



# Political Parties

## Chapter Outline

The Meaning of Party

The Party in the Electorate

The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots

to Washington

The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

Party Eras in American History

Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics

Understanding Political Parties

Summary

**T**hree hundred and sixty-seven Republican candidates for the House of Representatives stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in late September of 1994 to sign a document they entitled "Contract with America." This document outlined the reforms the Republicans promised to pass on the first day of the new Congress, as well as 10 bills they agreed would be brought to the floor for a vote within the first 100 days of the new Republican-controlled House of Representatives. The contract

was the brainchild of Newt Gingrich and Richard Armey, both of whom were college professors before they were elected to Congress. Gingrich and Armey thought that the Republicans needed a stronger message in 1994 than simply saying they opposed President Clinton's policies. The contract was an attempt to offer the 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.

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."<sup>1</sup> Political scientists and politicians alike believe that a strong party system is desirable and bemoan the weakening of American political parties in recent decades.

The strength of the parties has an impact not only on how we are governed but also on what government does. The major historical developments in the expansion or contraction 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. If either party were to gain control of both the presidency and the Congress for an extended period of time, that circumstance would have a profound impact on the scope of government. However, as we shall see in this chapter, during the past few decades the Congress was usually controlled by one party and the White House by the other. This lack of unified party control has largely stifled any major changes in the scope of government in America.

As you read this chapter, consider whether you would prefer to see a single party in firm control of the government, and what difference such control would make.

**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."

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, and this two-party system remains intact almost two centuries later.

## The Meaning Of Party

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."<sup>2</sup>

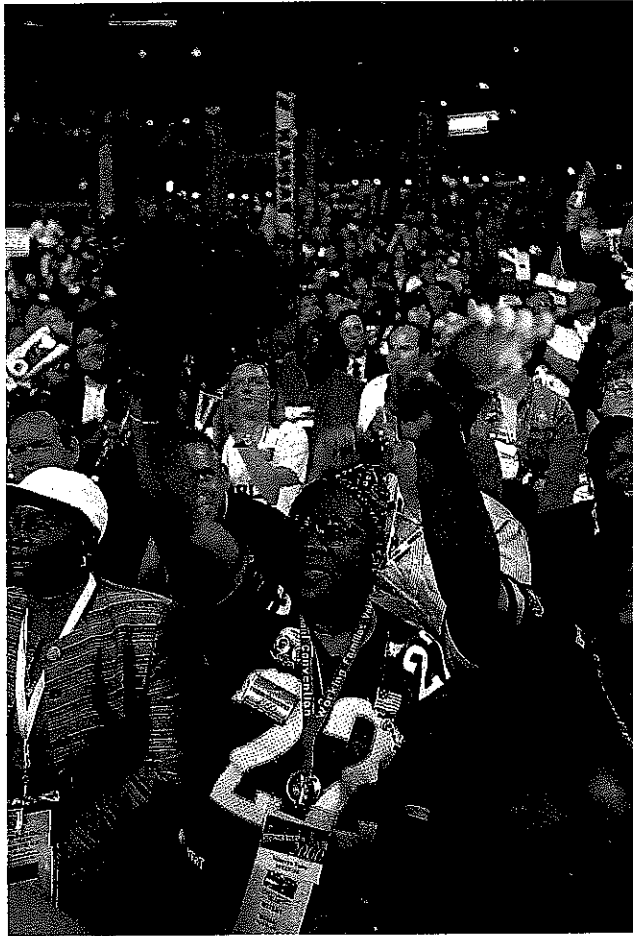
The word *team* is the slippery part of this definition. Party teams may not be so well disciplined and single-minded as teams fielded by top football coaches. Party teams often run every which way (sometimes toward the opposition's goal line) and are difficult to lead. Party leaders often disagree about policy, and between elections the party organizations seem to all but disappear. 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 a 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 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 always 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



The major parties have different demographic bases of support. Of all social groups, African Americans tend to be the most solidly aligned with one party. Ever since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they have voted overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. In 2000, African-American voters cast 89 percent of their votes for Al Gore, 8 percent for George W. Bush, and 2 percent for Ralph Nader.

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. All 287 million Americans cannot raise their voices to 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.”<sup>4</sup> Here is a checklist of the tasks parties perform, or should perform, if they are to serve as effective linkage institutions:

**Parties Pick Candidates.** Almost no one above the local level (and often not even there) gets elected to a public office without winning a party’s endorsement.<sup>5</sup> A party’s endorsement is called a *nomination*. Up until the early twentieth century, American parties chose their candidates with little or no input from the voters. Progressive reformers led the charge for primary elections, in which citizens would

### 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.

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 has made it easier for candidates to campaign on their own, without the help of the party organization. For example, Ross Perot received 18.9 percent of the presidential vote in 1992 and 8.5 percent in 1996 with hardly any organizational support at all.

#### party image

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

**Parties Give Cues to Voters.** Most voters have a **party image** of each party; that is, they know (or think they know) what the Republicans and Democrats stand for. Liberal, conservative, probusiness, prolabor—these are some of the elements of each party's image. Even in the present era of weakened parties, many voters still rely on a party to give them cues for voting.

#### Why does it matter?

Parties perform many important tasks in American politics. Yet, 30 percent of the respondents to the 1998 National Election Study felt that parties were no longer needed. What do you think?

Would you like to see the parties disbanded and have every candidate for office run completely on his or her own? How would this change American politics?

**Parties Articulate Policies.** Within the electorate and within the government, each political party advocates specific policy alternatives. For example, the Democratic Party has clearly supported abortion rights, and the Republican Party has repeatedly called for restrictions on abortion.

**Parties Coordinate Policymaking.** In America's fragmented government, parties are essential for coordination among the branches of government. Virtually all major public officials are also members of a party. When they need support to get something done, the first place they look is to their fellow partisans.

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.

### Parties, Voters, and Policy: The Downs Model

The parties compete, at least in theory, as in a marketplace. A party is in the market for voters; 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.<sup>6</sup> **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."<sup>7</sup> Downs argues that (1) voters want to maximize the chance that policies they favor will be adopted by government, and (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 primarily use 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 far from the midpoint of public opinion. In the American electorate, a few voters are extremely liberal and a few are extremely conservative; but the majority are in the middle (see Figure 8.1). If Downs is right, then centrist parties will win, and extremist parties will be condemned to footnotes in the history books. Indeed, occasionally a party may misperceive voters' desires or take a risky stand on a principle—hoping to persuade voters during the campaign—but in order to survive in a system where the majority opinion is middle-of-the-road, parties must stay near the center.

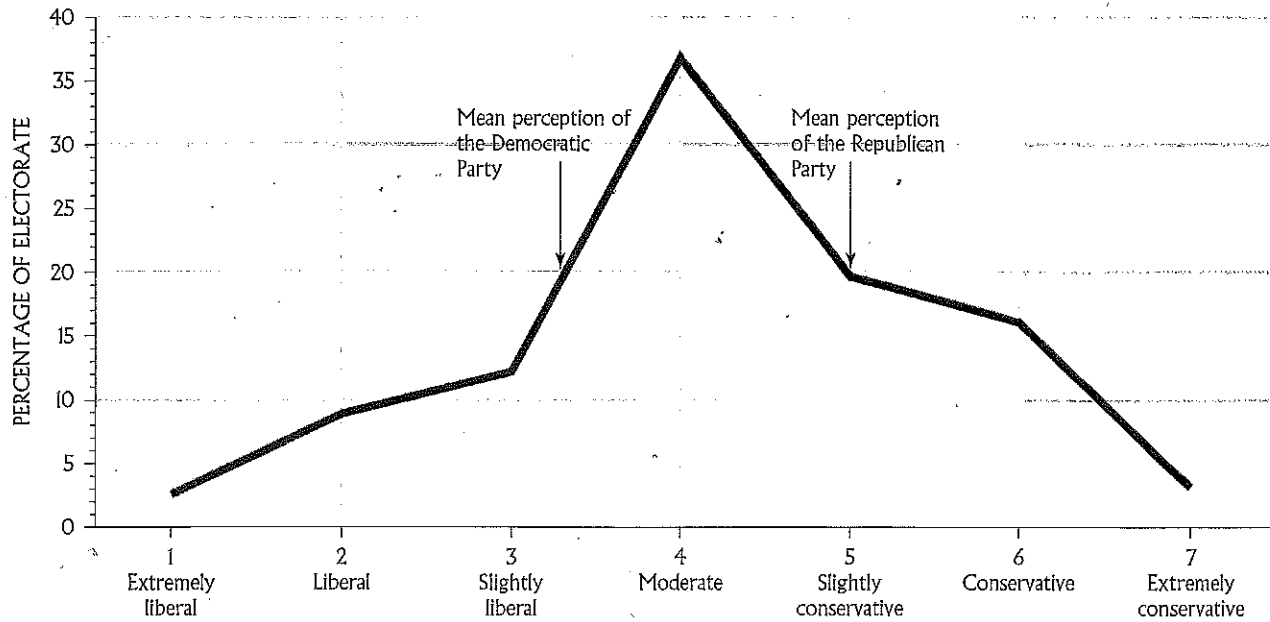
We frequently hear criticism that there is not much difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. Given the nature of the American political market,

