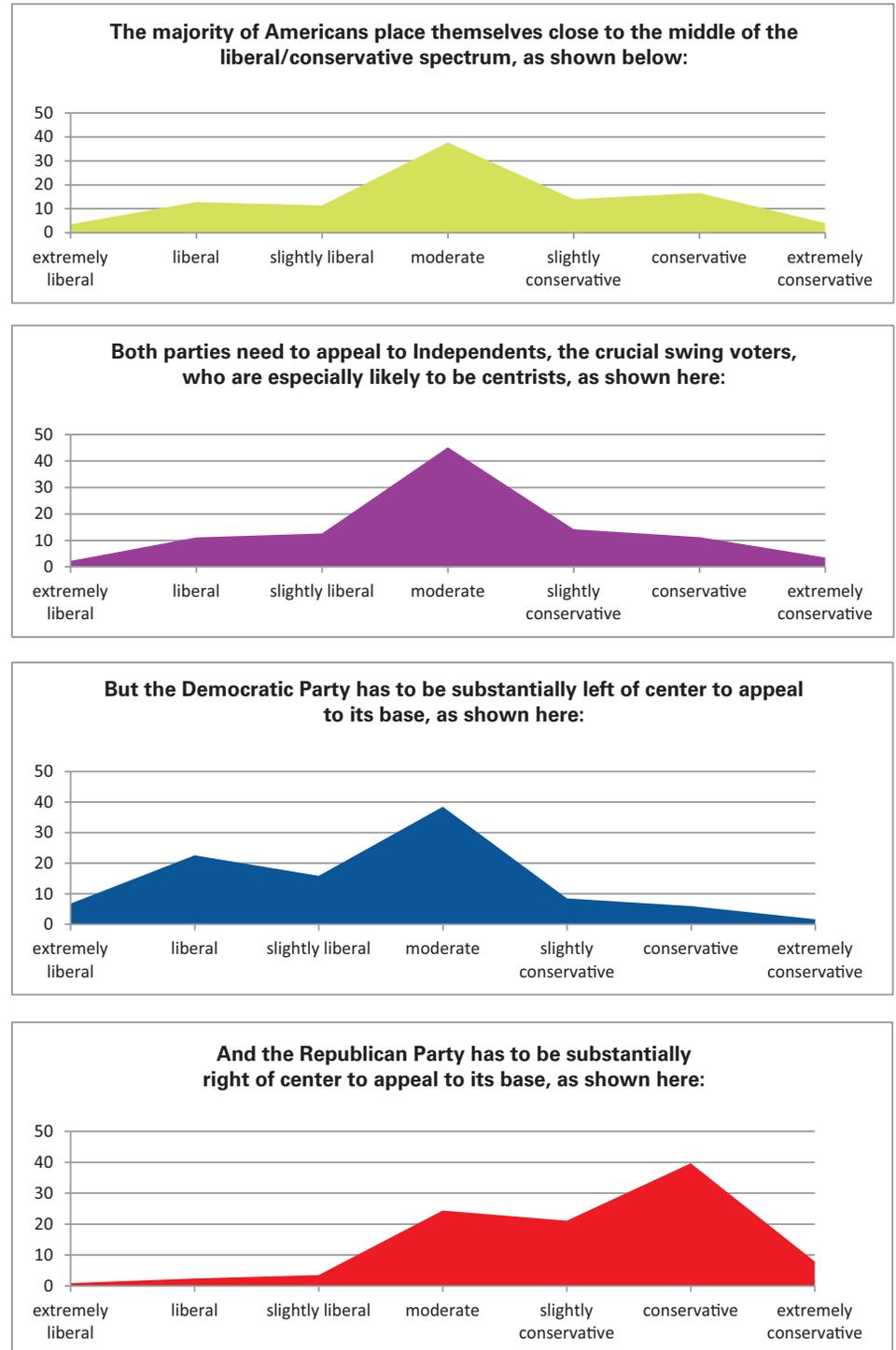
The parties compete, at least in theory, as in a marketplace. A party competes for voters’ support; its products are its candidates and policies. Anthony Downs has provided a working model of the relationship among citizens, parties, and policy, employing a rational-choice perspective.⁶ **Rational-choice 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 that (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 use primarily 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 too far from the midpoint of public opinion. In the American electorate, a few voters are extremely liberal and a few extremely conservative, but the majority are in the middle or lean just slightly one way or the other (see the first part of Figure 8.1). This pattern is even more evident if we examine the key swing voters, namely, those who identify themselves as being independent of party affiliation. As you can see in the second part of Figure 8.1, Independents are very much concentrated near the middle of the liberal–conservative spectrum. Thus, if Downs’s theory is right, then parties must stay fairly near the center in order to broaden their appeal.

Downs also notes, though, that from a rational-choice perspective, one should expect the parties to significantly differentiate themselves in order to win over loyal adherents, who will participate in party activities and provide a core of regular supporters. Just as Ford tries to offer something different from and better than Toyota in order to build buyer loyalty, so Democrats and Republicans have to forge substantially different identities to build voter loyalty. As you can see in third and fourth parts of Figure 8.1, those who identify with the two parties do indeed have distinct ideological profiles. Democrats lean to the left of center (towards liberalism), and Republicans clearly lean to the right of center (conservatism).

FIGURE 8.1 THE DOWNS MODEL: HOW RATIONAL PARTIES POSITION THEMSELVES NEAR (BUT NOT AT) THE CENTER OF PUBLIC OPINION

The General Social Survey regularly asks a sample of the American population to classify themselves on a 7-point scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. As illustrated in the four graphs below, both political parties regularly face the challenge of positioning themselves relatively close to the median voter, in particular to appeal to Independents, while at the same time being responsive to the position of their own base of supporters.



SOURCE: Author's analysis of combined 2008 and 2010 General Social Survey data.

In order to win party nominations, politicians need the support of the median voter within their own party—namely, people who are substantially to the left or right of center. But they need to balance satisfying their own party's core supporters with



party image

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

party identification

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

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Political parties have to cater to their most enthusiastic and active supporters—liberals for the Democrats and conservatives for the Republicans. Tea Party activists, who advocate a strict adherence to the U.S. Constitution, have been quite visible among conservatives in recent years. Here, a member of the Tea Party dresses as an eighteenth-century patriot at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference.

not moving too far away from the center of national opinion, and in particular from Independent swing voters.

The Party in the Electorate

8.2 Determine the significance of party identification in America today.

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. Most voters have a **party image** of each party; that is, they know (or think they know) what the Democrats and Republicans stand for. Liberal or conservative, pro-labor or pro-business, pro-choice or pro-life—these are some of the elements of each party's images.

