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Political Parties, Interest Groups, PACs, and 527 Groups

THE CONCEPTS

- What coalitions make up the two main political parties in the United States?
- Why do third parties so often fail in U.S. politics?
- What effect has dealignment had on political parties?
- [illegible] Democrats and Republicans?

POLITICAL PARTIES

As we've mentioned, few successful political accomplishments are the work of one person. More often, such a person joins with other like-minded individuals to form organizations that try to influence the outcomes of elections and legislative struggles. **Political parties** are unique among these groups in that they play a formal role in both of these processes. Although they are not mentioned in the Constitution—in fact, the Framers of the Constitution disliked political parties and hoped to prevent them—political parties became a mainstay of U.S. elections by the year 1800. Parties arose in the United States as a means of uniting those who shared political ideals, enabling them to elect like-minded representatives and pursue similar legislative goals. To those ends, parties endorse candidates for office and assist in their election efforts. In return for this support, parties expect candidates to remain loyal to goals defined by the party leadership.

The United States has two major political parties: Democrats and Republicans. This **two-party** or **bipartisan system** is reinforced by the nation's electoral system. U.S. election rules, which have been agreed upon by members of the two parties, also make it difficult for all but the two major parties to win a place on the ballot, further strengthening the two-party system.

PARTY CHARACTERISTICS

Don't forget these facts about political parties.

- Parties serve as intermediaries between people and the government.
- Parties are made up of grassroots members, activist members, and leadership.
- Parties are organized to raise money, present positions on policy, and get their candidates elected to office.
- Parties were created outside of the Constitution—they are not even mentioned in the document.

The major purpose of political parties is to get candidates elected to office. In the past, candidates were chosen by the party hierarchy, with little or no public input. However, since 1960, more states have passed laws requiring parties to select candidates through state-run **primary elections**. These primaries have reduced the power of political parties. Candidates must raise their own money for primaries, campaigning for their party's nomination with little to no support from the party itself. If the parties don't control the money, they can't control the candidates. This levels the playing field, but multiple candidates for the nomination can splinter the party membership.

THIRD PARTIES

New parties are occasionally formed in the United States. Unless and until these parties reach the level of a major party, they are called third parties. Third parties form to represent constituencies that feel disenfranchised from both of the major parties. These so-called **splinter** or **bolter parties** usually unite around a feeling that the major parties are not responding to the demands of some segment of the electorate. The Reform Party, under whose banner Ross Perot ran for president in 1996, was an example of a splinter party whose constituency was fed up with politics as usual.

Sometimes third parties form to represent an ideology considered too radical by the mainstream parties. These **doctrinal parties** reject the prevailing attitudes and policies of the political system. The Socialist Party and the Libertarian Party are examples. **Single-issue parties** are formed to promote one principle. The American Independent Party, which sponsored the segregationist candidacy of George C. Wallace in 1968, is an example. Third parties can have a major impact on elections. The Green Party,

which favors strict environmental policies, more government social programs, and controls over big business, ran Ralph Nader for president in 2000. Nader's candidacy took votes from Al Gore, thus tipping the scales in favor of George W. Bush.

Third-party candidates should not be confused with **Independent candidates.** Independent candidates run without party affiliation. It is very difficult for Independent candidates to overcome the money and organization of the two major parties. Eugene McCarthy, an anti-Vietnam War candidate in 1968, and John Anderson, a fiscal conservative and social liberal in 1980, are two examples.

Why Third Parties Fail

The failure of third parties to elect presidential and other candidates to office is a direct result of an American political system designed to support only two major parties. National campaigns in countries using equal, single-member, plurality voting-district systems (like the United States) require huge sums of money and vast organizations. Also, in American presidential elections, almost all states have a winner-take-all system for electoral votes; the candidate who receives the most votes, even if it is only by one, wins all of the electors in the state. Because the losers get no electoral votes, the electoral count usually does not accurately reflect the popular vote. During the 2000 presidential election (which featured the Florida voting controversy), Al Gore won the popular vote by about 500,000 votes nationwide, but George W. Bush was found to have won the Florida electorate, giving him all of Florida's 25 electoral votes and ultimately, the presidency.

FUNCTIONS OF MODERN POLITICAL PARTIES

Political scientists identify three major subdivisions of political parties.