#### 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.

**Figure 8.1 The Downs Model: How Rational Parties Match Voters' Policy Preferences**

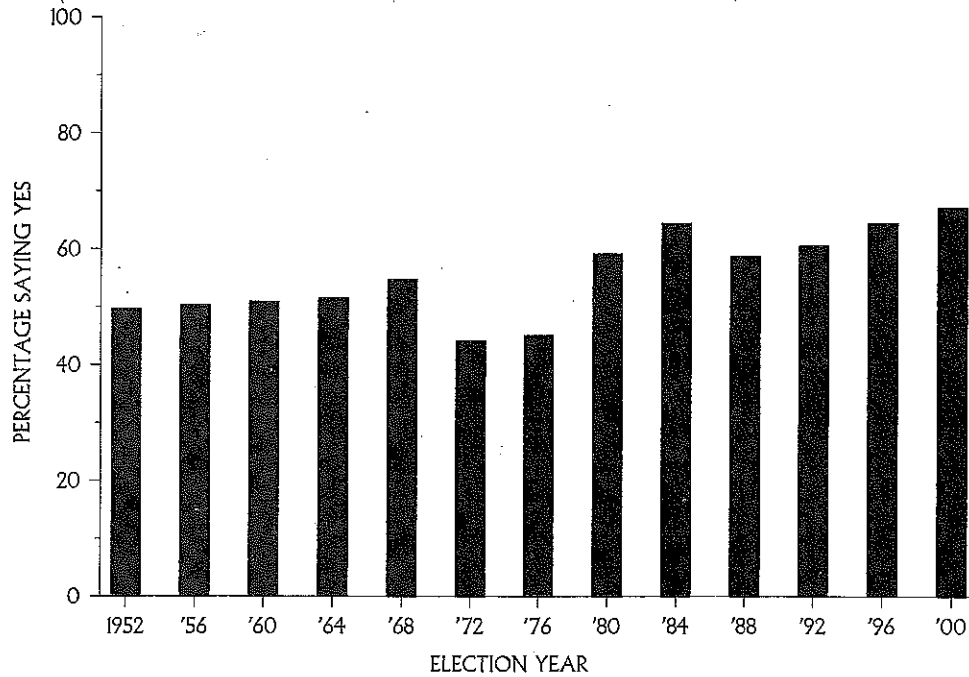
In 1998, the National Election Study asked a sample of the American electorate to classify themselves on a 7-point scale from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. The graph shows how the people located themselves in terms of ideology and how they perceived the ideology of the parties.



Source: From the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 1998.

**Figure 8.2 Do People See Differences Between the Parties?**

Over the years, the National Election Studies have repeatedly asked nationwide samples whether they thought there were major differences between the Democrats and the Republicans. Since Ronald Reagan first became the Republican Party's nominee in 1980, and moved the GOP further toward conservatism, more people have said that they see substantial differences between the parties.



Source: From the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies.



however, these two parties have little choice. We would not expect two competing department stores to locate at opposite ends of town when most people live on Main Street. Downs also notes, though, that from a rational-choice perspective, one should expect the parties to differentiate themselves at least somewhat. Just as Chrysler tries to offer something different from and better than General Motors in order to build buyer loyalty, so Democrats and Republicans have to forge different identities to build voter loyalty. Two-thirds of the the population currently believes that important differences do exist between the parties, as you can see in Figure 8.2. When asked what those differences are, respondents most frequently comment that the Republicans favor lower taxes and less domestic spending, whereas Democrats favor more government programs to help the middle class and less-advantaged Americans.

## The Party in the Electorate

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. 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. They may never go to a party meeting, but they have images of the parties’ stances on issues and of which groups the parties generally favor or oppose.

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 in the distribution of party identification is important. Since 1952, the 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 the past four decades (see Table 8.1). The clearest trend has been *the decline of both parties and*

### party identification

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

**Table 8.1 Party Identification in the United States, 1952–2000<sup>a</sup>**

YEAR	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS	REPUBLICANS
1952	48.6	23.3	28.1
1956	45.3	24.4	30.3
1960	46.4	23.4	30.2
1964	52.2	23.0	24.8
1968	46.0	29.5	24.5
1972	41.0	35.2	23.8
1976	40.2	36.8	23.0
1980	41.7	35.3	23.0
1984	37.7	34.8	27.6
1988	35.7	36.3	28.0
1992	35.8	38.7	25.5
1996	39.3	32.9	27.8
2000	34.8	41.0	24.2

<sup>a</sup>In percentage of people; the small percentage who identify with a minor party or who cannot answer the question are excluded.

Source: From the 1952–2000 National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies.

*resultant upsurge of independence* (mostly at the expense of the Democrats). In 2000, 41 percent of the population called themselves Independents.

Virtually every major social group—Catholics, Jews, poor Whites, Southerners, and so on—has moved toward a position of increased independence. The major exception has been African-American voters. A decade of Democratic civil rights policy in the 1960s moved African Americans even more solidly into the Democratic Party. Currently, only about 5 percent of African Americans identify themselves as Republicans.<sup>8</sup>

For many white Americans, though, the abandonment of either party for a non-partisan stance is well advanced. This abandonment occurred at all age levels in the electorate, but it was most pronounced for younger voters, who have always had the weakest party ties. The baby boom and the lowering of the voting age to 18 contributed to the rising tide of independence during the 1970s. Young people are usually the most likely to call themselves Independents.

Not only are there more Independents now, but those who still identify with a party are no longer so loyal in the voting booth. In recent years, **ticket-splitting**—voting with one party for one office and the other for other offices—has reached record proportions.<sup>9</sup> An examination of a random sample of over 8,000 actual 1994 ballots from Los Angeles County compiled by Anthony Salvanto reveals that only 30 percent cast a complete and straight vote for all 11 partisan offices contested that year.<sup>10</sup> The result of voters failing to make an across-the-board choice between the parties has often been divided party government, at both the federal and state levels.

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#### **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.

## **The Party Organizations: From the Grass Roots to Washington**

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. As Paul Allen Beck writes, party organizations in the United States “lack the hierarchical control and efficiency, the unified setting of priorities and strategy, and the central responsibility we often find in parties in other nations.”<sup>11</sup> One can imagine a system in which the national office of a party resolves conflicts among its state and local branches, states 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 influence and resources to officeholders who follow the party line and by punishing 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

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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.

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 Boss Tweed of New York, whose ring reportedly made between \$40 million and \$200 million from tax receipts, payoffs, and kickbacks.

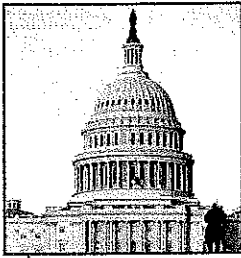
At one time, urban machines in Albany, Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City, and elsewhere depended heavily on ethnic group support. Some of the most fabled machine leaders were Irish politicians, including New York's George Washington Plunkett, Boston's James Michael Curley, and Chicago's Richard J. Daley. Daley's Chicago machine was the last survivor, steamrolling its opposition amid charges of racism and corruption. Even today there are remnants of the Chicago machine, particularly in white and ethnic neighborhoods. The survival of machine politics in Chicago can be traced to 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 Daley 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.<sup>12</sup>

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. Table 8.2 demonstrates how county party organizations in the early 1990s were more likely to have the characteristics of permanent institutions than those of just a dozen years earlier. These county organizations distribute yard signs and campaign literature, get out the vote on election day, and help state and local candidates any way they can. To candidates who have ample resources of their own, the county organization is probably not of great consequence; as you can see, most still have no regular paid staff. However, to candidates for less visible offices who often work on shoestring budgets, the local party organization can provide crucial assistance.

