

8

Political Parties

□ Chapter Overview

In his farewell address, President George Washington warned against the growing influence of political parties. From his perspective, parties represented a threat to democracy in the United States. But in spite of his caution, political parties today play a central role in American democracy. In this chapter, we analyze the role of political parties in American politics. We begin by outlining the functions that parties perform in American democracy. Then we explore the significance of party identification. We describe how parties are organized in the United States, and evaluate how well parties generally implement their platforms. Next, we examine the historical evolution of political parties in the United States. We conclude by evaluating the role of third parties in the American political system, and determine why the two-party system has persisted. By the end of the chapter, students should have a good understanding of the role of political parties in American politics.

□ Study Outline

8.1

Learning Objective 8.1: Identify the functions that political parties perform in American democracy. (p. 259)

The Meaning of Party

- A political party is a team of men and women seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in an election.

- Political parties carry out several tasks, including choosing candidates, running campaigns, giving cues to voters, articulating policies, and coordinating policymaking.
- Political parties serve as **linkage institutions**, which are channels through which concerns become political issues on the government's policy agenda.
- **Rational choice theory** explains the actions of voters, politicians, and parties.
- It assumes that individuals act in their best interest and weigh the costs and benefits of possible alternatives.
- In order to win office, candidates select policies that are widely favored.
- The majority of voters are in the middle ideologically, so centrist parties win elections.
- This has led to criticism of the two major parties for being too similar.

8.2

Learning Objective 8.2: Determine the significance of party identification in America today. (p. 263)

The Party in the Electorate

- Many voters cast their ballots on the basis of **party identification**.
- For instance, people who consider themselves Democrats usually vote for Democratic candidates.
- Party identification is declining, however; as of 2000, the more voters considered themselves **Independent** than either Democratic or Republican.
- **Party image** is the voter's perception of what the Republicans and Democrats stand for, such as conservatism and liberalism.
- **Ticket splitting**, or voting for members of different parties for different offices in an election, is also on the rise.
- This practice leads to a divided party government—the president may be of a different party from the majority party in Congress, for example.

8.3

Learning Objective 8.3: Describe how political parties are organized in the United States. (p. 265)

The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots to Washington

- Unlike the more formal parties of other countries, American political parties are fairly decentralized, with city, state, and national administrative bodies.
- State parties are becoming more formally organized, but most presidential campaigning is still conducted through the candidate's personal campaign organization.
- Holding elections is one important task performed by the states, each of which has its own unique party organization.
- Each state's parties go about the election process differently, such as by choosing which type of primary to hold. There are three main types of primaries: closed, open, and blanket.
- Until the 1930s, local parties had tremendous influence over city governments.
- These often-corrupt **party machines** maintained their power by using the **patronage system** to reward loyal members with important positions in the government.
- Today local parties have declined, while county-level organizations have increased their election activities.
- The national party organization, or **national committee**, writes the official party platform and holds the national convention through which a presidential and vice presidential candidate are nominated.
- The national committee maintains the party organization during nonelection years.

8.4

Learning Objective 8.4: Evaluate how well political parties generally do in carrying out their promises. (p. 268)

The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

- Parties help members of Congress form **coalitions** that support a particular policy objective; however, presidents do not need to rely on party support as much as they used to because they can gain the favor of the public directly through television.

Learning Objective 8.5: Differentiate the various party eras in American history. (p. 270)

Party Eras in American History

- Most democratic nations have multiparty systems that allow many interests to be represented.
- The United States, however, has always had a two-party system. Political scientists divide American history into **party eras** in which one party dominated politics for a significant period of time.
- Party eras change when a **critical election** reveals new issues and a failure of the traditional coalitions and this usually causes **party realignment**, when the party redefines itself and attracts a new coalition of voters.
- The **First Party System** (1796–1824) started with Alexander Hamilton’s short-lived Federalist Party, the first American political party.
- For most of the period, though, Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans maintained control of the White House.
- During the period of the **Democrats and the Whigs** (1828–1856), Andrew Jackson appealed to the masses rather than to the elite.
- He formed a new coalition and, ultimately, the Democratic Party.
- The opposition party was the Whig Party, though it had little political success.
- The **Two Republican Eras** (1860–1928) were dominated by the Republican Party, but these eras saw a major realignment of party coalitions under the same name.
- The Republican Party formed out of a coalition of antislavery groups and nominated Abraham Lincoln as its first presidential candidate.
- The election of 1896 began another strongly Republican era during which industrialization and capitalism were advanced.
- The **New Deal Coalition** (1932–1964) formed when Franklin Roosevelt brought the Democratic Party back into favor by starting scores of federal programs to combat the Great Depression.
- The new Democratic coalition brought together the poor, Southerners, African Americans, city dwellers, Catholics, and Jews. Kennedy’s New Frontier and

Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty continued the Democratic New Deal tradition.

