

Political Parties and Political Action

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CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

Divided government, where one party controls the executive branch while the opposition party controls one or both houses of Congress, was favored by a majority of the American people in the 2014 midterm election. That election, when the Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives and the Senate brought divided government to both houses of Congress. This chapter explores the nature, function, and organization of political parties and how and why people identify with a particular party. The chapter also looks at how individuals can get involved in the political process through political participation and political action.



The four main linkage institutions are political parties, elections, the media, and interest groups. To fully understand the function of these informal institutions of government, you should view them as input agents that result in output from the policymaking institutions covered in the last section.

The first linkage institution, political parties and the manner in which they influence policy-making through political action, will be developed in this chapter. It will cover the major tasks, organization, and components of political parties. We will contrast the party organization with its actual influence on the policymakers in government. Then we will look at the history of the party system in America, evaluating the major party eras. The impact of third parties on the two-party system will also be discussed.

We will also analyze the ideology of the two major parties by looking at their platforms versus the liberal/conservative alliances that have developed. These coalitions may be the first step in the breakdown of the two-party system as we know it.

The last part of the chapter focuses on the political participation of the average citizen ranging from conventional means of influencing government to more radical, unconventional tools that have influenced our elected officials.

THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

Political parties have various functions and serve as one of the primary linkage institutions to government.

If the definition of politics is "who gets when, what, how, and why," then political parties are the means to achieve that end. The nature of the party system in America can be viewed as competitive. Since the development of our first parties, the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, different philosophies and different approaches to the development and implementation of public policy have determined which party and which leaders control the government. Our system has been one of the few two-party systems existing in democracies; however, the influence of third-party candidates cannot be underestimated. Parliamentary democracies have multiparty governments.

Because the aim of a political party is to influence public policy, in order to succeed, parties must draw enough of the electorate into their organization and ultimately must get enough votes to elect candidates to public office. You can, therefore, look at a political party in three ways:

- the party as an organization,
- the party's relationship with the electorate, and
- the party's role in government.

In order to achieve their goals, all political parties have common functions:

- nominating candidates who can develop public policy,
- running successful campaigns,
- developing a positive image,
- raising money,
- articulating these issues during the campaign so that the electorate will identify with a particular party or candidate,
- coordinating in the governing process the implementation of the policies they supported, and
- maintaining a watchdog function if they do not succeed in electing their candidates.

The completion of each of these tasks depends on how effective the party's organization is, the extent the party establishes its relationship with the electorate, and how it controls the institutions of government. A complete discussion of these components and functions will take place in other parts of the chapter.

Party Eras

The first party era (1828–1860) was characterized by the Democrats dominating the presidency and Congress. The second period (1860–1932) could be viewed as the Republican era. The third era (1932–1968) gave birth to the success of the New Deal and was dominated by the Democrats. The fourth period (1968 to present) has been called the era of divided government. It has been characterized by the election of a president from one party having to deal with an opposition party in one or both houses of Congress.

A new party era may have been ushered in, signaled by the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994. The Republican takeover and the reelection of President Clinton suggests that the era of

divided government may be long lasting. In the 2000 election, divided government became the theme. First, in the presidential election, Vice President Al Gore received more popular votes than George W. Bush but still lost the electoral vote. Congress initially remained Republican, but was closely divided. Then in 2001, the Democrats gained a majority in the Senate after a Republican senator left the party. After the midterm election in 2002, the Republicans again solidified their majority, retaking control of the Senate and increasing their majority in the House of Representatives. The 2004 election may have signaled a return of a Republican majority as George W. Bush was reelected by a popular vote majority for the first time since his father won in 1988, and the Republicans increased their majorities in both the House and Senate. In 2006, the midterm election—dominated by the Iraq war, what some called the Bush administration's "culture of corruption," and dissatisfaction with President Bush's job performance—resulted in a Democratic takeover of Congress. The Democrat incumbents did not lose a single seat and gained 29 seats in the House and six seats in the Senate. The results of this election could be attributed to an unpopular president and a war that had lost public support. One thing is certain. Republican gains in the once-Democratic South suggest a continuation of the party realignment in that area of the country.