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

ticket splitting

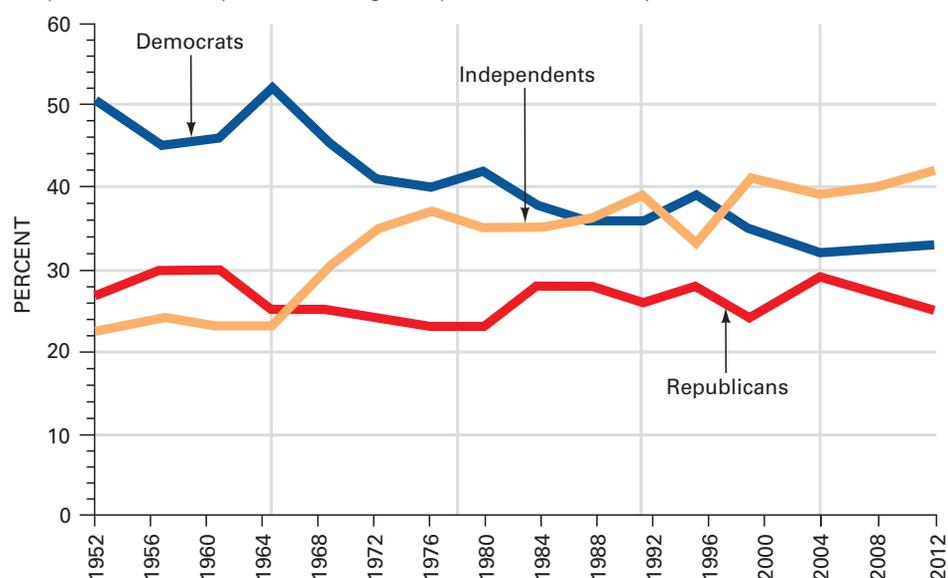
Voting with one party for one office and with another party for other offices. It has become the norm in American voting behavior.

in the distribution of party identification is important. Since 1952, the American 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 time (see Figure 8.2). In recent presidential elections, two clear patterns have been evident. First, in contrast to the 1952–1980 period when Democrats greatly outnumbered Republicans, the Democratic Party’s edge in terms of identifiers in the electorate has lately been quite modest. In 1964, there were more than twice as many Democrats as Republicans, whereas in 2008 Republicans trailed Democrats by a mere 6 percentage points. Second, in most recent elections the most frequent response to the party identification question has been the Independent option. In 2012, 42 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.

Voters who call themselves Independents are the most likely to engage in the practice of **ticket splitting**—voting with one party for one office and the other party for another office. Independents overwhelmingly agree that they vote for the person, not the party. And in practice they often do just that, voting for some Democrats and some Republicans. The result of many voters being open to splitting their tickets is that even when one party has a big edge in a state, the other party always has a decent shot at winning at least some important offices. In other words, despite media labels of red and blue states, the practice of ticket splitting means that no state is ever completely safe for a given party. Thus, New Jersey, Michigan, and Maine lean heavily toward the Democrats in national elections, but as of 2013 all the governors of these states were Republicans. On the other side of the coin, Democrats were serving as governors in heavily Republican states such as West Virginia and Arkansas.

FIGURE 8.2 PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN THE UNITED STATES, 1952–2012^a

Political analysts and scholars carefully monitor changes in the distribution of party identification. Below, you can see the percentage of the population that has identified itself as Democrats, Independents, and Republicans during each presidential election year from 1952 to 2012.



^aIn 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, 1952–2008; for 2012, the authors have averaged out the findings from 10 CBS/*New York Times* and ABC/*Washington Post* polls conducted between January and June 2012.

Young People & 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 as evident in survey data as it is now. As you can see from the 2008 national survey data displayed here, 54 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24 said they were political independents. In contrast, only 31 percent of people over 65 called themselves Independents. 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.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that as the current generation of young people ages they will become more likely to identify with the major political parties?
2. Because younger people are so likely to be independent, does this mean that 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?

Age	Democrat	Independent	Republican
18–24	29	54	17
25–34	30	49	21
35–44	32	40	28
45–54	35	33	33
55–64	37	38	25
65+	36	31	33

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the 2008 American National Election Study.

The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots to Washington

8.3

Describe how political parties are organized in the United States.

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, determines 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

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party machines

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

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.



Mayor Richard J. Daley ruled the city of Chicago from 1955 until his death in 1976. His Cook County Democratic Party organization was highly organized at the precinct level. Members of the organization kept people in their neighborhoods happy by providing for their local needs, such as street maintenance, new stoplights, no-parking zones, and so on, and the people reciprocated on Election Day by supporting the organization's candidates.

influence and resources to officeholders who follow the party line and by punishing—even expelling—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.

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 New York City's Democratic leader William Tweed, widely known as "Boss Tweed," whose ring reportedly made between \$40 million and \$200 million from tax receipts, payoffs, and kickbacks.

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 Daley's machine in Chicago. Machine politics in Chicago survived through 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 Democratic political 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.⁸

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, register voters, 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.

A 2008 survey of county party leaders by Melody Crowder-Meyer found that county parties play an important role in many elections, especially lower profile elections such as those for county commissioner, sheriff, mayor, and school board members. She

concludes that “county parties have the potential to significantly affect who is recruited to run for office, who receives party support, who gains assistance from community and interest groups, and who is eventually elected to public office.”⁹

□ The 50 State Party Systems

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, such as California, party organizations are weak and underfunded.

The states are allowed wide discretion in the regulation of party activities, and how they choose to organize elections substantially influences the strength of the parties. In particular, the choice between holding open versus closed primaries is a crucial one, as you can read about in “You Are the Policymaker: Should Political Parties Choose Their Nominees in Open or Closed Primaries?” 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

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.

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You Are the Policymaker

Should Political Parties Choose Their Nominees in Open or Closed Primaries?

Some states restrict who can participate in party nomination contests far more than others. In **closed primaries** only people who have registered in advance with a party can vote in its primary. In contrast, **open primaries** allow voters to decide on Election Day whether they want to participate in the Democratic or Republican contests. Each state legislature is faced with making the choice between an open or closed primary, and the pros and cons of these two basic options are often hotly debated.

Closed primaries are generally favored by the party organizations themselves because they encourage voters to officially declare a partisan preference when they register to vote. By requiring voters to sign up in advance in order to participate in its primary, a party can be reasonably assured that most people who participate in their nomination decisions will be reasonably committed to its platform. In other words, closed primaries favor ideological purity and help to keep the policy distinctions between Democrats and Republicans clear. A further advantage for the party organizations is that a closed primary system requires the state’s election authority to maintain a record of the party registration of each voter. It is, of course, a secret who you vote for, but anything you put down on your voter registration form is public information. Hence, a closed primary provides each party with invaluable information identifying voters who consider themselves to be party members. Imagine running a business and having the government collect information for you regarding who likes your product. It’s no

wonder that if the decision were left up to the leaders of the party organizations most would choose a closed primary.