## 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, however, parties are weak. California, says Kay Lawson, "has political parties so weak as to be almost nonexistent; it is the birthplace of campaigning by 'hired guns'; and it has been run by special interests for so long that Californians have forgotten what is special about that."<sup>13</sup>



## You Are the Policymaker

### Was the Blanket Primary A Good Idea?

In the 1996 California primary, voters were presented with an initiative to change the state's closed primary process to a blanket primary. Proponents of this initiative argued that a closed primary system favors the election of party hard-liners, contributes to legislative gridlock, and stacks the deck against moderate problem solvers. By opening up the primary process to allow voters to vote for any set of candidates they like regardless of partisanship, advocates of the blanket primary argued that politicians would be encouraged to focus on the median voter rather than a narrow group of partisans. They also noted that participation in primary elections would increase by allowing Independents a chance to take part, and by giving minority party voters in noncompetitive districts a real say in selecting their representatives.

Both the Democratic and Republican state parties of California came out strongly against this initiative. They argued that the blanket primary would be an invitation to political mischief, with political consultants and special interests manipulating the system to help the candidate they'd most like to face in November

get the other party's nomination. A frequently used analogy during the campaign was that allowing members of one party a large voice in choosing another party's nominee was like letting UCLA's football team choose USC's head coach. Rather than seeing this reform as giving voters more choice, opponents argued that it would diminish choice in the long run by muddling the differences between major parties.

In the end, the voters approved the blanket primary by a margin of nearly 40 to 60. The exit polls showed that the initiative was supported by Democrats and Republicans alike. However, the party organizations immediately took the case to federal court, arguing that the blanket primary infringed on their constitutional rights of freedom of association by giving nonmembers a say in their activities. U.S. District Judge David Levy listened to a variety of testimony from political consultants, party leaders, and political scientists (including one of the coauthors of this book). In *Democratic Party et al. v. Jones* he ruled that although the blanket primary weakened the parties it was what the voters wanted and shouldn't be overruled by the courts. Subsequently, the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the rul-

ing. But the Supreme Court had the final word in June of 2000, ruling that the blanket primary violated the parties' right to freedom of association. Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia stated that the blanket primary forces the parties "to adulterate their candidate-selection process—a political party's basic function—by opening it up to persons wholly unaffiliated with the party."

Upon hearing of the Supreme Court decision, California's Democratic governor and Republican secretary of state both pledged to try to retain a blanket primary system by making primary elections nonpartisan, as currently practiced in Louisiana. In his opinion, Justice Scalia indicated that such a system is constitutional because party nominees are not chosen through such a process; indeed, sometimes this system leads to a general election between two members of the same party. It would be ironic if the parties' court victory led them to be excluded from the primary process in some states altogether. You be the policymaker: Should the Supreme Court have outlawed California's blanket primary? Is the nonpartisan blanket primary an idea that should now be tried in a number of states?

**Table 8.2 Organizational Characteristics Of Parties At The County Level (in percents)**

	Democrats		Republicans	
	1979–1980	1992	1979–1980	1992
Year-Round Office	12	45	14	64
Paid Full-Time Staff	3	22	4	26
Maintain a Campaign Office	55	85	60	65

Source: Adapted from Paul Allen Beck, *Party Politics in America*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Longman, 1997), 79.

**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.

**blanket primaries**

Elections to select party nominees in which voters are presented with a list of candidates from all the parties. Voters can then select some Democrats and some Republicans if they like.

**Why does it matter?**

Some state party organizations are much more active and influential than others. What about your state—do you think the party organizations play an important role? Why do you think they are either weak or strong in your state? What might the consequences be if these state party organizations become better funded in the future?

**national convention**

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

**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.

**national chairperson**

The national chairperson is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the party and is usually nominated by the presidential nominee.

The states are allowed wide discretion in the regulation of party activities, and how they choose to organize elections influences the strength of the parties profoundly. Some states give parties greater power than others to limit who can participate in their nomination contests. In **closed primaries** only people who have registered in advance with the party can vote in its primary, thus encouraging greater party loyalty. In contrast, **open primaries** allow voters to decide on election day whether they want to participate in the Democratic or Republican contests. And most antiparty of all are **blanket primaries**, which present voters with a list of candidates from all the parties and allow them to pick some Democrats and some Republicans if they like. (See "You are the Policymaker: Was the Blanket Primary A Good Idea?")

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 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 of 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.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, almost all state parties today have a physical headquarters, typically in the capital city or the largest city. State party budgets have also increased. In the early 1960s, more than half the parties had an annual budget of less than \$50,000. With the development of permanent headquarters, professional staffs, and high-tech equipment, this figure has risen substantially. A 1984 survey found that the average Democratic state party budget was \$260,000; the Republican state parties were much better off with an average budget of \$795,000.<sup>15</sup>

Though no study of state parties has been conducted recently, it is almost certain that their financial resources have increased. In the 1996 case of *Colorado Republican Campaign Committee v. Federal Election Commission* the Supreme Court ruled that the government may not restrict the amount that the state or national parties spend on behalf of candidates through independent expenditures. This ruling opened the floodgates for a good deal of money to be spent through the state parties, much of it transferred down from the national party organization. In 1996, these transfers to the state parties amounted to \$76 million for the Democrats and \$66 million for the Republicans.

In terms of headquarters and budgets, state parties are better organized than they used to be. 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.<sup>16</sup>

**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. (Chapter 9 will discuss conventions in detail.) 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 what their biggest organizational challenge was at a 1998 joint appearance, the chairs of the Democratic and Republican parties both promptly responded “money.”<sup>17</sup>

The chairperson of the party that controls the White House is normally nominated by the president. 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 Bush, both of whom used this position as a means of political advancement.

## The Party in Government: Promises and Policy

Which party controls which of America’s many elected offices matters because each party and the elected officials who represent it generally 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.

However, because candidates are now less dependent on parties to get nominated and elected, that “control” is much less fixed than it was when George W. Bush took political science classes at Yale University in the 1960s. Presidents are now less likely to play the role of party leader, and members of Congress are less amenable to being led.

When George W. Bush ran for the presidency in 2000, he rarely made reference to the need for a Republican Party majority in Congress. In contrast, John Kennedy often made the point in 1960 that he wanted more members of his party elected to Congress. Presidents have always had a tendency to bypass parties on occasion by appealing to the national interest and the people as a whole. However, with the growth of communications technology, such a strategy has become far more feasible and potentially rewarding. Presidents no longer need the party machinery to get their message out; they can go on TV at any time to appeal directly to the American public. Nor do members of Congress feel that they owe any great loyalty to presidents of their own party. Few members of Congress these days feel that their reelection is strongly tied to the president’s success or failure. Like the president, most congressional candidates can expect to run on their own personal record rather than the party’s.

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 what Asian boys ought to be doing. . .” to defend the pro-American regime 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 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. Bill Clinton promised a tax cut for the middle class during the 1992 campaign, but after he was elected he backed off, saying that first the deficit would have to be substantially reduced.

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. When he first ran for president, Bill Clinton promised to support bills providing for family leave, easing voting registration procedures, and tightening gun control that had been vetoed by President Bush. He lobbied hard to get these measures through Congress again and proudly

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### coalition

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

**Table 8.3 Party Platforms, 2000**

Although few people actually read party platforms, they are one of the best written sources for what the parties believe in. Brief excerpts from some of the contrasting positions in the Democratic and Republican platforms of 2000 illustrates major differences in beliefs between the two parties.

**REPUBLICANS**

**Credit Claiming**

Inspired by Presidents Reagan and Bush, Republicans hammered into place the framework for today's prosperity and surpluses. We cut tax rates, simplified the tax code, deregulated industries, and opened world markets to American enterprise. The result was the tremendous growth in the 1980s that created the venture capital to launch the technology revolution of the 1990s.

**Abortion**

The unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed.

**The Environment**

The way current laws have been implemented has often fostered costly litigation and discouraged personal innovation in environmental conservation. . . . We condemn the current administration's policy of resorting to confrontation first.

**Health Care**

We will promote a health care system that supports, not supplants, the private sector; that promotes personal responsibility in health care decision-making; and that ensures the least intrusive role for the federal government.

**Taxes**

Budget surpluses are the result of over-taxation of the American people. . . . When the average American family has to work more than four months out of every year to fund all levels of government, it's time to change the tax system, to make it simpler, flatter, and fairer for everyone.