The 2008 presidential election was a short-lived start of a new party era—one party majority rule. Barack Obama had the largest congressional majority since Lyndon Johnson, who enjoyed a large Democratic majority in both houses of Congress. The era of divided government has shifted to this new era of one party dominance of the executive and legislative branches. This changed after the 2010 midterm election when Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives. In 2014, the GOP also gained more seats in the House and a majority in the Senate, strengthening their hand in policy debates with the president. Many political scientists question the strength of party eras because of the weakening of political parties as illustrated by the increasing number of independent voters, and the rise of the Tea Party. The 2000s can be described as a time where one party had majority rule until a "wave" election brought divided government.

Party Realignment

Party realignment, the shift of party loyalty, occurred in 1932 after the country experienced the Great Depression. Fed up with the trickle-down economic theories of Herbert Hoover, the public turned to the New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt. A new coalition of voters supported FDR's New Deal. They included city dwellers, blue collar workers, labor union activists, the poor, Catholics, Jews, the South, and African-Americans where they could vote. An unusual alliance of Northern liberals and Southern conservatives elected Roosevelt to an unprecedented four terms. This coalition, with the exception of Eisenhower's election, held control of the White House and Congress until 1968. A direct comparison can be made among Roosevelt's New Deal, Kennedy's New Frontier, and Johnson's Great Society philosophy and election coalition. The growth of the federal government and the growth of social programs became part of the Democratic platform. However, a party realignment began as Johnson fought for civil rights legislation. The Democratic "solid south" turned increasingly Republican both on the state and national level as white voters rejected the Democratic support for civil rights. In 1980, the so-called Reagan Democrats, blue-collar workers, signaled a new party realignment to the Republican Party.

Period of Divided Government

The Vietnam War and the issue of how this country would fight communism brought the Republicans back to power in 1968. Since then, they have won six of eight presidential elections but were unable to control Congress until 1994. That is why this modern period has been called

the period of divided government. The Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation in 1974 saw a weakened GOP and the eventual loss by Gerald Ford to Jimmy Carter in 1976. That election signaled a new Southern strategy, which Ronald Reagan was able to capitalize on in 1980. Pulling what has been labeled as "Reagan Democrats," Reagan attracted a traditional Democratic base of middle-class workers to his candidacy. It became even more divided from 1981 to 1986 when the Republicans were able to control the Senate. Divided government also existed on the state level with a minority of states controlling both the governorship and state legislatures. Besides being divided on party lines, government became divided on ideological lines. Political scientists began referring to the nation as divided into the "blue states" won by the Democrats and the "red states" won by the Republicans after the 2000 election.

With the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 and his reelection in 1996, the emergence of an ideological party era seemed to be on the horizon. Even though Clinton had a Democratic majority in both houses during his first term, much of his legislative agenda was embroiled in an ideological battle among liberals, moderates, and conservatives who did not always vote along party lines. The rise of the so-called religious right, an evangelical conglomeration of ultraconservative political activists joining the Republican Party, has contributed to this rise of an ideological party era. The attempt at bipartisanship has been replaced by temporary coalitions depending upon the issue of the day.

After the 2000 election, coalitions became even more important since the House was so closely divided and the Democrats had a one-vote majority in the Senate. A good example of the development of a moderate coalition was the one that formed to pass a major tax reduction package and the "No Child Left Behind" education law in 2001.

After the 2006 midterm election, the Democrats regained control of both houses of Congress, and divided government was once again the rule. President George W. Bush faced a hostile House of Representatives, locking horns with Speaker Nancy Pelosi over the direction of the Iraq War. In the Senate the Democrats held a narrow majority, and because major pieces of legislation required a 60-vote majority, Bush was able to block most of the Democratic agenda. Bush did not veto a single piece of legislation during his first term. However, in his second term, facing a Democratic majority, he vetoed 12 pieces of legislation, including legislation dealing with stem cell research, troop funding, and children's health insurance. The Democrats were not able to override any of these vetoes. After Barack Obama was elected in 2008 the Democrats had a majority in both houses until the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections when the Republican Party gained control of the House of Representatives and in 2014 the Senate in what was called "wave election(s)," an election where one party replaces the majority party with a new majority.

THIRD PARTIES

Third parties have had a significant impact on the political process.