- **The party among the electorate.** Voters enroll in and identify with political parties. They generally vote for candidates who represent their party.
- **The party in government.** Government officials belong to political parties. They act together to pursue common goals, although regional and ideological differences sometimes subvert their efforts.
- **The party organization.** A group of people who are neither elected officials nor average voters, the party organization is made up of political professionals who recruit candidates and voters, organize campaign events, and raise money to promote the party.

Political parties perform all of the following functions:

- **Recruit and nominate candidates.** The parties are the major players in electoral politics. They seek out candidates to run in their primary elections. They also create the rules by which candidates seek their nominations. In nearly all elections, nomination by one of the major parties is a prerequisite to victory. For example, in the 2008 Democratic primary, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton fought it out until Obama had enough delegates to secure the nomination, at which point the Democratic party formally announced him as their candidate.
- **Educate and mobilize voters.** Political parties fund propaganda campaigns to persuade voters to choose their candidates. They send mailings, hold rallies, and run advertisements. They target regions in which their support is strong and campaign to persuade voters in those regions to vote on election day.

- **Provide campaign funds and support.** The national parties have committees dedicated to raising funds for House and Senate campaigns. State parties also raise funds for candidates for both state and national office. Although most candidates rely primarily on their own personal campaign support staff, they also need the help of the state or national party organizations.
- **Organize government activity.** Parties act as an organizing force in government. The House and Senate organize their leadership and committee systems strictly along party lines, as do state legislatures.
- **Provide balance through opposition of two parties.** Each party serves as a check on the other by constantly watching for and exposing weakness and hypocrisy. The minority party (provided a single party controls both the White House and the Congress) performs the role of the *loyal opposition*, constantly critiquing the performance of the party in power.
- **Reduce conflict and tension in society.** The two-party system promotes compromise and negotiation in two ways: by encouraging parties to accommodate voters and encouraging voters to accept compromises in policy. The Republican Party, for example, includes both religious social-conservatives and libertarians. To assemble winning coalitions, the party must somehow appease both groups. The groups, in turn, must be willing to compromise if they wish to prevent the Democrats from prevailing.

U.S. political parties are not hierarchical. The national party organization and each of the state and local organizations are largely autonomous and serve different functions; one does not take orders from the other.

Party committees are organized by geographic subdivisions. Locally, committees at the precinct, town, ward, and electoral district levels coordinate get-out-the-vote drives, door-to-door canvassing, and leaflet distribution. These party committees are staffed mostly by volunteers, and their work is largely concentrated around election time. The next largest geographic grouping is the county. County committees coordinate efforts in local elections and organize the efforts of committees on the precinct level. They also send representatives to each polling place to monitor voting procedures. State committees raise money and provide volunteers to staff campaign events. They provide support to candidates for both state and national offices. National legislative elections, however, are also the responsibility of the powerful congressional district and senatorial committees. These committees, chaired by incumbents and staffed by professionals, are part of the national party organization. They are most likely to become involved in these legislative elections when the possibility exists of gaining or losing a seat. Because incumbents usually run for reelection and are often reelected easily, the congressional and senatorial committees are active in a minority of election efforts during each electoral cycle.

The national party plans the **national conventions** held every four years to nominate a presidential candidate. It sponsors polls to keep party members informed of public opinion and manages issue-oriented advertising and propaganda.

Are Parties in Decline?

Some political scientists believe that the parties are no longer as powerful or as significant as they once were. Prior to 1968, one party typically controlled both the executive and legislative branches of government. Since that year, however, there have been only a few years of one-party control of these branches (1977 to 1980, 1992 to 1994, and 2002 to 2005; and since the 2008 elections). Americans are voting a **split ticket** (see page 85) more frequently than ever before. They are more likely to consider the merits and positions of a particular candidate than to merely consider his or her party affiliation. As a result, no one party dominates government, and officials with different political agendas are elected to work together. Split-ticket voting leads to divided government, when one party controls Congress and the other controls the White House. An example of this was during the 110th Congress (2007–2008) when Democrats held the majority of the House and Senate, and there was a Republican in the White House. This can create policy gridlock because these two branches are often at odds with each other. Conversely, it can cause them to work together in the creation of moderate public policy. Lastly, it encourages party dealignment because voters do not align with their parties as uniformly as they once did.