Despite these advantages, the trend among the states in recent years has been toward more open primaries. The main advantage of open primaries is that they allow for more voters to participate in party nomination decisions. Because Independents can vote in either party’s primary and partisans can readily switch sides, the two major parties are faced with the task of competing for voter support in the primary round as well as the general election. In particular, young people, whose independent streak often leaves them on the sidelines in closed primaries, can be brought into the parties’ fold in an open primary. For many policymakers, the chance to widen participation in one’s own party via an open primary outweighs the advantage of limiting participation to loyal party members in a closed primary. However, even advocates of open primaries acknowledge that they come with some risk for mischief. There is always a possibility that the partisans of one side will “raid” the other party’s primary in order to give a boost to its least viable candidate. This would be akin to letting UCLA students participate in the choice of the quarterback for USC’s football team. Though raiding is always a theoretical possibility, scholars have found that when voters cast a ballot in the other party’s primary, it is usually for candidates whom they genuinely support.

What do you think? Would you choose an open or closed primary?

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national party convention

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

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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.

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national chairperson

The person responsible for the day-to-day activities of the party.

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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.¹⁰ 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. 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.¹¹

□ 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. Keeping the party operating between conventions is the job of the **national committee**, composed of representatives from the states and territories. 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, at a joint appearance, what their biggest organizational challenge was, the chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties both promptly responded "money."¹² Together, the Democratic and Republican national committees raised \$688 million in 2008, thereby plunging a tremendous amount of funds into the presidential campaign.

The chairperson of the party that controls the White House is normally selected by the president himself (subject to routine ratification by the national committee), whereas the contest for chair of the party out of power is often a hotly fought battle. 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 H. W. Bush, both of whom used this position as a means of political advancement. Other notables to have served as chair of their party's national committee include former governors Ed Rendell (D-PA), Howard Dean (D-VT), Haley Barbour (R-MS), and Tim Kaine (D-VA).

The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

8.4

Evaluate how well political parties generally do in carrying out their promises.



Which party controls each of America's many elected offices matters because both parties and the elected officials who represent them usually 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.

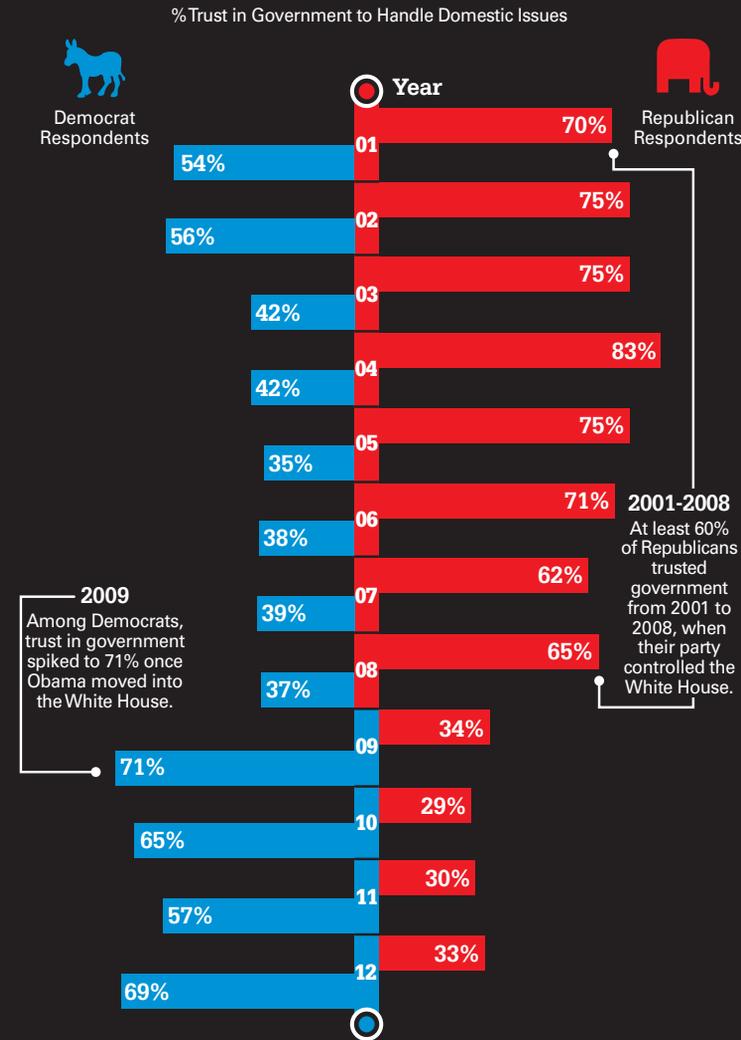


Explore on **MyPoliSciLab**
Simulation: You Are a Voter

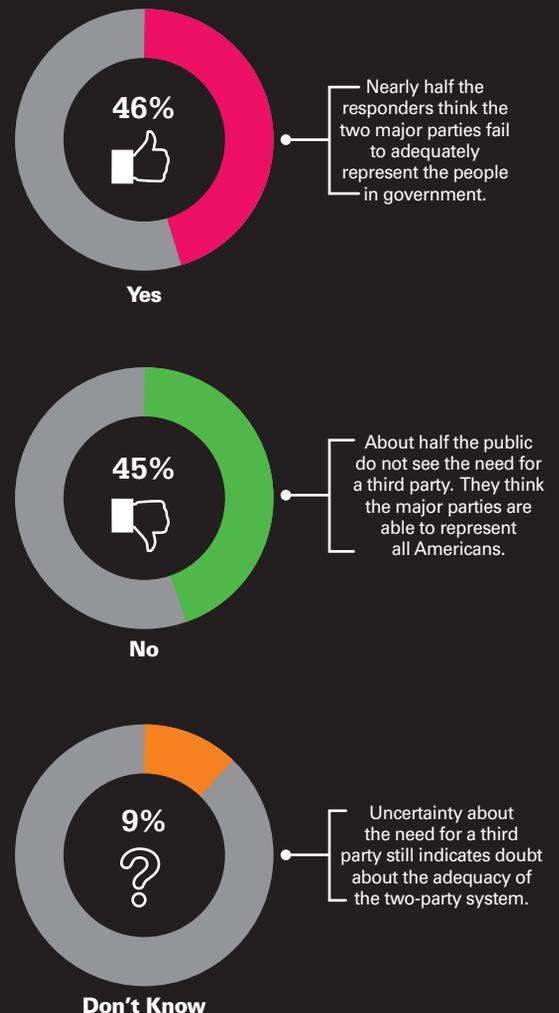
Which Party Governs Better?