- Since 1968, we have seen **Southern realignment** and **divided party government**.
- The states in the South have realigned and are now strongholds of the Republican Party.
- President Nixon was able to capture the South, which had previously been solidly Democratic.
- When Nixon became president, there was divided government for the first time in the 20th century, with one party controlling Congress and another the White House.
- This became a frequent election pattern for most presidents that followed him.
- The trend in divided government has led many political scientists to believe that the party system has dealigned rather than realigned.
- **Party dealignment** means that people are gradually moving away from both parties.

8.6

Learning Objective 8.6: Assess both the impact of third parties on American politics and their limitations. (p. 277)

Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics

- **Third parties** occasionally arise to challenge the two major parties, but they rarely gain enough support to put a candidate in office.
- Some parties form around a specific cause; some are splinter parties, formed from smaller factions of the two major parties, and some form around a specific individual.
- Though they rarely win, third-party candidates do force particular issues onto the political agenda and allow Americans to express their discontent with the two major parties.
- They may also shift the votes of the electorate; for example, many political scientists think George W. Bush won the 2000 election because Green Party candidate Ralph Nader took votes away from Democrat Al Gore. The American **winner-take-all system** is an electoral system in which legislative seats are awarded to candidates who come in first.

- In presidential elections, the candidate who comes in first gets all of the state's electoral votes. This makes only two parties likely.
- **Proportional representation** is an electoral system in which seats in a legislative branch are awarded in proportion to the percentage of the vote received, making it likely that many parties will win seats.
- This often makes a **coalition government** necessary, in which two or more parties join together to form a majority in a national legislature.

8.7

Learning Objective 8.7: Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of responsible party government. (p. 279)

Understanding Political Parties

Democracy and Responsible Party Government

- Political parties today are considered to be essential to a democratic system and the prevention of totalitarian rule, although the framers of the Constitution were wary of political parties.
- Critics of the two-party system allege that there is little choice for voters because the two parties keep to the middle of the road, that there is less opportunity for political change, and that the party system is so decentralized that it fails to translate campaign promises into policy because politicians do not have to vote with the party line.
- Critics of the two-party system have proposed the **responsible party model**, which describes how parties should offer choices to voters, follow through with campaign promises, and accept responsibility as a party for the performance of the government.
- American officeholders do not always follow the platform planks of their party; for example, the **Blue Dog Democrats** are fiscally conservative Democrats who oppose the more liberal tendencies of the Democratic party.

American Political Parties and the Scope of Government

- American political parties do not require party discipline the way many European party systems do.

- The weak party structure of the United States makes it harder to pass legislation.
- Political parties have declined in strength.
- The political party is no longer the major source of information for citizens.

For Additional Review

Design a pyramid diagram depicting the top-down leadership structure within a political party (national level, state level, local level). Place the various party members on the pyramid along with a description of the role played by each. Use this pyramid diagram when reviewing and studying for the unit test and the AP Government and Politics exam.

Create a timeline depicting the evolution of political parties in the United States. Place the major eras of political party development on the timeline along with a description of each era, including the political parties, their platforms, and accomplishments. Use this timeline when reviewing and studying for the unit test and the AP Government and Politics exam.

□ Review Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. All of the following are functions of political parties EXCEPT
 - a. dictating policies.
 - b. choosing candidates.
 - c. running campaigns.
 - d. giving cues to voters.
 - e. coordinating policymaking.

2. Which of the following is true of the Southern states?
 - a. They have always leaned Republican.
 - b. They have always leaned Democratic.
 - c. They have no political leaning.
 - d. They were once loyal to the Democratic Party but now are loyal to the Republican Party.
 - e. They were once loyal to the Republican Party but now are loyal to the Democratic Party.

3. All of the following are true of the party machine EXCEPT
 - a. they were successful in creating party loyalists.
 - b. they provided jobs and favors for voters.
 - c. they were corrupt.
 - d. legislation has largely dismantled them.
 - e. they relied on the merit principle when hiring employees.