Increasingly, modern candidates have taken control of their own election campaigns, relying less on party support than did past candidates. They are now able to appeal directly to the public through television. This has left the parties—which once wielded great power over the electoral process—with less power. In their place, media consultants have become the chief movers and shakers in political campaigns.

PARTY COALITIONS

Political parties consist of combinations of groups, which consist of combinations of individuals. The larger the coalition the more likely the candidate will win. Party candidates and party positions on policy are designed to attract more groups of voters, putting together a winning **coalition.**

In the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008, the Republican coalition included the following:

- disaffected conservative "Bluedog" Democrats
- veterans' groups
- religious conservatives
- pro-lifers
- opponents of gay rights
- missile-defense supporters
- opponents of affirmative action
- Cuban Americans
- supporters of the development of natural resources on public lands

In the same elections, the Democratic coalition included the following:

- disaffected moderate Republicans
- pro-choicers
- African Americans
- labor unions
- intellectuals
- people with lower incomes
- city dwellers
- non-Cuban Latinos
- feminists
- Jewish people
- environmentalists

While there are always exceptions to the rule, the two parties tend to rely on these groups as a base of support. Regionally, it appears that the east and west coasts and the upper Midwest are more Democratic, while the South and lower Midwest are more Republican.

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PARTIES

While there are general ideological differences between the two parties, there are also a number of similarities. Neither party, for example, questions the validity of the nation's capitalist economic system.

Although both parties tend to be centrist, there are nevertheless differences in the ways the two parties view the role of government. The greatest ideological differences are between the liberals in the Democratic Party and the conservatives in the Republican Party, the so-called **party bases.** While appealing to the independent centrist voter during election campaigns, each party counts on its base to get out and vote. Party leaders must use great care in choosing policy positions so they do not lose their party base. They must also avoid alienating the moderates of the party by taking extreme left or right positions.

Democrats tend to be

- less disposed to spend on defense.
- less disposed to use vouchers, or other public funds, to let students attend private schools.
- more disposed to spend money to advance social-welfare programs.
- more disposed to use government money for public education.
- more disposed to spend money on government-run health programs.
- more disposed to grant tax relief to targeted groups such as the lower and middle classes.
- against private ownership of assault weapons and for broader regulations on the ownership of firearms.

Republicans tend to be

- more disposed to spend on defense.
- more disposed to use vouchers for private schools and to give government aid to parochial schools.
- more disposed to grant tax relief to everyone, including the wealthy and corporations.
- less disposed to spend money on social-welfare programs.
- less disposed to spend money on government-run health programs.
- less disposed to regulate firearms.

Party Realignment

Party realignment occurs when the coalitions making up the two parties fall apart, such as when many of the groups that make up the majority party defect to the minority party. Realignments are very rare and usually occur as a result of some major traumatic event, such as an economic depression or a war. They are signaled by what is called a **critical election,** when a new party comes to dominate politics. The last realignment took place in 1932, as a result of the Great Depression, when the Republican Party became the minority party and the Democratic party became the majority party, with overwhelming numbers of Democrats being elected to every branch of government at every level. Realignments occur over a period of time and show permanence. The New Deal coalition of the 1930s lasted for decades. There have been no realignments since the 1930s.

The trend today seems to be toward dealignment. **Dealignment** is usually a result of party members becoming disaffected as a result of some policy position taken by the party. These disaffected party members join no political party and vote for the candidate rather than the party he or she belongs to. Since the 1960s, membership in the Democratic party has declined while the number of voters self-identifying as independents has increased. During the same time period, the number of Republicans has remained constant. The two major parties are now nearly equal in party membership. This is a classic example of dealignment. (That said, the number of registered Democrats has increased since the 2006 mid-term elections and the presidential campaign of Barack Obama.)

INTEREST GROUPS AND LOBBYISTS

Interest groups are organizations dedicated to a particular political goal or to a set of unified goals. Group members often share a common bond, either religious (**Christian Coalition**), racial (**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**), or professional (**American Medical Association**). In other cases, they simply share a common interest, such as the environment (**Sierra Club**) or political reform (**Common Cause**). In either case, they are similar to political parties in that they try to influence the outcome of elections and legislation. Unlike political parties, however, they do not nominate candidates, nor do they normally try to address a wide range of issues.