Third political parties, also called minor parties, have played a major role in influencing the outcome of elections and the political platforms of the Democrats and Republicans. Even though these smaller parties and their leaders realize that they have virtually no chance to win, they still wage a vocal campaign. These third political parties can be described as ideological, single-issue oriented, economically motivated, and personality driven. They have been called Socialist, Libertarian, Right to Life, Populist, Bull Moose, and United We Stand. But they all have one thing in common—an effort to influence the outcome and direction of an election. Let's look at some of the more successful third-party attempts.

The modern third-party impact has revolved around a political leader who could not get the nomination from his party. George Wallace's American Independent Party of 1968 opposed the integration policies of the Democratic Party, and he received 13 percent of the vote and 46 electoral

votes, contributing to Hubert Humphrey's defeat in a very close election. John Anderson's defection from the Republican Party in 1980 and his decision to run as a third-party candidate had a negligible effect on the outcome of that election.

The announcement by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot that he was entering the 1992 presidential race, and using his own money to wage the campaign, changed the nature of that race. He announced his intention to run on CNN's *Larry King Show* and said that if his supporters could get his name on the ballot in all 50 states he would officially enter the race. A political novice, he decided to drop out of the race the day Bill Clinton was nominated. He then reentered the heated contest in October, appeared in the presidential debates, and struck a chord with close to 20 percent of the electorate. His folksy style and call for reducing the nation's deficit played a significant role in the campaign. He did not win a single electoral vote, but won almost 20% of the popular vote. Third parties became less important in the 2000s. Ralph Nader running as the Green Party candidate hurt Al Gore's chance in the contested 2000 election.

PARTY DEALIGNMENT

If party realignment signifies the shifts in the history of party eras, then people gradually moving away from their parties has become more of a trend in today's view of party loyalty. This shift to a more neutral and ideological view of party identification has been called party dealignment. Party dealignment is also characterized by voters who are fed up with both parties and register as independents. This trend has been on the rise, and in party identification surveys more than one third of voters identify themselves as independents. In fact those people who are strong party loyalists are so because they believe that the party matches their ideology. The shift of traditional Southern Democrats to the Republican Party came about because many voters perceived the Republicans as a more conservative party than the Democrats. Women activists, civil rights supporters, and people who believe in abortion make up the Democratic coalition because the Democratic Party has supported these issues in their national platform. Party organization and party support have remained stronger than party identification because of the ability of the parties to raise funds and motivate their workers.

Although considered unimportant by many, party platforms are perhaps a better barometer of party identification than traditional measurements. If you look at the 2012 national party platform of the Democratic and Republican Parties, you can see the effect ideological differences had on voter support. A few examples are on the next page.

Even though the party positions differ significantly, it is interesting to note that, when actual legislation is proposed, there is very rarely bloc voting on these issues.

Then how do you determine what constitutes a liberal or conservative ideology? Political labels are deceptive. You may be a social liberal or a civil libertarian but be a conservative when it comes to the role of government in regulating business. If you have a single issue like abortion that is most important, it will make very little difference whether a candidate is a Democrat or Republican. In 2014 a widely reported poll asked people to classify themselves as liberal, moderate, or conservative. Forty-two percent identified themselves as Independent, thirty-one percent as Democrat, and twenty-five percent as Republican. In another poll, when asked what it is meant to be labeled a liberal, people responded in terms of

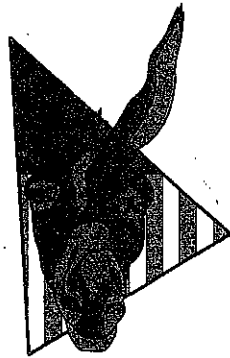
- accepting change,
- supporting programs that increase spending,
- favoring social programs, and
- believing in the rights of all people.

Democrats and Republicans have been viewed as having few differences between them. Ideology has become more important than party identification.

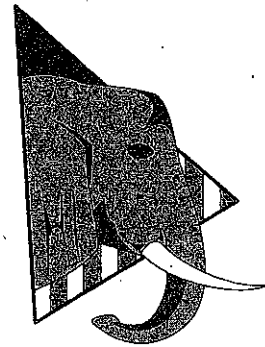
When asked what it is meant to be a conservative they responded with the following descriptions:

- resistant to change,
- thrifty,
- traditional, and
- narrow-minded.

