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# Political Parties

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## Political Parties

### I. INTRODUCTION

Political Parties, organizations that mobilize voters on behalf of a common set of interests, concerns, and goals. In many nations, parties play a crucial role in the democratic process. They formulate political and policy agendas, select candidates, conduct election campaigns, and monitor the work of their elected representatives. Political parties link citizens and the government, providing a means by which people can have a voice in their government. For a history of the party system in the United States, see Political Parties in the United States.

### II. PARTY SYSTEMS

A political party system consists of all the parties in a particular nation and the laws and customs that govern their behavior. There are three types of party systems: (1) multiparty systems, (2) two-party systems, and (3) one-party systems.

Multiparty systems are the most common type of party system. Parliamentary governments based on proportional representation often develop multiparty systems. In this type of electoral arrangement, the number of legislative seats held by any party depends on the proportion of votes they received in the most recent election. When no party gains a majority of the legislative seats in a parliamentary multiparty system, several parties may join forces to form a *coalition* government. Advocates of multiparty systems point out that they permit more points of view to be represented in government and often provide stable, enduring systems of government, as in most of contemporary Western Europe (where every system, including Great Britain, has at least three and usually five or six significant parties). Critics note, however, that multiparty systems have sometimes contributed to fragmentation and political instability, as in the Weimar Republic in Germany (1919-1933), the Fourth Republic in France (1946-1958), and Italy after World War II.

In a two-party system, control of government power shifts between two dominant parties. Two-party systems most frequently develop when electoral victory requires only a simple plurality vote, that is, the winner gets the most votes, but not necessarily a majority of votes. In such a system, it makes sense for smaller parties to combine into larger ones or to drop out altogether. Parliamentary governments in which the legislators are elected by plurality voting to represent distinct districts may develop party systems in which only two parties hold significant numbers of seats, as in Great Britain and Canada. Advocates of two-party systems believe they limit the dangers of excessive fragmentation and government stalemate. However, in the United States, which separates the powers and functions of government between executive, legislative, and judicial branches, it is possible for one party to control the legislature and the other to control the executive branch. This frequently has led to political gridlock between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Opponents of the two-party system also believe that in time the two parties increasingly tend to resemble each other and leave too many points of view out of the political process. These factors may alienate voters and lead to low turnout in elections. See also United States (Government): *Election Process and Political Parties*.

A single-party system is one in which one party nominates all candidates for office. Thus there is no competition for elected offices. The only choices left to voters are (1) to decide whether or not to vote and (2) to vote "yes" or "no" for the designated candidate. Single-party systems have characterized Communist Party governments and other authoritarian regimes. They have become much less common since Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) between 1989 and 1991. Surviving Communist states, most notably China, North Korea, and Cuba, do

continue to enforce the rule of a single party. International financial pressure has also reduced the number of single-party systems in developing nations. Funding agencies such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (also known as the World Bank) often insist upon a competitive party system as a precondition for granting loans or aid to these countries. Defenders of single-party systems point out that they provide a way for nations to mobilize and direct the talents and energies of every citizen toward a unified mission or purpose. This advantage appeals to leaders of some nations that possess limited human and material resources. However, single-party systems limit the political freedoms and choices of citizens.

### III. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties mediate the relationship between citizens and their government. In democracies with competitive party systems, political parties pressure governments to respond to the needs and interests of broad segments of the population. In more authoritarian governments, parties offer a structure for directing and conditioning the behavior of individual citizens.

Most political parties espouse democratic principles and commitments. In practice, however, a combination of factors has placed limits on parties as instruments of democratic participation. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, most parties took their message to the people through the work of committed activists. The introduction of new communications technologies has since reduced the incentive of parties to mobilize and actively engage its members. Even during the so-called "golden age" of political parties, from the middle of the 19th century until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, most effective parties developed a rigid bureaucratic structure that increasingly hampered participation of ordinary party supporters. Power instead flowed to elites at the top of the party hierarchy.

Political parties employ different strategies for recruiting supporters. "Externally mobilized" parties develop around leaders who lack power within an existing government. These leaders compensate by mobilizing and organizing a popular base of support from among disaffected groups in society. External mobilization has typically provided the origins of social-democratic, Socialist, Communist, and Fascist parties in Europe.

"Internally mobilized" parties, by contrast, usually represent a defensive strategy of countermobilization on the part of influential government insiders. This strategy also involves efforts to recruit a broad base of party members and supporters. Internally mobilized parties seek to neutralize the organizational efforts of another party or to gain that party's cooperation in the pursuit of goals, such as wars, that require a broad foundation of support and sacrifice. Conservative parties and Liberal parties in Europe have more often used a strategy of countermobilization. In the late 1930s, the Democratic Party sponsored social reform to fend off challenges from the Socialist, Communist, and Progressive parties, and from populist leaders such as Father Charles Coughlin, Francis Townsend, and Louisiana Senator Huey Long.