**Defense Spending**

Republicans are the party of peace through strength. . . . Republicans will restore the health of a defense industry weakened by a combination of neglect and misguided policies.

**Education**

We endorse the principles of Governor Bush's education reforms, which will: Raise academic standards through increased local control and accountability to parents, shrinking a multitude of federal programs into five flexible grants in exchange for real, measured progress in student achievement.

**Social Security**

Personal savings accounts must be the cornerstone of restructuring. Each of today's workers should be free to direct a portion of their payroll taxes to personal investments for their retirement future.

**Affirmative Action**

We believe rights inhere in individuals, not in groups. We will attain our nation's goal of equal opportunity without quotas or other forms of preferential treatment.

**DEMOCRATS**

**Credit Claiming**

In 1992, Americans elected Bill Clinton and Al Gore with a mandate to turn America around. And that's just what they did. . . . Eight years later the record is clear: the longest economic expansion in American history. The most jobs ever created under a single administration. The first real wage growth in 20 years.

**Abortion**

The Democratic Party stands behind the right of every woman to choose, consistent with *Roe v. Wade*, and regardless of ability to pay.

**The Environment**

We have worked for eight years to produce the cleanest environment in decades: with cleaner air, cleaner water, and a safer food supply; a record number of toxic waste dumps cleaned up; new smog and soot standards so that children with asthma and the elderly would be able to live better lives; and a strong international treaty to begin combating global warming.

**Health Care**

We must redouble our efforts to bring the uninsured into coverage step-by-step and as soon as possible. We should guarantee access to affordable health care for every child in America. We should expand coverage to working families, including more Medicaid assistance to help with the transition from welfare to work.

**Taxes**

The Bush tax slash . . . would let the richest one percent of Americans afford a new sports car and middle-class Americans afford a warm soda. It would undermine the American economy and undercut our prosperity. Democrats want to give middle-class families tax cuts they can use.

**Defense Spending**

With Bill Clinton and Al Gore in the White House, Democrats reversed a decline in defense spending that began under President Bush, boosted pay and allowances, and provided the funding for a new generation of weapons.

**Education**

George Bush and the Republican Party. . . refuse to invest in America's crumbling schools and crowded classrooms—spending 100 times more on tax cuts than on education. When it comes to education, Democrats want to invest more and aim higher, the Republicans invest too little and aim too low.

**Social Security**

To build on the success of Social Security, Al Gore has proposed the creation of Retirement Savings Plus—voluntary, tax-free, personally controlled, privately managed savings accounts with a government match that would help couples build a nest egg of up to \$400,000.

**Affirmative Action**

Al Gore has strongly opposed efforts to roll back affirmative action programs. He knows that the way to lift this nation up is not by pulling the weakest down, but by continuing to expand opportunities for everyone who wants to achieve.

signed them into law once they arrived on his desk. Ronald Reagan promised to step up defense spending and cut back on social welfare expenditures, and within his first year in office he did just that. He promised a major tax cut and provided one. He promised less government regulation and quickly set about deregulating natural gas prices and occupational safety and environmental policies. In sum, the impression that politicians and parties never produce policy out of promises is largely erroneous.

In fact, the parties have done a fairly good job over the years of translating their platform promises into public policy. Gerald Pomper has shown that party platforms are excellent predictors of a party's actual policy performance in office. He tabulated specific pledges in the major parties' platforms over a number of years, tabulating 3,225 specific policy pronouncements. Pomper then looked to see whether the party that won the presidency actually fulfilled its promises. Nearly three-fourths of all promises resulted in policy actions. Others were tried but floundered for one reason or another. Only 10 percent were ignored altogether.<sup>18</sup>

If parties generally do what they say they will, then the party platforms adopted at the national conventions represent blueprints, however vague, for action. Consider what the two major parties promised the voters in 2000 (see Table 8.3). There is little doubt that the election of Bush over Gore will direct the government in a course different from the one it would have taken if the outcome had been reversed.



## 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 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**. The majority party does not, of course, win every election; sometimes it suffers from intraparty squabbles and loses power. Sometimes it nominates a weak candidate, and the opposition cashes in on the majority party's misfortune.

Punctuating each party era is a **critical election**.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 eras

Historical periods in which a majority of voters cling to the party in power, which tends to win a majority of the elections.

#### critical election

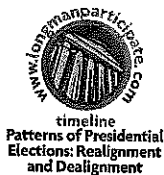
An electoral “earthquake” where new issues emerge, new coalitions replace old ones, and the majority party is often displaced by the minority party. Critical election periods are sometimes marked by a national crisis and may require more than one election to bring about a new party era.

#### party realignment

The displacement of the majority party by the minority party, usually during a critical election period.



Aaron Burr dealt a near-death blow to the Federalist Party when he killed its leader, Alexander Hamilton, in this 1804 duel. Burr, then vice president, challenged Hamilton to the duel after the former treasury secretary publicly called him a traitor.



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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 aging but popular 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.”<sup>23</sup> Congress battled over the extension of slavery to the new states and territories. In *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 most bitter 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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, D.C.) 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 party conventions have changed dramatically as a result of technological progress. When Franklin Roosevelt appeared at the Democratic Convention of 1932, it marked the first time that a nominee’s acceptance speech was broadcast live across the nation via radio.

Political scientists call the 1896 election a realigning one because it shifted the party coalitions and entrenched the Republicans for another generation. (For more on the election of 1896, see Chapter 10.) 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.<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt reinforced the partisanship of these groups, and the Democrats forged the **New Deal coalition**.

The basic elements of the New Deal coalition were:

- *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.* Though the poor had low turnout rates, their votes went overwhelmingly to the party of Roosevelt and his successors.
- *Southerners.* Ever since the pre-Civil War days, white Southerners had been Democratic loyalists. This alignment continued unabated during the New Deal.
- *African Americans.* The Republicans freed the slaves, but under FDR the Democrats attracted the majority of African Americans.
- *Intellectuals.* Small in number, prominent intellectuals provided a wealth of new ideas that fueled Roosevelt's New Deal policies.

As you can see in Figure 8.3, many of the same groups that supported FDR's New Deal continue to shape the party coalitions today.

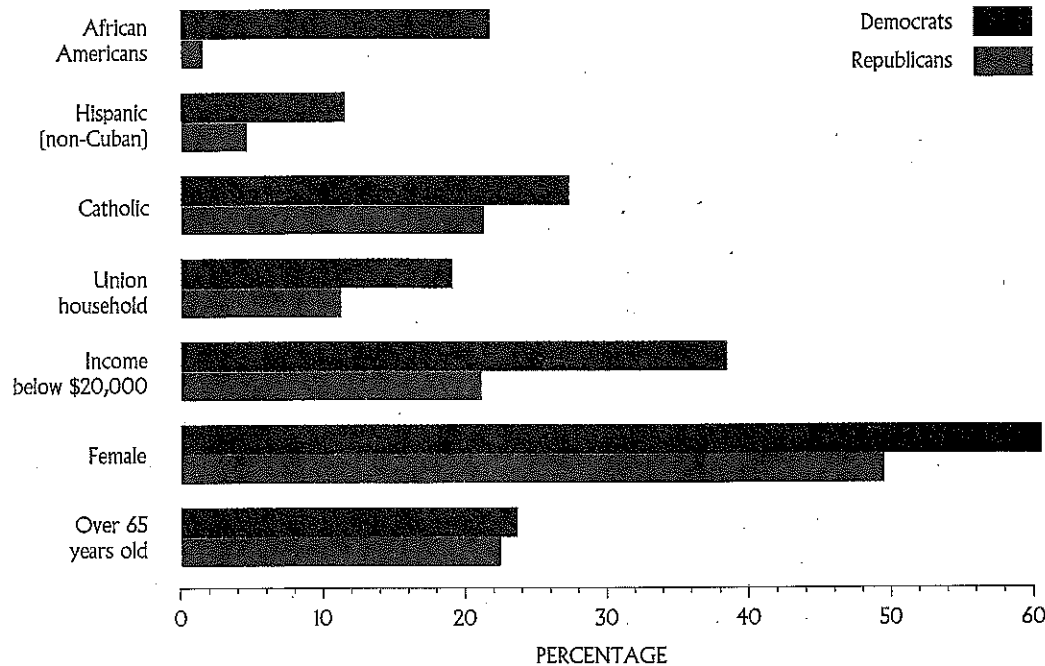
The New Deal coalition made the Democratic Party the clear majority party for decades. Harry S Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt in 1945, promised a Fair Deal. World War II hero and Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower broke the Democrats' grip on power by being elected president twice during the 1950s, but 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, picked as Kennedy's vice president because he could help win Southern votes, became president upon Kennedy's assassination and was overwhelmingly elected to a term of his own in 1964. Johnson's Great Society programs included a major expansion of government programs to help the poor, the homeless, and minorities. 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.