When asked whether they trust the government to handle domestic issues, Americans are guided by partisanship—they are more likely to be optimistic when their party is in charge. Even so, general dissatisfaction with both major parties is substantial, and many Americans believe that a third party option is needed in the United States.

Your Level of Trust Depends on Your Party



Does the United States Need a Third Party?



SOURCE: Data from Gallup press releases, September 12 and 25, 2012.

Investigate Further

Concept How do we measure opinion on which party governs better? Surveys let us track public opinion on party performance on certain issues. Historically, when it comes to trusting government, partisans trust their party to govern, but not the other. Partisanship is a lens through which voters evaluate and determine trust of parties and government.

Connection Which party do Americans think governs better? Voters think *their* party governs better. Democrats think we are governed better when Democrats rule. Republicans think the same when Republicans rule. The parties represent different governing philosophies, so each party has a different definition of what it means to “govern better”.

Cause When do third parties become viable? Third parties become viable when major parties fail on divisive issues that matter to the public, like the economy or racial issues. Third parties emerge to address those issues and often capture a lot of support. However, the third party is usually absorbed by a major party that co-opts its issues and supporters.

coalition

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

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 H. W. 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. Barack Obama promised to cut income tax rates for the middle class and raise them for the wealthiest Americans, but he backed off these promises after he was elected in 2008.

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. Barack Obama pledged to get American troops out of Iraq and accomplished this feat by the end of 2011. In sum, the impression that politicians and parties never produce policy out of promises is off the mark.

Indeed, two projects that monitored President Obama’s actions on his 2008 campaign promises found far more promises that were followed through on than broken. The *National Journal’s* “Promise Audit” (<http://promises.nationaljournal.com/>) identified about 200 of Obama’s most important promises and found at least some progress made on keeping 84 percent of them. Similarly, PolitiFact, a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature of the *St. Petersburg Times* (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/>) reported at least some progress on 76 percent of a broader selection of over 500 promises made by Obama. In both studies, unfulfilled promises usually fell in the category of proposals that had been shelved for one reason or other; relatively few promises were broken outright.

If parties generally do what they say they will, then the party platforms adopted at the national conventions represent blueprints, however vague, for action. In their study of party platforms and voter attitudes over three decades, Elizabeth Simas and Kevin Evans find that “voters are in fact picking up on the parties’ objective policy positions.”¹³ Consider what the two major parties promised the voters in their 2012 platforms (see Table 8.1). There is little doubt that the choice between Democratic and Republican policies in 2012 was clear on many important issues facing the country. When voters selected Barack Obama over Mitt Romney, the country was poised to move in a direction that was significantly different than had the election gone the other way.

Party Eras in American History

8.5 Differentiate the various 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

TABLE 8.1 PARTY PLATFORMS, 2012

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 2012 illustrates major differences in beliefs between the two parties.

Republicans	Democrats
<p>The War in Afghanistan</p> <p>Future decisions by a Republican President will never subordinate military necessity to domestic politics or an artificial timetable. ... We cannot expect others to remain resolute unless we show the same determination ourselves.</p>	<p>The War in Afghanistan</p> <p>We have begun the process of bringing our troops home from Afghanistan, including removing 33,000 by September 2012. And, with the support of our allies, the President has outlined a plan to end the war in Afghanistan in 2014.</p>
<p>Immigration</p> <p>We oppose any form of amnesty for those who, by intentionally violating the law, disadvantage those who have obeyed it. ... We will create humane procedures to encourage illegal aliens to return home voluntarily, while enforcing the law against those who overstay their visas.</p>	<p>Immigration</p> <p>The country urgently needs comprehensive immigration reform that brings undocumented immigrants out of the shadows and requires them to get right with the law, learn English, and pay taxes in order to get on a path to earn citizenship.</p>
<p>Abortion</p> <p>We assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed. We support a human life amendment to the Constitution.</p>	<p>Abortion</p> <p>The Democratic Party strongly and unequivocally supports <i>Roe v. Wade</i> and a woman's right to decisions regarding her pregnancy, including a safe and legal abortion, regardless of ability to pay.</p>
<p>Same-Sex Marriage</p> <p>We reaffirm our support for a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman.</p>	<p>Same-Sex Marriage</p> <p>We support marriage equality and support the movement to secure equal treatment under law for same-sex couples.</p>
<p>Health Care</p> <p>Obamacare is falling by the weight of its own confusing, unworkable, budget-busting, and conflicting provisions. ... Republicans are committed to its repeal. ... Then the American people, through the free market, can advance affordable and responsible health care reform.</p>	<p>Health Care</p> <p>We believe that accessible, affordable, high quality health care is part of the American promise... We refuse to go back to the days when health insurance companies had unchecked power to cancel your health policy, deny you coverage, or charge women more than men.</p>
<p>Taxes</p> <p>Taxes, by their very nature, reduce a citizen's freedom. ... We propose to extend the 2001 and 2003 tax relief packages—commonly known as the Bush tax cuts.</p>	<p>Taxes</p> <p>We support allowing the Bush tax cuts for wealthiest to expire and closing loopholes and deductions for the largest corporations and the highest-earning taxpayers.</p>
<p>Rising college costs</p> <p>New systems of learning are needed to compete with traditional four-year colleges: expanded community colleges and technical institutions, private training schools, online universities, life-long learning, and work-based learning in the private sector. New models for acquiring advanced skills will be ever more important in the rapidly changing economy.</p>	<p>Rising college costs</p> <p>President Obama has pledged to encourage colleges to keep their costs down by reducing federal aid for those that do not, investing in colleges that keep tuition affordable and provide good value, doubling the number of work-study jobs available to students, and continuing to ensure that students have access to federal loans at reasonable rates.</p>
<p>Campaign finance</p> <p>We support repeal of the remaining sections of McCain-Feingold, support either raising or repealing contribution limits, and oppose passage of the DISLCOSE Act or any similar legislation designed to vitiate the Supreme Court's recent decisions protecting political speech.</p>	<p>Campaign finance</p> <p>We support campaign finance reform, by constitutional amendment if necessary. We support legislation to close loopholes and require greater disclosure of campaign spending. ... We support requiring groups trying to influence elections to reveal their donors.</p>

SOURCE: Excerpts from party platforms as posted on the Web sites of each organization.

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**.

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.

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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.

Punctuating each party era is a **critical election**.¹⁴ 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 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.

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.”¹⁷ 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 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.”¹⁸ 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 bitterest 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.”¹⁹ 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.