When interest groups try to influence legislators, we say they are **lobbying** for a bill or issue. The term originated with the historical practice of early lobbyists; they waited in the lobby of the capitol so they could catch legislators coming in and out of session. Today, most lobbyists are highly paid professionals. A number are former legislators, whose experience and friendships in the capitol make them particularly effective.

There are literally thousands of interest groups in the United States. Most groups fall under one of the following categories:

- **Economic groups.** Economic groups are formed to promote and protect members' economic interests. They include peak business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which represents the interests of all businesspeople. Other groups represent specific trades and industries; among these are the American Farm Bureau Federation and the American Nuclear Energy Council. Labor groups such as the AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers represent union members. Professional groups include the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association. Most economic groups have existed a long time and have developed strong ties with legislators and bureaucrats. They are also very large, highly influential, and extremely well funded, and either represent or employ large constituencies. As a result, they are usually the most powerful interest groups in Washington, D.C.
- **Public interest groups.** Public interest groups are nonprofit organizations that are generally organized around a well-defined set of public policy issues. Consumer groups usually work to promote safer products and more informative labeling; the most prominent of these groups is Public Citizen, led by **Ralph Nader**. Environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, advocate preservation of wildlife and wilderness areas. Religious groups such as the Christian Coalition attempt to influence public policy in such a way as to promote or protect their beliefs. Other groups promote causes such as women's rights, minority rights, and political reform. Single-issue groups like the **National Rifle Association** and the **National Right to Life Committee** are often among the most powerful public interest groups because of the intensity of their supporters. Single-issue constituents are more likely than other voters to use a single issue as a litmus test for candidates. Thus, a candidate who advocates gun control runs the risk of losing the votes of all 3 million NRA members.
- **Government interest groups.** Most states and many cities and other localities maintain lobbying organizations in the nation's capital. A separate group represents the nation's governors, and yet another represents mayors. Most foreign governments and businesses lobby the government as well.

How Interest Groups Influence Government

Interest groups use a number of tactics to disseminate information and persuade Congress, the president, the judiciary, and federal bureaucrats. Those tactics include the following:

- **Direct lobbying.** Representatives of the interest group meet privately with government officials to suggest legislation and to present arguments supporting their positions.
- **Testifying before Congress.** Interest groups provide expert witnesses at committee hearings.
- **Socializing.** Social events in Washington, D.C., are often political events as well. Interest groups hold social functions and members attend other functions to meet and forge relationships with government officials.
- **Political donations.** Interest groups provide financial support to candidates and parties that champion their causes. Those that are forbidden to do so by law—corporations, trade groups, and unions—may do so by forming political action committees (PACs) for that purpose.
- **Endorsements.** Many groups announce their support for specific candidates. Some groups rate legislators on the basis of their voting records; a high rating constitutes an implicit endorsement of that candidate.
- **Court action.** Interest groups file lawsuits or **class action suits** to protect and advance their interests. They will also submit ***amicus curiae*** (friend of the court) **briefs** in lawsuits to which they are not a party so that judges may consider their advice in respect to matters of law that directly affect the case in question.
- **Rallying their membership.** Public interest groups often engage in grassroots campaigning by contacting members and asking them to write, phone, or e-mail their legislators in support of a particular program or piece of legislation. In addition, members may engage in demonstrations and rallies promoting their cause.
- **Propaganda.** Interest groups send out press releases and run advertisements promoting their views.

Limits on Lobbying

Several laws limit the scope of lobbyists' activities. Most are ineffective, but stronger efforts to regulate lobbying run the risk of violating the First Amendment right to free speech. The 1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act was intended to allow the government to monitor lobbying activities by requiring lobbyists to register with the government and publicly disclose their salaries, expenses, and the nature of their activities in Washington, D.C.

Other laws prohibit, for limited amounts of time, certain lobbying activities by former government officials. These laws are meant to counteract the appearance of **influence peddling**, the practice of using personal friendships and inside information to get political advantage. Former legislators must wait one year before lobbying Congress directly, for example. However, they may lobby the executive branch immediately after leaving office. Some groups complain of a "revolving door" that pushes former federal employees into jobs as lobbyists and consultants. A limit similar to that of the former legislators also applies to former executive officials. It prevents them from lobbying for five years after they leave the agency that employed them. These limits were determined in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), the case that equated donations with free speech. In this ruling, the Supreme Court upheld federal limits on campaign contributions and ruled that donating money to influence elections is a form of constitutionally protected free speech.