### 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.

### 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 of Democrats and Republicans with various characteristics.



Source: From the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies, 1996.

### 1968–Present: The Era of Divided Party Government

Throughout most of American history, newly elected presidents have routinely 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. The first time in the twentieth century that a newly elected president moved into the White House without having his party in control of both houses of Congress was when Nixon won the 1968 election. Nixon's election was not to be an exception, however, but rather the beginning of a common pattern—repeated in the presidential elections won by Reagan and Bush. For a time, it seemed that the normal state of affairs in Washington was to have 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. After the 1994 elections, Republican leaders were optimistic that they were at last on the verge of a new Republican era in which they would control both the presidency and Congress simultaneously. On the other side, Democratic leaders were hopeful that voters would not like the actions of the new Republican Congress 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 party government.

With fewer voters attached to the two major parties, it will be difficult for either one to gain a strong enough foothold to maintain simultaneous control of both sides 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 6.3 of the 34 years from 1969 to 2002.<sup>26</sup> The discrepancy between the patterns of presidential



and congressional voting during this era of divided party government is unprecedented in American history.

Divided party government is frequently seen not only at the federal level but at the state level as well. As Morris Fiorina shows, the percentage of states that have unified party control of the governorship and the state legislature has steadily declined for over four decades.<sup>27</sup> Whereas 85 percent of state governments had one party controlling both houses of the legislature and the governorship in 1946, by 2001 this was the case in only 42 percent of the states (see Figure 8.4). Divided government, once an occasional oddity in state capitols, is now commonplace.

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 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.

In the parties' heyday, it was said that people would vote for a yellow dog if their party nominated one. Now, more than 90 percent of all Americans insist that "I always vote for the person whom I think is best, regardless of what party they belong to."<sup>28</sup> Rather than reflecting negative attitudes toward the parties, the recent dealignment has been characterized by a growing **party neutrality**. For example, 30 percent of the 1996 National Election Study respondents answered as follows to a set of four open-ended questions about the parties:

Q. Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party?  
A. No.

Q. Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Democratic Party?  
A. No.

**party dealignment**

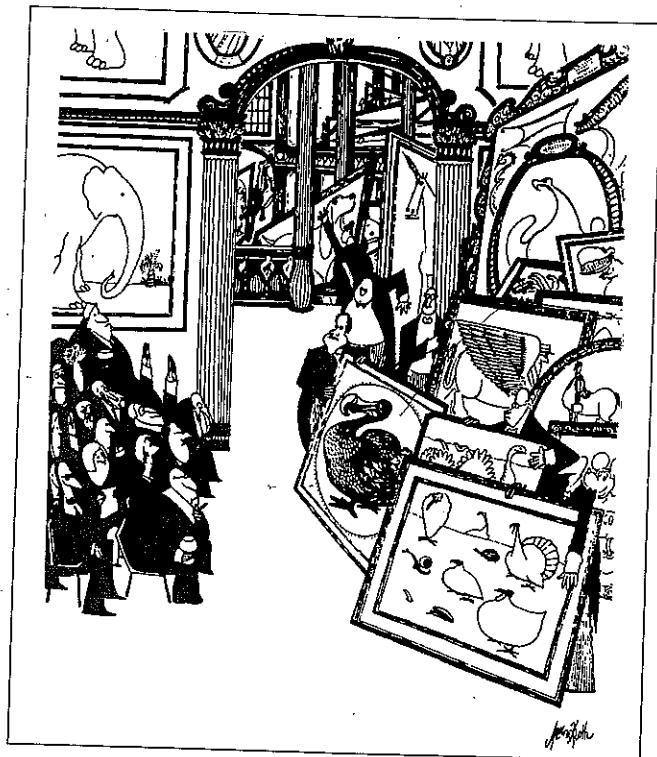
The gradual disengagement of people and politicians from the parties, as seen in part by shrinking party identification.

**party neutrality**

A term used to describe the fact that many Americans are indifferent toward to two major political parties.

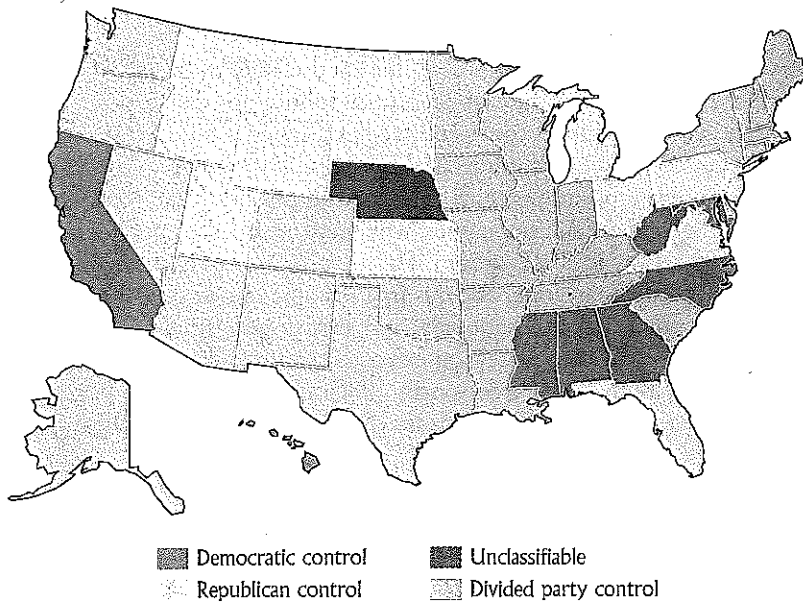


The Democratic National Committee meets to consider a new party symbol.



The Republican National Committee meets to consider a new party symbol.

**Figure 8.4 Partisan Control of State Governments: 2001**



The following map shows which states as of 2001 were totally under Democratic or Republican control—that is, had one party controlling both Houses of the legislature as well as the Governorship. Divided party control means that either one or both Houses of the legislature are controlled by a party different than the Governor. Nebraska has a non-partisan legislature and hence cannot be classified.

*Q. Is there anything in particular that you like about the Republican Party?*

*A. No.*

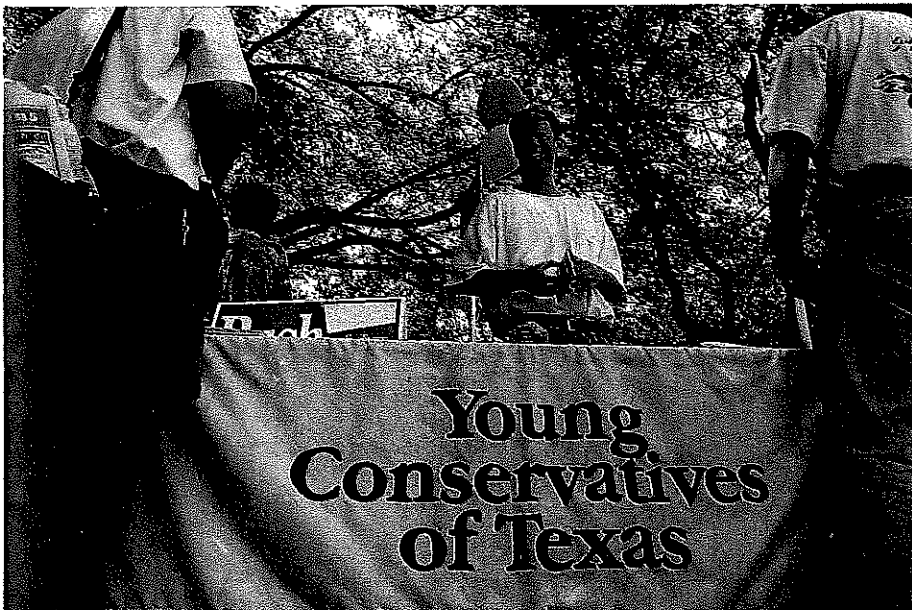
*Q. Is there anything in particular that you don't like about the Republican Party?*

*A. No.*

When these questions were first asked in the 1950s, only about 10 percent of respondents answered in this neutral way, generally indicating that they were not following politics at all. Now, many of those who say nothing about the parties are quite aware of the candidates. Lacking any party anchoring, though, they are easily swayed one way or the other. As a result, they are often referred to as “the floating voters.” More than any other group, it is these independent-minded voters who will determine the ups and downs of party fortunes in the twenty-first century.