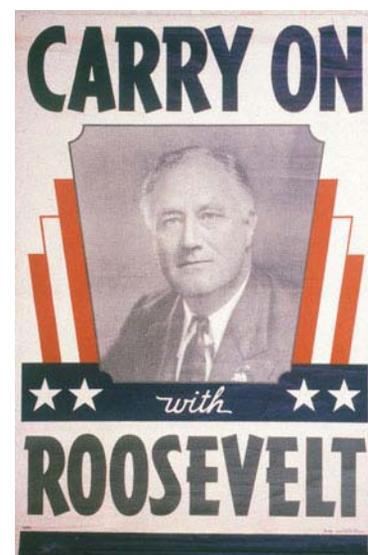
Political scientists call the 1896 election a realigning one because it shifted the party coalitions and entrenched the Republicans for another generation. For the next three decades the Republicans continued as the nation’s majority party, until the stock market crashed in 1929. The ensuing Great Depression 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.²⁰ 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.



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.

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The basic elements of the New Deal coalition were the following:

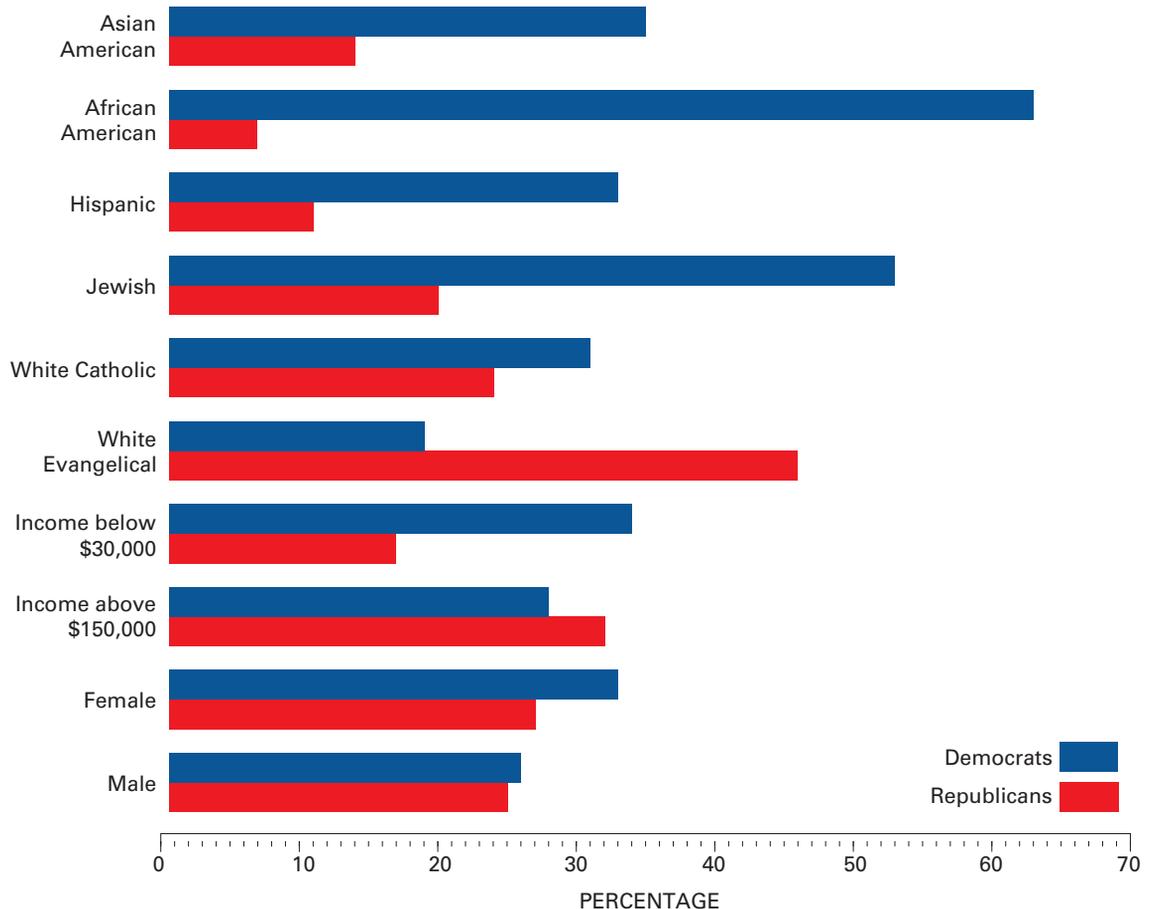
- *Urban dwellers.* Big cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia were staunchly Republican before the New Deal realignment; afterward, they were Democratic bastions.
- *Labor unions.* FDR became the first president to support unions enthusiastically, and they returned the favor.
- *Catholics and Jews.* During and after the Roosevelt period, Catholics and Jews were strongly Democratic.
- *The poor.* Although 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 8.3, many of the same groups that supported FDR's New Deal continue to be part of the Democratic Party's coalition 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. World War II hero and Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower broke the Democrats'

FIGURE 8.3 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 2012.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of two Pew Research Center polls conducted in January 2012.

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 became president after Kennedy's assassination and was overwhelmingly elected to a term of his own in 1964. His Great Society programs vastly increased the scope of government in America, and 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.

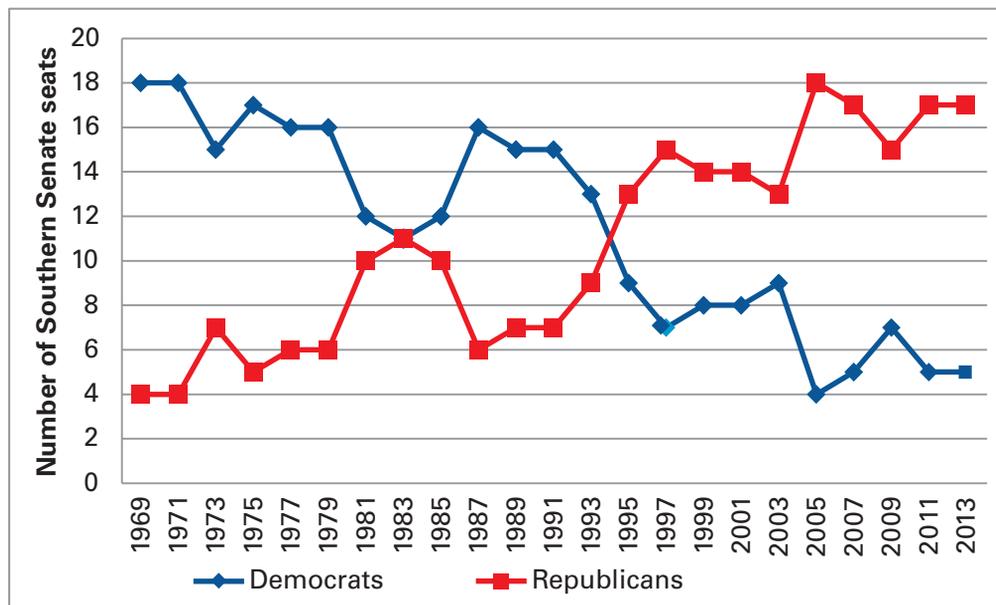
1968–Present: Southern Realignment and the Era of Divided Party Government