In January of 2010, the Supreme Court changed many of the campaign finance rules in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The court ruled that corporations have a First Amendment right to expressly support political candidates for Congress and the White House. The ruling struck down restrictions that had prevented corporations from spending company money directly on campaign advertising right before an election. In the near future, this ground-breaking case will surely cause many changes in the financing of election campaigns. At the time of publication of this edition, it was unclear exactly how it will affect political action committees and 527 groups. It is still important to learn how and why learn how and why these groups function by reading the following sections.

Finally, federal laws prohibiting campaign contributions from corporations, unions, and trade associations can be sidestepped through the formation of a political action committee or PAC.

Political Action Committees (PACs)

The 1974 **Federal Election Campaign Act** allows corporations, unions, and trade associations to form **political action committees** as a means of raising campaign funds. Certain restrictions apply to PACs: They must raise money from at least 50 contributors; they must donate to at least five different candidates; they may not donate more than $5,000 per year to any single candidate or more than $15,000 to a national party per year. Corporate, union, and trade PACs must raise money from employees and members and may not simply draw it from their treasuries.

Corporations, unions, and trade associations are not the only groups that form PACs. Many other interest groups form PACs to collect and distribute contributions, as do legislators (these PACs are called leadership PACs). Federal law limits the amount donors may contribute to candidates ($2,300), national parties ($28,500), and individual PACs ($5,000). Furthermore, the sum of all such contributions may not exceed $108,200 over two years. These numbers are accurate for the 2008 election cycle, but are scheduled to increase slightly for each future cycle.

527 Groups

A 527 group (named after the section of the tax code that allows them) is a tax-exempt organization that promotes a political agenda, although they cannot expressly advocate for or against a specific candidate. The term is generally used to refer to political organizations that are not regulated by the FEC (Federal Election Commission) and are not subject to the same contribution limits as PACs. They avoid regulation by the FEC because 527s are "political organizations" but are not registered as "political committees" subject to campaign finance law contribution limits. Sounds confusing, huh? The line between issue advocacy and candidate advocacy is a huge source of contention and disagreement. Examples of 527s include Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, College Republican National

Committee, and The Media Fund. The **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002** (also known as the **McCain–Feingold Act**) changed soft money rules that make establishing new 527s a more attractive option than traditional PACs. 527 groups have become a way for outside organizations to get around the hard money limits of McCain-Feingold.

SUMMARY

- Though they are not mentioned in the Constitution, political parties have become an integral part of American government. They may embrace a wide variety of ideologies, but ultimately both parties share the same goal: to be elected by any means necessary.
- American history has been marked by numerous third parties that have challenged the prevailing duopoly. All have died, but if it is popular enough, a third party may influence the two major parties to adopt its ideas.
- Parties serve many functions in American democracy: They recruit and fund candidates, educate voters, provide a loyal opposition, and run the government—all while mitigating societal tension.
- When we look at parties, they often turn out to be broad coalitions of disparate ideologies and groups. The Republican Party, for example, blends Libertarians who are hostile to government regulation with religious evangelists who want government to play a greater role in stamping out immorality.
- Generally speaking, Democrats tend to be in favor of government regulation of industry, redistribution of government money to the poor, and social freedom. Republicans tend to want to empower business to free itself from government rules, encourage people to earn money with assistance from the state, and want more social and moral controls on society.
- Interest groups are large organizations with strong policy goals, but they are different from political parties in that they do not change their ideologies. These groups try to control the political process by hiring lobbyists to influence legislators and by giving them money as well.
- When labor unions or corporation want to fund candidates, they do so by forming Political Action Committees, or PACs. PACs provide a means to funnel money to a candidate of choice and are regulated by the Federal Election Commission (FEC).
- 527 groups are not regulated by the FEC, and the nature of these groups is a great source of contention. They have become a way for organizations to avoid hard money limits, and their spending has ballooned in recent years, despite efforts to limit and regulate outside money in elections.