**Why does it matter?**

The partisan era since 1969 has been characterized by divided party government. How has this made recent American politics different from previous partisan eras? In what ways has divided party government affected policymaking and policy implementation?



One's party affiliation is an important part of one's political identity. Although clubs of college Republicans and college Democrats are common on campuses around the country, roughly half of college-age Americans do not have a party affiliation, preferring to call themselves Independents.



## Third Parties: Their Impact on American Politics

### third parties

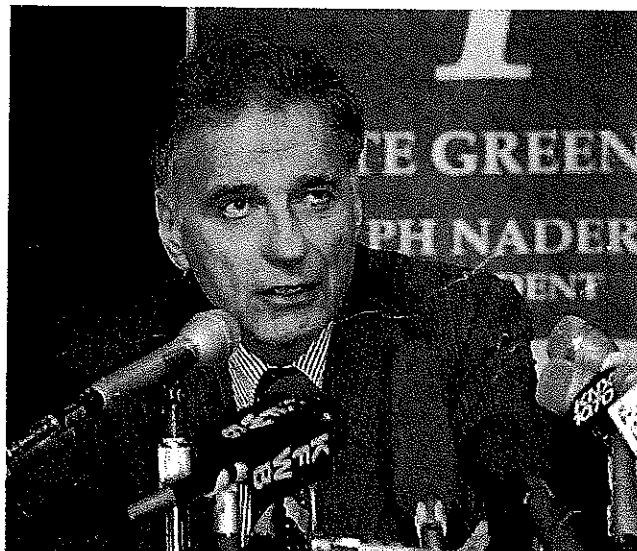
Electoral contenders other than the two major parties. American third parties are not unusual, but they rarely win elections.

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 come in three basic varieties. First are parties that promote certain causes—either a controversial single issue (prohibition of alcoholic beverages, for example) or an extreme ideological position such as socialism or libertarianism. Second are splinter parties, which are 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. Finally, some third parties 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.<sup>29</sup> 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 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. In 1998, a former professional wrestler stunned the political world when he won the governorship of Minnesota as a third party candidate (see "Making a Difference: Jesse "The Body" Ventura"). And in 2000 Green Party candidate Ralph Nader forced more attention on environmental issues, and ultimately probably cost Gore the presidency by drawing away a small percentage of the 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

Ralph Nader challenged the two-party system in 2000 by running for president on the ticket of the Green Party. Exit polls show his voters preferred Gore over Bush by a margin of five to two. With the margin being as close as it was in 2000, it seems readily apparent that Nader's presence in the race influenced the outcome.





## Making a Difference

### Jesse "The Body" Ventura

Few people thought former professional wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura had much of a chance when he entered the race for governor of Minnesota on the ticket of the Reform Party. For starters, no member of the party founded by Ross Perot had ever been elected to a major office. Although an imposing figure at 6'4" and 250 pounds, Jesse Ventura hardly seemed like the man to make the Reform Party's first breakthrough. His only political experience had been as mayor of Brooklyn Park, a Minneapolis suburb, and it seemed unlikely he could raise nearly as much money as the Democratic and Republican nominees. He could count on virtually no help from the Reform Party organization, as the newly formed party had very few members. And perhaps most important, he would have to change the common perception that supporting a third-party candidate was a wasted vote.

On his campaign web site, Jesse Ventura posted a message to all Minnesota voters explaining how he could win. He listed three major factors that he wanted people to consider. First, he pointed out that the candidate with the most money doesn't always win. Second, he noted that his opponents were "boring." And finally,

he said that he had a "secret weapon" that the pundits were ignoring: Many people who would turn out to vote for him normally wouldn't vote.

Ventura's opponents were not worried. In fact, Democratic nominees Hubert Humphrey III, heir to the most famous political name in Minnesota history, refused to participate in any televised debate unless Ventura were included. He reasoned that Ventura's antitax message would siphon more votes away from the Republican candidate than from him. The former professional wrestler joked that he would "body slam" his opponents in the debates, and in the end he stole the show, using his talent for ad-libbing and performing. He appealed to young people and blue-collar workers with his candor, compassion, and antiestablishment rhetoric. The major party candidates ignored Ventura, spending most of their time hurling accusations at one another.

Ventura's strong showing in the debates brought him recognition as a serious candidate and therefore some supporters. Volunteers started to sign up via his web site, and through an e-mail list an organization was stitched together to help out at campaign events around the state. Money also started to come in, giving Ventura enough funds to start

advertising on television. His low-budget, irreverent ads used the theme from "Shaft" as his campaign song, portrayed children playing with a Jesse Ventura action figure who battles Evil Special Interest Man, and featured Ventura posing as Rodin's "The Thinker."

The final statewide poll had Ventura in third place, but only 8 percent behind. Few people expected him to win, but neither did they consider that a vote for this third party candidate would necessarily be "wasted." On election day, Ventura's "secret weapon" actually materialized, and he won with 37 percent of the vote. Turnout in Minnesota was the highest in the nation at 59 percent, far above the national rate of 36 percent. Young people made up a larger percentage of the electorate in Minnesota than anywhere else, and their strong support for Ventura put him over the top. Approximately 150,000 voters aged 18 to 29 voted for Ventura, who won by just 57,000 votes.

The shocking victory of Jesse Ventura was one of the biggest stories of 1998, proving that Democrats and Republicans don't necessarily have a lock on all American elections. Would you like to see more third party candidates like Jesse Ventura in order to give people a wider range of choice in American elections?

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 more civil rights legislation. 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").

The American two-party system contributes to political ambiguity. Why should parties risk taking a strong stand on a controversial policy if doing so will only antagonize many voters? Ambiguity is a safe strategy,<sup>30</sup> as extremist candidates Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern in 1972 found out the hard way. The two-party system thus throttles extreme or unconventional views.



## 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. Though it got less than a majority, the party that finished first is declared the winner. The others are 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 form an alliance 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. In 1998, they entered the government for the first time when they formed a **coalition government** along with Germany's Social Democratic Party. Together the coalition controls over half the seats. Coalition governments are common in Europe. Italy has regularly been ruled by a coalition since the end of World War II, for example.

Even with proportional representation, not every party gets represented in the leg-

islature. To be awarded seats, a party must always achieve a certain percentage of votes, which varies from country to country. Israel has one of the lowest thresholds at 1.5 percent. This explains why there are always so many parties represented in the Israeli Knesset. 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.

#### winner-take-all system

An electoral system in which legislative seats are awarded only to the candidates who come in first in their constituencies. In American presidential elections, the system in which the winner of the popular vote in a state receives all the electoral votes of that state.

#### 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.

## Understanding Political Parties

Political parties are considered essential elements of democratic government. Indeed, one of the first steps taken toward democracy in Eastern Europe 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

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."<sup>31</sup> 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.



## How You Can Make a Difference

### Volunteering for Political Campaigns

If you do not support either major political party, why not join one of the smaller political parties such as the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, or the Reform Party? Sometimes minor parties can win, such as when Jesse Ventura won the gubernatorial race in Minnesota in 1998. Minor parties suffer at the polls due to restrictive ballot access laws and lack of money. Many states will not let minor parties be on the ballot unless they demonstrate a lot of support in that state. Most states require a certain number of signatures of registered voters on petitions to allow a minor party on the ballot. You can help these parties get on the ballot in your state by carrying petitions and getting signatures. You can also help register new members of the party, distribute leaflets, write letters to the editors of newspapers, or in any other way your local party leaders need. There are statewide organizations for most of the smaller political parties, and many local chapters, as well. You can find the nearest one by checking the party's web site.

**Green Party:** [www.greens.org](http://www.greens.org). The Green Party is a progressive party that supports environmentalism, grassroots democracy, social justice, and peace/non-violence. Ralph Nader was the Green Party candidate for the 2000 Presidential Elections. Many believe his candidacy influenced the final outcome.