**SYMBOL OF THE
DEMOCRATIC PARTY**



**SYMBOL OF THE
REPUBLICAN PARTY**



In 2012, the Democratic and Republican parties stressed economic issues and national security issues. The stands on social issues remained the same as the 2008 platforms. Health care was a major plank of both platforms. The Democrats supported the president's Affordable Care Act, which the Supreme Court affirmed, while the Republicans supported a repeal of what they called Obamacare. The Republican platform indicted President Obama for his failure to reduce the unemployment rate to under 8%, while the Democrats pointed to the number of jobs that were created since the president took office in 2009. There were also significant differences in the areas of support of labor unions (Democrats supporting them; Republicans critical) and repeal of the so-called Bush era tax cuts (the Democrats favoring repeal for those who made more than \$250,000 while Republicans were against repeal.)

Liberals and Conservatives

These general areas translate into specific liberal/conservative differences when applied to actual issues. For instance, on foreign policy, liberals favor defense cuts. Conservatives, on the other hand, favor government spending on defense over social welfare programs. On social issues liberals favor freedom of choice for abortions, whereas conservatives favor the right to life. Liberals are opposed to school prayer of any kind; conservatives favor moments of silent prayer. Liberals generally view the government as a means of dealing with the problems facing society, whereas conservatives favor a more laissez-faire position. Liberals have been more sympathetic to the rights of the accused, and conservatives have been critical of many of the Warren Court decisions. Yet when you apply these standards to specific bills, there is a clouding up of which party is liberal and which party is conservative.

The term *New Democrat* was applied to President Clinton. Whether this was a public relations gimmick to make Clinton and the Democrats appear to be more conservative, or whether the traditional New Deal liberalism of the party was being modified, is still not clear. Serious differences do exist between the parties. Part of the differences derive from the fact that one party is in power and controls the agenda and that the party out of power must fight to keep their ideas alive. And there are still constituencies that are attracted to the two parties—for instance big business to the Republicans and labor unions to the Democrats.

The Tea Party

Defying liberal and conservative labels, a new party emerged prior to the 2010 midterm election. The Tea Party, named after the colonists who protested against taxes imposed by the British Crown in 1773, was organized by a combination of grassroots Americans and former leaders of the Republican Party. Even though they did not officially petition to get on state ballots, they held a party convention and endorsed many congressional candidates in primary races, successfully defeating a number of Republican Senators and Congressmen and women. After the primaries, the party also endorsed Republican gubernatorial and congressional candidates, many of whom won. Former Alaska governor and 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin embraced the movement and became one of their biggest supporters.

The Tea Party's slogan "take back America," refers to its philosophy that a government is best when it governs the least. The Tea Party opposes government spending without cuts in other government programs, favors tax cuts and a balanced budget, and points to the Declaration of Independence and a strict interpretation of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as their guiding principles.

The Tea Party movement was a big factor in the 2010 midterm elections supporting insurgent candidates to run against Republicans in primaries. They were not successful in opposing President Obama's reelection, and in 2014 they failed to get any of their candidates elected in Republican Senate primaries. They were able to defeat the House majority leader in a primary.

ORGANIZATION

Political parties exist on both the national and local levels. Their organization is hierarchical. Grass roots politics on the local level involves door-to-door campaigns to get signatures on petitions, campaigns run through precinct and ward organizations, county committees, and state committees headed by a state chairman. Local party bosses like Boss Tweed or party machines like the Democratic Tammany machine in New York City or the Daley machine in Chicago have lessened in influence. The national political scene is dominated by the outcome of national conventions, which give direction to the national chairperson, the spokesperson of the party, and the person who heads the national committee. The party machine exists on the local level and uses patronage (rewarding loyal party members with jobs) as the means to keep the party members in line.