When Richard Nixon was first elected to the presidency in 1968, he formulated what became widely known as his “Southern strategy.” Emphasizing his support for states’ rights, law and order, and a strong military posture, Nixon hoped to win over Southern conservatives to the Republican Party, thereby breaking the Democratic Party’s long dominance in the former Confederacy. Party realignment in the South did not happen as quickly as Nixon would have liked, but it has taken place gradually over the four decades since 1968.²¹ As you can see in Figure 8.4, whereas the Democrats held the vast majority of the South’s Senate seats in the late 1960s and the 1970s, ever since the Congress of 1995–1996 the Republicans have been the dominant party in the South. This trend is evident in representation in the House of Representatives as well. In 1969, the Republicans were outnumbered 24 to 77 by the Democrats in the South. By 2013, the balance of Southern seats in the House had changed dramatically, with the Republicans holding 96 seats to just 40 for the Democrats.

FIGURE 8.4 REALIGNMENT IN THE SOUTH

One of the most significant political changes over the past four decades has been the partisan realignment in the Southern states that has transformed this region from a solid Democratic base of support to a solid Republican area.

Without strong Southern support for the Republicans in recent elections, it is doubtful that the GOP would have been able to attain majority party status in the Congress for the majority of the period from 1995 to 2014. The crucial role of the South in Republican politics has lately been reflected in the makeup of the GOP congressional leadership. Mitch McConnell of Tennessee and Trent Lott of Mississippi have served as the Republicans’ leader in the Senate. Georgia’s Newt Gingrich served as Speaker of the House for three terms, and Virginia’s Eric Cantor currently holds the position of House majority leader.



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party dealignment

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

Another noteworthy aspect of Nixon's 1968 election was that for the first time in the twentieth century, a newly elected president moved into the White House without having his party in control of both houses of Congress. Prior to 1968, most newly elected presidents had 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. Nixon's inability to bring in congressional majorities with him was not to be an exception, however, but rather the beginning of a new 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 for American government to be divided with 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. For the remaining six years of his presidency, Clinton was forced to battle with Republican majorities in both houses who generally opposed his most cherished policy priorities. During the eight years of George W. Bush's presidency, the Republicans maintained control of the Congress for just the middle four years, from 2003 through 2006. Barack Obama enjoyed Democratic majorities in Congress during his first two years as president, but divided government returned to Washington when the Republicans gained control of the House in 2010. After the Republicans' gains in the 2010 elections, their leaders were optimistic that they were at last on the verge of a new era of Republican dominance. On the other side, Democratic leaders were hopeful that voters would not like the actions of the new Republican House majority 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 government by reelecting President Obama along with a Republican majority in the House.

Why It Matters to You

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.

With only about 60 percent of the electorate currently identifying with the Democrats or Republicans, it may well be difficult for either one to gain a strong enough foothold to maintain simultaneous control of both ends 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 12 of the 46 years from 1969 to 2014. The regularity with which partisan control of the presidency and Congress has been divided during this period is unprecedented in American political history. 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 many 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, hence the federal government.

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.

8.6 Assess both the impact of third parties on American politics and their limitations.

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 in the United States come in three basic varieties:

- Parties that promote certain causes—for example, a controversial single issue such as prohibition of alcoholic beverages—or that take a relatively extreme ideological position such as socialism or libertarianism.
- Splinter parties, or 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.
- Parties that 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.

Although third-party candidates almost never win office in the United States, scholars believe they are often quite important.²² 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



Third party candidates usually struggle to get noticed in the United States, as almost all major elected officials are affiliated with either the Democrats or Republicans. But occasionally a third-party candidate will become a serious contender, as did Lincoln Chafee when he ran successfully for governor of Rhode Island in 2010.

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winner-take-all system

An electoral system in which legislative seats are awarded only to the candidates who come in first in their constituencies.

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.

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. 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 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”).

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. Although it got less than a majority, the party that finished first is declared the winner. The others are left 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 merge 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 controlled over half the seats in the German parliament for three years. Coalition governments are common in Europe. Italy has regularly been ruled by coalition governments 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 exceed a certain minimal percentage of votes, which varies from country to country. Israel has one of the lowest thresholds at 2 percent. This explains why there are always so many parties represented in the Israeli Knesset—12 as of 2012. 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.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. If the United States adopted a form of proportional representation, what new parties do you think would be formed and would become important players?
2. Do you think your political views would end up being better represented if we had proportional representation and there were more viable parties to choose from on Election Day? If so, how?

Understanding Political Parties

8.7 Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of responsible party government.

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: How Should We Govern?

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.”²³ 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.

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 often fall short of these conditions. They are too decentralized to take a single national position and then enforce it. Most candidates are self-selected, gaining their nomination by their own efforts rather than the party's. Because party primaries are electoral contests for popular support, the party's organization and leaders do not have control over those who run in the general election under their labels. In America's loosely organized party system, there simply is no mechanism for a party to discipline officeholders and thereby ensure cohesion in policymaking. Party leaders can help a candidate raise money,²⁴ get on to the prestigious committees, and sometimes provide support in their efforts to get special benefits for their constituency. But what they cannot do is even more telling: They cannot deny them the party's nomination at the next election or take away their congressional staff support. Thus, unlike politicians in parliamentary systems who can be told by their party leaders that they must follow the party line or else not be renominated in the next election, American politicians enjoy the freedom to buck the party line. American officeholders try to go along with their parties' platform whenever they can. But when the party line conflicts with

responsible party model

A view about how parties should work, held by some political scientists. According to the model, parties should offer clear choices to the voters and once in office, should carry out their campaign promises.

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Blue Dog Democrats

Fiscally conservative Democrats who are mostly from the South and/or rural parts of the United States.

their own personal opinion and/or the clear desires of their constituents, then they feel perfectly comfortable in voting against their party's leaders. As you can see in Table 8.2, even on the key policy votes in Congress during the presidency of George W. Bush, there were numerous disagreements among members of the same party.