**Libertarian Party:** [www.lp.org](http://www.lp.org). The Libertarian party is both very liberal and very conservative. It favors absolute freedom in both the economic realm (free trade, nonintervention in foreign affairs, unrestricted free market, no government programs such as Social Security, welfare, interstate highways, or public schools) and in social/personal issues (no restrictions on abortions, drug use, prostitution, and so forth).

**Reform Party:** [www.reformparty.org](http://www.reformparty.org). The Reform Party was started by Ross Perot and his followers in the early 1990s and reflects concerns such as favoring a balanced federal budget, campaign finance reform, a new tax system, and trade that protects American workers.

Other lesser known minor parties include:

**Christian Alliance** (formerly the Puritan Party): [www.christianalliance.com](http://www.christianalliance.com). This is a very conservative, religious party that seeks to call Christians to act politically and according to their faith.

**Communist Party USA:** [www.hartford-hwp.com/cp-usa/](http://www.hartford-hwp.com/cp-usa/). This party is a Marxist-Leninist working-class party that believes capitalism has failed and is angry at the continuing injustices and suffering they say it brings. They work for a socialist economy that puts people before profits and for full equality of all races and both genders.

**Constitution Party** (formerly U.S. Taxpayers Party) [www.USTaxpayers.org](http://www.USTaxpayers.org). This conservative group wishes to return the U.S. government to its constitutional boundaries and limitations by restricting much current government activity.

**U.S. Pacifist Party:** [www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/4826](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/4826). This party is opposed to all military power and says that it is the root of most major social evils such as war, poverty, the arms race, and political oppression.

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 fall far 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. Virtually anyone can vote in party primaries; thus, parties do not have control over those who run under their labels. In 1991, for example, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, became the Republican nominee for governor of Louisiana despite denunciations from

#### responsible party model

A view favored by some political scientists about how parties should work. According to the model, parties should offer clear choices to the voters, who can then use those choices as cues to their own preferences of candidates. Once in office, parties would carry out their campaign promises.

President Bush, who ultimately said he preferred the Democratic nominee. Had Duke won the election, the Republican Party would have been powerless to control his actions in office.

In America's loosely organized party system, there simply is no mechanism for a party to discipline officeholders and thereby ensure cohesion in policymaking. As David Mayhew writes, "Unlike most politicians elsewhere, American ones at both legislative and executive levels have managed to navigate the last two centuries of history without becoming minions of party leaders."<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is rare to find congressional votes in which over 90 percent of Democrats vote in opposition to over 90 percent of Republicans. Indeed, Mayhew's analysis of historic legislation from 1946 to 1990 failed to uncover a single case in which a major law was passed by such a clearly partisan vote.<sup>33</sup> The 1998 vote in the House to impeach President Clinton was unparalleled in recent times, with 98 percent of each party's members sticking to the party line.

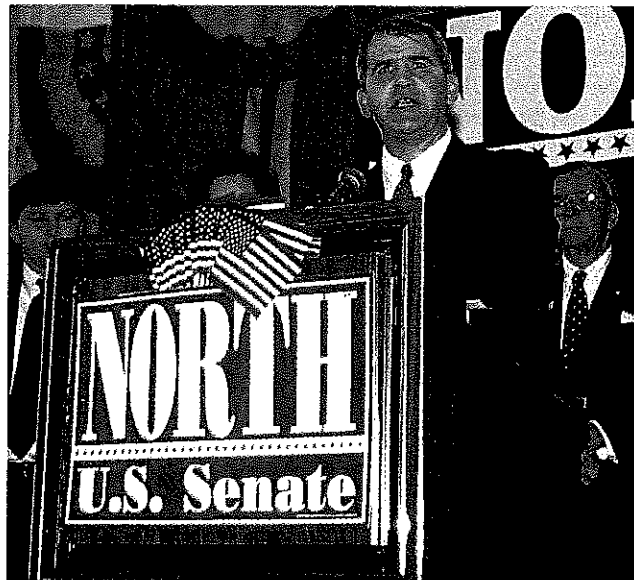
Not everyone thinks that America's decentralized parties are a problem, however. Critics of the responsible party model argue that the complexity and diversity of American society are too great to be captured by such a simple model of party politics. Local differences need an outlet for expression, they say. One cannot expect Texas Democrats always to want to vote in line with New York Democrats. In 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.<sup>34</sup>

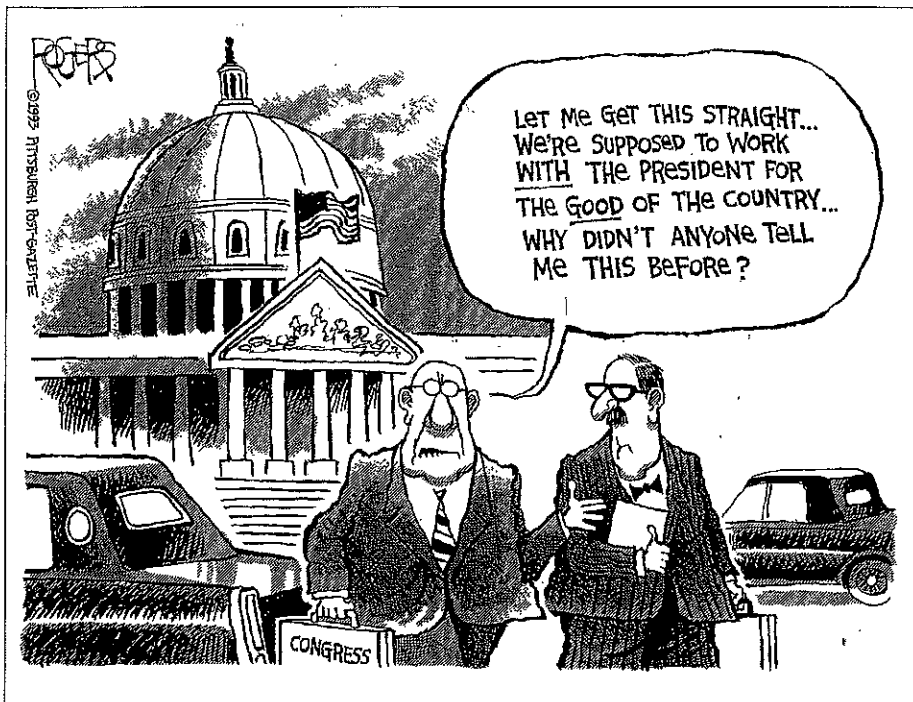
### Individualism and Gridlock

The Founding Fathers 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.

One frequently cited consequence of this allowance for individualism, however, is gridlock in American policymaking. The lack of a strong party structure makes it easier for politicians to pass the buck than bite the bullet. In particular, the divided

America's decentralized political parties have little control over candidates, as shown by the Senate nomination of Oliver North, who figured prominently in the Iran-Contra scandal. North obtained the Republican nomination in Virginia despite being denounced by the state's senior Republican Senator, John Warner, as well as by former Presidents Reagan and Bush.





government of the Reagan-Bush era allowed Republican leaders to blame budget deficits on congressional unwillingness to cut social programs, while Democratic leaders put the blame on what they viewed as the president's excessive military spending and tax cuts for the wealthy. With neither party really in charge and each pointing a finger at the other, it is no wonder that little was done to resolve the budget deficit. With the situation reversed in 1995–1996, the new Republican majority in Congress found their agenda frustrated by a Democratic president. Although both sides agreed on the importance of passing a plan to balance the budget, the two sides could not reach an agreement, and at two points during the budget controversy, unprecedented shutdowns of parts of the federal government occurred.

When one party has simultaneous control of the executive and legislative branches, there is much less open conflict. Nevertheless, the party in control typically has a hard time maintaining sufficient unity to accomplish major changes. When President Clinton had the chance to work with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate in 1993 and 1994, he found it hard to get the support he needed from other Democrats. Gridlock was clearly evident on such issues as health care, campaign finance reform, and welfare reform during the first two years of the Clinton presidency.

## 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 absence of a national health care system in America provides a perfect example. In Britain, the Labour Party had long proposed such a system, and after it won the 1945 election, all of 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 War World 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. His experience in 1994 was much the same as Truman's; 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 him. Thus 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 no single party in the United States can ever be said to have firm control over the government, the hard choices necessary to cut back on existing government spending are rarely addressed. A disciplined and cohesive governing party would have the power to say no to various demands on the government. In contrast, America's loose party structure makes it possible for individual politicians to focus their efforts on getting more from the government for their own constituents.

