

APGoPo Unit 4

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL PARTIES

In most democracies political parties are important institutions that link citizens to their government. The Constitution did not call for political parties, and the Founding Fathers at first did not intend to create them believing there were enough points of influence to make parties unnecessary. James Madison reflected in his famous *Federalist #10* that political factions are necessary evils to be controlled by federalism and separation of powers, but the founders still believed that political parties such as those that dominated British politics could and should be avoided at all costs. George Washington was elected president without party labels and in his farewell address warned against the "baneful effects of the spirit of the party". During the process for ratification of the Constitution, Federalists and Anti-Federalists conflicted over ideals concerning the proper role of government. This conflict resulted in the development of the first political parties: the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, or Democratic-Republicans as they were later called.

Today, many Americans take pride in their status as independent voters, partly because they see parties as lacking vision for the country. Since many people think that each of the major parties only cares about defeating or humiliating the other, they avoid identification as a loyal Democrat or a staunch Republican. These negative attitudes toward parties are rooted in the roles that they play in American politics. Political parties have been losing power of many of their functions as more people are moving toward "independent" voters.

WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

A group of people seeking to control government by gaining office in elections and determining public policy

WHY A TWO-PARTY TRADITION IN AMERICA?

Although there have been numerous minor parties throughout its history, why has the United States maintained the two-party tradition?

- *Consensus of values* - It is easy to complain about petty bickering between Democrats and Republicans. Both parties believe in liberty, equality, and individualism. Neither advocates that the Constitution be discarded, and both accept the election process by conceding defeat to the winners. In many countries with multi-party systems, the range of beliefs is greater, and disagreements run deeper.
- *Historical influence* - The nation began with two political parties. During early American history politicians tended to take sides, starting with the debate over the Constitution, and continuing with the disagreements within George Washington's cabinet. The tendency has persisted throughout American history.
- *The winner-take-all electoral system* - The single most important reason for a two-party system is the winner-take-all or pluralist electoral system. This system contrasts to those with proportional representation where the percentage of votes for a party's candidates is directly applied as the percentage of representatives in the legislature. The winner in American elections is the one who receives the largest number of votes in each voting district. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent, but only one vote more than his or her closest competitor. This process encourages parties to become larger, embracing more and more voters. So third parties have almost no hope of getting candidates into office, and their points of view tend to fall under the umbrella of one or both of the big parties.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES?

- 1) Provide cues for voters
 - Unify the electorate
 - Provide "loyal opposition"
 - Linking mechanism between people and government
 - Simplify decisions for voters: provide "shorthand" through which busy and uninterested voters can base a voting decision, use of "party lens" by voters.
- 2) Raise and spend campaign funds
 - Declining importance w/advent of "candidate-centered" campaigns
- 3) Support for candidates' campaigns
- 4) Register and mobilize voters and get-out-the-votes (get them to the polls)
- 5) Provide a platform of issues
 - However, few people check platforms, which in any case are often broadly-worded, i.e., like train platforms: "something to get on rather than something to stand on."
- 6) Recruit candidates for government office
- 7) Nominate candidates for government office
 - Previously: caucuses >> nominating conventions
 - Now: primary elections
 - With advent of primaries, nominating function now seriously lessened.
 - To win elections, parties must usually nominate moderate candidates who appeal to the vast center of the American electorate. Fringe elements squeezed out.
 - Criticism: To appeal to such a wide variety of party members, parties must avoid taking strong stands
- 8) Provide Patronage
- 9) Organize the competition by designating candidates to run under their label
 - A party's ability to organize the competition is influenced by how states organize their ballots or the type of elections they provide
 - The party column ballot makes it easier for voters to vote a straight ticket
 - The office block ballot makes it harder to cast a vote for all the candidates of a single party