### IV. HISTORY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

#### A. Origins and Development

The origins of political parties are closely associated with the development of the modern state and representative democracy in Western Europe and the United States. Parties evolved through the struggle of contending groups to grasp control of the apparatus of government. This struggle for power generally took place within legislatures. Formed initially to advise monarchs, by the 17th and 18th centuries many legislative bodies had begun to claim independent power bases and privileges of their own. An early model of the modern party system developed in Britain in the 18th century, shaped around the efforts of the Whig and Tory parties to control government jobs and political influence. A party system also developed in the United States in the decade following ratification of the Constitution of the United States in 1788, pitting members of the Federalist Party against members of the Democratic-Republican Party.

In both Britain and the United States, competition between political parties undermined traditional

conceptions of politics rooted in classical and Christian notions of virtue and public service. According to this tradition, political leaders should act according to a model of virtue that involved placing the common good above the interests of a fraction of the society. Leaders acting to benefit only themselves or a narrow portion of the society were considered corrupt. However, party competition required public figures to act upon a contrary set of assumptions: (1) that politics "naturally" involves conflict and division, and (2) that its true goals are to secure the economic interests and political influence of groups divided along lines of class, ethnicity, race, and religion. From the vantage point of the 20th century, some political scientists have concluded that party competition, far from corrupting a society, measurably strengthens and integrates it by providing a way to include and represent different groups and interests.

During the 19th century, the broad extension of voting rights to adult male citizens throughout Europe and the United States required legislators to appeal to a much larger segment of national populations. Political parties grew dramatically in size and began to take the form of independent, popularly based organizations, no longer serving merely the interests of a narrow elite. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, arguably the period when political parties in the United States reached the height of their influence, party organizations played an important role in the lives of millions of Americans. Political party "machines" organized new communities out of the vast waves of immigrants settling in America's largest cities. These political machines offered urban Americans an array of services, ranging from housing, food, and jobs to legal assistance and language instruction. In return, they asked for votes. They also expected loyalty from their victorious candidates, who were to remain ever mindful of the party organization's role in delivering the votes.

## B. Decline

Political parties no longer play such a central role in determining election outcomes in the United States. Since the early decades of the 20th century, the influence of primary elections, the mass media, and lobbyists for special interests has gradually weakened the ties of parties to both candidates and voters. The proliferation of primaries, for instance, has given individual voters the power to select candidates—a power that once resided with the party organization itself. The media also places more emphasis on candidates as individuals than as agents of parties and party platforms. Public attention now focuses on the personalities and ideas of candidates, rather than the benefits that the party as an organization can offer party loyalists. To that extent, little incentive exists for voters to support the choice of the party establishment or for candidates to adhere to a "party line."

Individuals are also less likely to work as party activists because of the limits to the benefits parties can provide them. Where they were once pragmatic vehicles for electing candidates and offering benefits and services to supporters, parties have become more programmatic and issue-oriented. Party leadership positions, especially at the state and local level, have increasingly gone to "programmatic ideologues," party activists whose views on issues tend to be more extreme and intense than those of most party supporters. Examples of programmatic ideologues in party organizations include environmental, gun rights, and abortion activists.

As the direct influence of political parties upon the electorate has diminished, candidate organizations in the United States have taken over more of the work of campaigning. Independent financial support from interest groups and individuals further weakens the parties. Candidate obligations to and dependence upon major donors often supersede their attachment to their party. In Europe, by contrast, parties generally control the distribution of funds for election campaigns. Rather than separate themselves from their party, strong candidates such as Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Jacques Chirac in France, and Helmut Kohl in Germany have often simply taken over their party organizations.

Though their organizational strength in the United States has diminished, political parties continue to provide expert assistance with polling, fundraising, and advertising efforts of candidates. Campaign finance law also permits parties to gather and spend money on "party-building activities" that can be used to aid specific candidates, and thus circumvent limits on contributions. Parties help to coordinate the campaigns of party members and they organize the statewide and national conventions that mark election years. However, as the capacity of parties to formulate programs, nominate candidates, and control campaigns has weakened, they have lost control over those who win elections under their name. Political parties have little basis for denying future renomination to those who deviate from the party

program.

## V. THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Though most pronounced in the United States, the decline of traditional parties is an international phenomenon. Some analysts believe political parties will one day cease to exist, and that the function of democratic linkage between citizen and state will then be performed by polls, by interactive television, and by other media. Others argue, however, that none of these institutions offers citizens the public arena in which reasoned debate can lead to collective action on behalf of an organized membership. Collective action, they suggest, is the only effective recourse of the less privileged members of a society. A nation without multiple strong, competitive political parties will inevitably be a nation in which power rests in the hands of a narrow elite. Still other analysts simply note that the first act of a new nation, or a nation newly liberated from authoritarian control, is to create political parties. These analysts believe that human political communities have not outgrown their need for political parties.

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