### Is the Party Over?

The key problem for American political parties is that they are no longer the main source of political information, attention, and affection. The party of today has rivals that appeal to voters and politicians alike, the biggest of which is the media. With the advent of television, voters no longer need the party to find out what the candidates are like and what they stand for. The interest group is another party rival. As Chapter 11 will discuss, the power of interest groups has grown enormously in recent years. Interest groups, not the parties, pioneered much of the technology of modern politics, including mass mailings and sophisticated fund-raising.

The parties have clearly been having a tough time lately, but there are indications that they are beginning to adapt to the high-tech age. Although the old city machines are largely extinct, state and national party organizations have become more visible and active than ever. More people are calling themselves Independents and splitting their tickets, but the majority still identify with a party, and this percentage seems to have stabilized.

For a time, some political scientists were concerned that parties were on the verge of disappearing from the political scene. A more realistic view is that parties will continue to play an important, but significantly diminished, role in American politics. Leon Epstein sees the situation as one in which the parties have become "frayed." He concludes that the parties will "survive and even moderately prosper in a society evidently unreceptive to strong parties and yet unready, and probably unable, to abandon parties altogether."<sup>35</sup>

### Summary

Even though political parties are one of Americans' least beloved institutions, political scientists see them as a key linkage between policymakers and the people. Parties are pervasive in politics; for each party there is a *party in the electorate*, a *party organization*, and a *party in government*. Political parties affect policy through their platforms. Despite much cynicism about party platforms, they are taken seriously when their candidates are elected.

America has a two-party system. This fact is of fundamental importance in understanding American politics. The ups and downs of the two parties constitute party competition. In the past, one party or the other has dominated the government for long periods

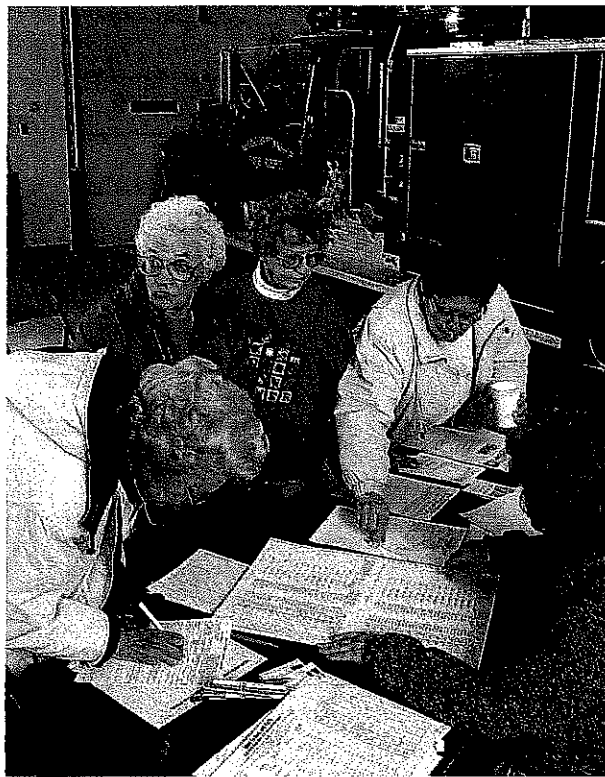
## Career Profile

**Position:** State Party Chair

**Employer:** Iowa Democratic Party

**Salary and Benefits:** None, this is a volunteer position

**Qualifications:** College degree, commitment to the political party, interest in politics and public policy, management skills



### Real People on the Job: Rob Tully

Rob Tully gets paid nothing to do an awful lot of work. As party chair of the Iowa Democratic Party, it's his job to run the day-to-day operations of the state party, serve

as the party's chief spokesperson to the local media, help recruit candidates to run for office, raise money for their campaigns, and decide how to spend the money. He estimates that at least half his time is spent fund-raising, perhaps more.

The party chair's most important job is to help elect and to keep in office Democratic candidates for a variety of government positions, ranging all the way from city dogcatcher to president of the United States. This job requires long hours, especially during election season, and great dedication to the cause. There is almost always a campaign going on that needs money and assistance. It is the party chair's job to make sure each Democratic race is successful.

In Iowa, the Democratic party chair has a unique responsibility since Iowa conducts the first presidential caucus in the country. Rob says that this makes Iowa the best state to be a party chair in because he gets to meet face to face with all the candidates and comes to know each one of them as individuals. He recalls meeting with Bill Bradley during the presidential nomination process for the 2000 election. Bradley had just finished walking in a Fourth of July parade and the two of them sat down under a big shade tree and talked for more than an hour about politics, policy, and Bradley's chances in Iowa. For someone who had grown up hearing of Bradley's prowess as a basketball player, Rob was impressed to be sitting down "like real people" with the former athlete and presidential candidate.

There are many jobs in political parties, and they vary somewhat by state and by party. Some are paid while others are not. Local parties have ward or precinct chairpersons (an easy position to get in most places—just show enthusiasm and ask). The city or county party will usually have a central committee, composed of volunteers who have shown an interest in the party over a number of years and who have worked on a number of campaigns. Beyond this is the state party central committee and state party chairperson. The national parties have central committees and a national chairperson.

of time. These periods were punctuated by critical elections, in which party coalitions underwent realignment. Since 1968, however, American government has experienced a unique period of party dealignment. Although parties are currently weaker at the mass level, they are somewhat stronger and richer in terms of national and state organization. Some would have them be far more centralized and cohesive, following the responsible party model. The loose structure of American parties allows politicians to avoid collective responsibility but also promotes individualism that many Americans value.

## Key Terms

party competition	closed primaries	party realignment
political party	open primaries	New Deal coalition
linkage institutions	blanket primaries	party dealignment
party image	national convention	party neutrality
rational-choice theory	national committee	third parties
party identification	national chairperson	winner-take-all system
ticket-splitting	coalition	proportional representation
party machines	party eras	coalition government
patronage	critical election	responsible party model

## For Further Reading

Beck, Paul Allen. *Party Politics in America*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Longman, 1997. The standard textbook on political parties.

Black, Earl, and Merle Black. *Politics and Society in the South*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. An excellent examination of the transformation of party politics in the South.

Cox, Gary W., and Samuel Kernell, eds. *The Politics of Divided Government*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991. A set of readings that addresses both the causes and the consequences of divided party government.

Downs, Anthony. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957. An extremely influential theoretical work that applies rational-choice theory to party politics.

Epstein, Leon. *Political Parties in the American Mold*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. Epstein demonstrates the remarkable persistence of both parties during a century of profound social change.

Green, John C., and Daniel M. Shea. *The State of the Parties*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. A diverse set of articles on numerous aspects of party politics, with an emphasis on how well the party system is working.

Maisel, L. Sandy, ed. *The Parties Respond: Changes in the American Parties and Campaigns*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. A good collection of readings on how parties have adapted to changes in the political system.

Rosenstone, Steven, Roy Behr, and Edward Lazarus. *Third Parties in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. An analytical study of why third parties appear, when they do, and what effect they have.

Sabato, Larry. *The Party's Just Begun: Shaping Political Parties for America's Future*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown, 1988. A spirited prescription for strengthening the parties.

Sundquist, James L. *Dynamics of the Party System*, rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1983. One of the best books ever written on the major realignments in American history.

Tarrance, V. Lance Jr., and Walter DeVries with Donna L. Mosher. *Checked and Balanced: How Ticket-Splitters Are Shaping the New Balance of Power in American Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998. A good basic presentation of trends in ticket-splitting, which also contains in-depth interviews that shed light on the meaning of such votes.

Wattenberg, Martin P. *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1996*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. An account of the decline of parties in the electorate.

White, John Kenneth, and Jerome M. Mileur. *Challenges to Party Government*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992. A collection of essays that examines the responsible party model from the perspective of politics in the 1990s.

## Internet Resources

[www.rnc.org](http://www.rnc.org)

The official site of the Republican National Committee.

[www.democrats.org](http://www.democrats.org)

The Democratic Party online.

[www.lp.org](http://www.lp.org)

Although Libertarians rarely get more than a few percent of the vote, they are consistently getting many of their candidates on the

ballot for many offices. You can learn more about their beliefs at this official site.

[www.reformparty.org](http://www.reformparty.org)

The official web site for the party founded by Ross Perot, which nominated Pat Buchanan for president in 2000.

## Notes

1. E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), 1.
2. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
3. Paul Allen Beck, *Party Politics in America*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 12.
4. Kay Lawson, ed., *Political Parties and Linkage: A Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 3.