Because American officeholders don't always follow the platform planks of their party, even when Democrats controlled majorities in both the House and Senate in 2009–2010, President Obama could not take for granted that his policy proposals would be enacted into law. In particular, Obama regularly encountered resistance from members of the organized caucus known as “**Blue Dog Democrats.**” Back in the days of the Solid South, Democrats would often say that they would vote for “a yellow dog” if their party wanted them to. Today's Blue Dogs say they have been squeezed so often by the liberals in the Democratic leadership that they have turned blue. Hailing mostly from Southern and/or rural areas of the country, they are more fiscally conservative than most Democrats and are resistant to any domestic policy proposals that would enlarge the scope of government. Thus, on congressional votes like the \$787 billion economic stimulus package or the even more expensive health care proposal, many Blue Dog Democrats did not support President Obama's initiatives.

Whenever a president's agenda fails to pass because of his inability to rally his own party, advocates of responsible party government bemoan the lack of centralized political parties in America. However, not everyone thinks that America's decentralized parties are a problem. 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

TABLE 8.2 PARTISAN DIVISIONS ON KEY ROLL CALL VOTES DURING THE BUSH PRESIDENCY

During the presidency of George W. Bush, there was much discussion in the press about heightened partisan tensions between Democrats and Republicans in Congress. While it is true that congressional voting was more polarized along party lines than had usually been the case in recent times, a close look at the roll calls on nine key proposals that President Bush favored reveals a variety of patterns. On three issues, colored in orange in Table 8.2, there was bipartisan support for Bush's position. On two others, colored in blue, the majority of Democrats supported Bush's proposals whereas the majority of Republicans decided not to go along with their own party's leader. Just four of the nine key votes, colored in green, fit the very loose American criteria for a party-line vote: a majority of the president's party voting in support of his position and a majority of the opposition party voting the other way. Notably, on all these partisan votes at least some Democrats broke ranks to support President Bush, and on the Republican side there was unanimity only on the issue of cutting taxes in 2001.

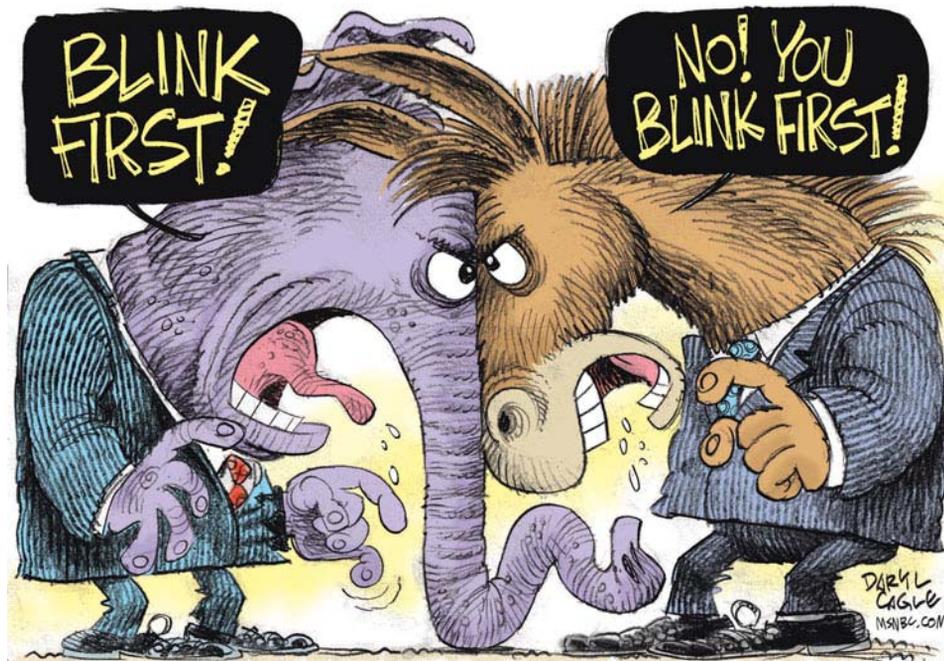
	Dems		Reps	
	Dems For	Against	Reps For	Against
2008 \$700 billion bailout bill	172	63	91	108
2008 \$168 billion tax rebate	216	10	169	25
2007 immigration reform*	33	15	12	37
2005 USA Patriot Act reauthorization	43	156	214	14
2003 prescription drug program	16	190	204	25
2002 Iraq War	82	126	215	6
2001 USA Patriot Act	145	62	211	3
2001 No Child Left Behind	198	6	183	33
2001 tax cut	10	197	219	0

*The House of Representatives never voted on this proposal because it failed a key test in the Senate. Hence, we display the Senate vote in this case, whereas the other votes displayed are from the more numerous House.

Point to Ponder

Many people believe that the gap between the two parties has become so wide that it is hard to get bipartisan agreement about anything.

Based on the data shown in Table 8.2, as well as on partisan behavior during the Obama presidency, how accurate is that view?



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.²⁵

The Founders 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 long struggle to guarantee access to health care for all Americans 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. But 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 the plan. It wasn't until 2010 that something akin to President

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Truman's proposal for health care for all Americans was finally enacted into law. Notably, this historic bill only passed by a narrow margin in the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, with 34 House Democrats opposing it despite the strong urging of President Obama. In short, 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 it is rarely the case that one single party can ever be said to have firm control over American government, the hard choices necessary to cut back on existing government spending are rarely addressed. A disciplined and cohesive governing party might have the power to say no to various demands on the government. 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.

Review the Chapter



Listen to **Chapter 8** on **MyPoliSciLab**

The Meaning of Party

8.1 Identify the functions that political parties perform in American democracy, p. 259.

Even though political parties are one of Americans' least beloved institutions, political scientists see them as a key linkage between policymakers and the people. Political parties operate at three levels: (1) in the electorate; (2) as organizations; and (3) in government. Among the functions that they perform in our democratic system are to pick candidates, run campaigns, give cues to voters, articulate policies, and coordinate policymaking between the branches of government.

The Party in the Electorate

8.2 Determine the significance of party identification in America today, p. 263.

Party identification—one's self-proclaimed general preference for one party or the other—is the most important factor in explaining the political behavior of American voters. People who do not identify with either party are known as political independents. They are the crucial swing voters who can go either way and are also more likely to split their tickets. Young people are especially likely to be Independents.

The Party Organization: From the Grass Roots to Washington

8.3 Describe how political parties are organized in the United States, p. 265.

American political party organizations are decentralized and fragmented. The national party organization can rarely tell state parties what to do. In particular, the state party organizations have a good deal of discretion as to how to choose their nominees for state and local offices. Some states opt to have closed primaries, which restrict participation to people who have registered with the party, whereas others have open primaries, which allow much broader participation. The supreme power within each of the parties is its national convention, which, every four years, nominates candidates for president and vice president and sets party policy. In between conventions, the activities of the national party are guided by each party's national chairperson.