The nominating process drives the organization of the national political party. This procedure has evolved, and, even though the national nominating convention (more on this in the next chapter) still selects presidential candidates, the role of the party caucus and party primary has grown in importance. The role of the national convention is one of publicizing the party's position. It also adopts party rules and procedures. Sometimes this plays an important part in the restructuring of a political party. After the disastrous 1968 Democratic Convention, with rioting in the streets and calls for party reform, the McGovern-Fraser Commission brought significant representation changes to the party. It made future conventions more democratic. Delegate selection procedures aimed to include more minority representation. In 1982 another commission further reformed the representation of the Democratic convention by establishing 15 percent of the delegates as superdelegates (party leaders and elected party officials). These delegates helped Walter Mondale achieve his nomination in 1984 and enabled Al Gore to defeat Bill Bradley easily in 2000. Superdelegates played a significant role in the 2008 Democratic primaries. Primary elections were completed in June, and neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Clinton had a majority of the delegates.

The organization of national political parties helps maintain party discipline. However, local party organizations and their party machines have a major influence on the outcome of elections.

Ultimately, the superdelegates turned to Obama, giving him a majority and enabling him to clinch the nomination. There has been some criticism that these delegates have reduced the democratic reforms of the McGovern Commission.

On the other hand, the Republicans were more concerned about regenerating party identification after the Watergate debacle. They were not interested in reform as much as making the Republican Party more efficient. Their conventions are well run and highly planned. There was, however, some negative publicity at their 1992 convention, which critics said was dominated by the conservative faction of the party. The lesson was learned. In 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 both the Republican and Democratic Conventions were so highly scripted that political scientists concluded that it would be virtually impossible to make a similar mistake.

The National Committee

The national committee, made up of a combination of state and national party leaders, is the governing body of the political party. It has limited power and responds to the direction of the national chairperson. The chairperson is selected by the presidential candidates nominated at the convention. In fact, the real party leader of the party in power is the president himself. The chairperson is recognized as the chief strategist and often takes the credit or blame if gains or losses occur in midterm elections. Some of the primary duties of the national chairperson are fundraising, fostering party unity, recruiting new voters and candidates, and preparing strategy for the next election. Also, congressional campaign committees in both parties work with their respective national committees to win Senate and House seats that are considered up for grabs.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The future of political parties depends on the extent of positive political participation of the electorate and the ability to succeed in creating and implementing public policy.

Participation in the political process is the key gauge of how successful political parties are in involving the average citizen. If you develop the actual vote as the key criteria, the future is certainly not bright. Unlike many foreign countries, the American electorate has not turned out in droves in local or national elections. The reasons why people vote depend on a number of factors including family income, age, education, party identification, and race. Then what does the future hold for the Democrats and Republicans? To answer this question, you must look at the continuum of political involvement.

There is no doubt that statistically the majority of the electorate participates in the political process in conventional ways. From those areas that the majority of people participate to those areas that a minority participate, the population as a whole generally is involved in one or more of the following:

- discussing politics;
- registering to vote;
- voting in local, state, and national elections;
- joining a specific political party;
- making contact with politicians either by letter or phone;
- attending political meetings;
- contributing to political campaigns;
- working in a campaign;
- soliciting funds; and
- running for office.

Yet one of the ironies of conventional political participation is that less than half of those who are eligible actually vote in most elections.

Unconventional participation involves protest and civil disobedience. Activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have influenced the political process through mass meetings such as the March on Washington in 1963. Elected officials responded by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The future of political parties depends on how closely associated the voters remain with the party. The future is not bright for traditional party politics. There is a sharp decline in party enrollment and an increase in the affiliation of voters calling themselves independents. More and more ticket splitting (where voters cast their ballots not on party lines, but rather based upon each individual candidate running for a particular office) has taken place. The impact of the media on the campaign has weakened the ability of the party to get its message out. Finally, the impact of special-interest groups and PACs has reduced the need for elected officials to use traditional party resources.

Suggestions have been made to strengthen voter identification with the party by presenting

- clearly defined programs on how to govern the nation once their candidates are elected,
- candidates who are committed to the ideology of the party and who are willing to carry out the program once elected, and
- alternative views if it is the party out of power.

The winning party must take on the responsibility of governing the country if elected and accepting the consequences if it fails. This responsible party model would go a long way in redefining the importance of political parties in America. Even though there is a recognized decline in the importance of political parties, it is highly doubtful that our two-party system will change to a multiparty or ideological party system in the future.