The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

8.4 Evaluate how well political parties generally do in carrying out their promises, p. 268.

Political parties affect policy through their platforms. Despite much cynicism about party platforms, they serve as

important roadmaps for elected officials once they come into office. More promises are generally kept than broken.

Party Eras in American History

8.5 Differentiate the various party eras in American history, p. 270.

Throughout American history, one party has generally been dominant for a substantial period of time. The first party era, from 1796 to 1824, was dominated by the Democratic-Republicans, whose agricultural base defeated the business-oriented Federalists. The newly formed Democratic Party dominated from 1828 to 1856, pushing for more power for ordinary individuals. The newly formed Republican Party came to power in 1860 and dominated American politics through 1928—first standing firm against slavery and then successfully promoting the interests of industrialization. The Great Depression led to a reversal of party fortunes, with the Democrats establishing the New Deal coalition that usually prevailed from 1932 to 1964. Since 1968, neither party has been able to hold the reins of power for long. A frequent result has been for power to be divided, with one party controlling the presidency and the other in control of the Congress.

Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics

8.6 Assess both the impact of third parties on American politics and their limitations, p. 277.

Third parties in the United States have brought new groups into the electorate and have served as a vehicle for sending a protest message to the two major parties. The American winner-take-all electoral system makes it hard for third parties to win elections. In contrast, most European electoral systems use proportional representation, which guarantees that any party that has at least a certain percentage of the vote receives a proportional share of the legislative seats.

Understanding Political Parties

8.7 Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of responsible party government, p. 279.

Some scholars of American politics have advocated what is known as “responsible party government,” in which parties offer clear policy choices which generate clearly identifiable outcomes. That is, at least in theory, parties say what they plan to do and once in office carry out these plans. The main disadvantage is that the party discipline necessary for a party to carry out its pledges requires members of the party in government to toe the line without regard to constituency preferences. Individualism in American politics would be stifled by a true responsible government.

Learn the Terms



Study and Review the Flashcards

party competition, p. 259
political party, p. 259
linkage institutions, p. 260
rational-choice theory, p. 261
party image, p. 263
party identification, p. 263
ticket splitting, p. 264
party machines, p. 266
patronage, p. 266

closed primaries, p. 267
open primaries, p. 267
national party convention, p. 268
national committee, p. 268
national chairperson, p. 268
coalition, p. 270
party eras, p. 271
critical election, p. 272
party realignment, p. 272

New Deal coalition, p. 273
party dealignment, p. 276
third parties, p. 277
winner-take-all system, p. 278
proportional representation, p. 278
coalition government, p. 278
responsible party model, p. 279
Blue Dog Democrats, p. 280

Test Yourself



Study and Review the Practice Tests

1. What is a political party's core function?
 - a. to field candidates for elected office
 - b. to provide a voting cue to the electorate
 - c. to try to win elections
 - d. to organize a national office
 - e. to guide policymakers' decisions
2. Successful political parties in the United States remain close to the midpoint of public opinion.
True_____ False_____
3. Explain three of the five ways in which political parties act as a linkage institution. How does performing these tasks show that parties are serving as linking institutions?
4. Political parties are often called "three-headed giants." What are the three "heads" of political parties? How do they relate to each other?
5. Over the last several decades,
 - a. more people have consistently called themselves Republicans than Democrats.
 - b. the percentage of Independents has risen.
 - c. the percentage of Republicans has fallen.
 - d. the percentage of Democrats has risen.
 - e. the party that has won the presidency has always had the most members.
6. What is party identification and in the United States how does party identification affect voting?
7. The internal organization of political parties in the United States is best characterized as
 - a. hierarchical.
 - b. fragmented.
 - c. centralized.
 - d. rigidly determined.
 - e. usually marked by strong leadership.

8. Party machines dominate local party organizations today.
True_____ False_____

9. What role do state party organizations play in American politics today? How does the use of a closed or open primary system help or hinder state party organization influence over campaigns and elections?
10. What is the role of the national party organization between national conventions? Who runs the national organization and what is this person's primary role?
11. Which of the following campaign promises was NOT kept?
 - a. Barack Obama's 2008 promise to withdraw combat troops from Iraq.
 - b. Ronald Reagan's 1980 promise to build up American military power.
 - c. George W. Bush's 2000 promise to lower income tax rates.
 - d. George H. W. Bush's 1988 promise of "no new taxes."
 - e. Bill Clinton's 1992 promise to sign legislation providing for family leave for workers.

12. Based on what you know about American political parties, what are some incentives that parties have to carry out their campaign promises? Why might political parties fail to achieve their campaign promises?

13. A party dealignment is considered to be
 - a. the fragmentation of a political party into splinter parties.
 - b. the loss of party members as more people identify as Independents.
 - c. the loss of party members to the other party.
 - d. the shuffling of party coalitions.
 - e. the reformulation of a party's platform.

14. What do the terms *party era*, *critical election*, and *party realignment* each mean? Explain how they are related to each other.

15. Trace American political parties across their several eras in American history. In what ways are these eras similar and in what ways are they different?

- 16.** Third parties in American politics typically
- encourage major party candidates to take extreme positions.
 - win elections in American politics.
 - promote a broad range of moderate policy ideas.
 - bring new groups into politics.
 - replace one of the two major parties during realignments.

17. The American two-party system encourages parties and candidates to offer clear choices for voters.

True _____ False _____

18. Even though third parties rarely win elected office in the United States, they are still important in several respects. In what ways are third parties important to American politics? Use concrete examples to support your answer.

19. Do you think that if the United States had a multiparty system, American politics would be different? If so, in what ways would American politics be different?

20. Which of the following is NOT true about the responsible party model of government?

- Both parties present comprehensive and distinct policy programs.
- Both parties' candidates are committed to carrying out the party's program.
- The majority party must accept responsibility for government's performance.
- Both parties operate much as the major parties do today.
- The minority party must state what it would do if it were in power.

21. So-called Blue Dog Democrats are an example of the Democratic Party operating according to the principles of responsible party government.

True _____ False _____

22. How does the American two-party system limit the scope of government and yet, at the same time, prevent politicians from taking measures that would limit the scope of government? Use recent policy examples to support your answer.

Explore Further

WEB SITES

www.rnc.org

The official site of the Republican National Committee.

www.democrats.org

The Democratic Party online.

<http://ross.house.gov/BlueDog/>

The official site of the fiscally conservative Democratic Blue Dog Coalition.

www.lp.org

Although Libertarians rarely get more than a few percent of the vote, they consistently get 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 Web site for the Green Party, which emphasizes environmental protection over corporate profits.

FURTHER READING

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