

Political
Parties
AND
their
functions

On the evening of November 5, 1996, President Bill Clinton, Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole, independent presidential candidate Ross Perot, and hundreds of other candidates for the Senate, the House, and state and local office anxiously listened to election returns. The television networks announced the outcome for President Clinton early in the evening. Many other candidates, however, did not learn the results of their efforts until late that night, and, in some cases, days or even weeks later.

Despite President Clinton's early victory, his interest in the election results continued throughout the night. He cared about the results of more than just his own race because every time a Democratic candidate won a race for a seat in the House or Senate, a governorship, or any one of many other offices, it strengthened his hand for governing the nation. Bill Clinton wasn't running alone; he was running as part of a Democratic team.

Who were all those candidates and how did they come to run together under the same party label? In what sense were they a team? And why do two teams, the Democrats and Republicans, dominate American politics?

Parties were not written into the Constitution. Indeed, they were never even considered when the founders debated the Constitution. Instead, politicians created parties to help them achieve their goals—winning elections and making public policy. For these reasons, the nature of parties changes over time and differs from one part of the country to another. Parties change because the people who make them up and who seek office respond to public preferences and to the rules and laws that govern competition for elected office—both of which vary over time and from place to place. To serve as a means for the people to control government decisions, the parties must respond to public opinion. Yet to serve as vehicles for politicians to win elections, they must respond to the rules of the system as well.

In this chapter, we will examine what political parties are and what functions they perform for the political system—from contesting elections to organizing the government and providing a means for people to hold their elected officials accountable. We will discuss why our nation has two centrist parties rather than a multiparty system. We will sketch out America's electoral history so that we can examine how parties have behaved over the last two hundred years, and we will describe the current state of party organizations—including the roles they play in elections today.

WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

People have many images of political parties: the hoopla of presidential nominating conventions, smoke-filled backrooms full of politicians, and local party workers canvassing their neighbors for votes. All of these images reflect different aspects of the truth.

The core of a political party's purpose, and the basis on which most scholars define parties, is their role as *electoral organizations*. A **political party** is a coalition of people seeking to control the government by contesting elections and winning office. A party differs from a single candidate's campaign because a party runs an entire slate of candidates for a wide range of offices rather than just one campaign for one office. A party also differs from an interest group because a party seeks to win offices rather than to influence those in office to win benefits from the government.

Party coalitions form around the basic **political cleavages**, or divisions, in society. For instance, on economic issues, today's Democratic politicians are mostly liberal—they represent the working class, the poor, and most minority groups in political conflicts. Today's Republican politicians are generally economic conservatives—they represent the wealthy and business interests. Thus, the two major parties offer opposing views on economic issues.

Of course, not all Democrats are liberal on economic issues, nor are all Republicans conservative. The overlap stems largely from the fact that economic differences are not the only important political cleavage in American society. A second basic cleavage divides people on social issues. As we saw in chapter 5, Democrats tend to be

Political party

A coalition of people seeking to control the government by contesting elections and winning office.

Political cleavages

Divisions in society around which parties organize.



President Clinton and Vice-President Gore celebrate their 1996 re-election victory on Election Night in Little Rock, Arkansas.

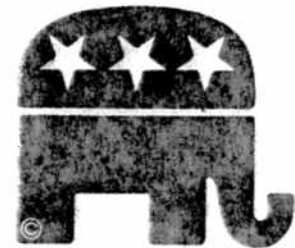
liberal and Republicans tend to be conservative, but people's positions on social and economic issues do not always fall neatly along party lines; to some extent, these cleavages are cross-cutting. This means that within each party, we find some politicians who are liberal on economic issues and conservative on social issues, and vice versa. Because the cleavages do not form one perfect dividing line, most Democratic politicians are liberal and most Republican politicians are conservative, but both parties contain a mixture. So, although the parties offer voters a choice, the choice may not always be clear.¹

To contest elections, the Democrats and the Republicans have developed a network of party organizations, from their national committees in Washington, D.C., to state committees and down to county committees. In some towns and cities, parties are even organized at the neighborhood level. In addition, both parties have formed a number of affiliated organizations for special purposes such as raising money for congressional candidates and training campaign managers. These organizations work to recruit and nominate the candidates who run under the party's banner, to help the candidates win office once they are nominated, and to manage the party's affairs between elections.

Party Functions

A useful way to think about political parties and to see how they provide a means for the people to control their government is to consider the functions parties may perform in our political system. We say *may* perform because parties do not always perform these functions, and when they do, they may not perform them fully. At different times and different places in the country, parties have taken on different roles and behaved differently. The degree to which parties perform various functions depends on what party leaders and activists think will help them win elections and control the government. As we shall discuss later in this chapter, party leaders look at the rules governing campaigns and elections as well as other factors such as current campaign technology, public preferences on the issues, and voter loyalties when they decide how best to organize their parties.² In other words, parties are *changeable*. They adapt to circumstances. So when we generalize about what functions parties perform, we must qualify our statements by noting that parties do not *always* do these things.

Broadly speaking, the parties link the people and the government by providing *organization* and *information*. The organization is easy to see—party headquarters, committees, campaigns, nominations, and so forth provide it. The information is less obvious, but no less vital. Parties provide information because the parties organize around basic political cleavages. The party labels, therefore, inform voters and other candidates roughly where candidates stand on the issues. When a voter knows little about the candidates up



The Mule is the symbol of the Democratic Party. The Elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party—often called the "Grand Old Party" or "GOP" for short.

Courtesy of the Republican National Committee, Washington, D.C.



Both Democratic and Republican leaders recruited Dwight Eisenhower, the enormously popular general who commanded the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, to run for the presidency in 1952. But such efforts at recruitment are rare; most candidates are self-starters.

Direct primary

An election in which voters and not party leaders directly choose a party's nominees for political office.

Caucus/convention system

A nomination method in which registered party members attend a party caucus, or meeting, to choose a nominee. In large districts, local caucuses send delegates to represent them at a convention.

for election (which is unfortunately all too common, as we saw in chapter 5), party labels provide essential cues about which side the candidates are likely to take on issues. If a voter knows only the candidates' names and party labels, for instance, the voter can make a fair guess that the Democrat will favor more spending on jobs programs or education and the Republican will favor less. Similarly, party labels provide information to activists and other politicians about whether given politicians are likely allies.

A look at seven specific functions that the parties usually perform shows how they help the political system work by organizing and providing information.

First, parties recruit candidates to run for office. In some cases, party leaders seek out potential candidates, urge them to run, and offer them support. Both the Democrats and the Republicans recruited Dwight Eisenhower, the enormously popular general who commanded the Allied forces during World War II, to run for president in 1952.³ Far more commonly, self-starting candidates seek out party leaders (among others) and ask for their support. In either case, the party leaders help bring together candidates and campaign donors, activists to work in the campaigns, and the people with the technical skills needed in campaigns—campaign managers, fundraisers, pollsters, public relations specialists, and others.

Second, parties nominate candidates. Through party primaries, caucuses, conventions, or other means, parties bestow the right to run using the party labels. In doing so, they reduce the field of candidates to only a few—and usually to only two serious competitors, the Democratic and Republican nominees. In eliminating most of the candidates, nominations simplify the choices for voters and give them a more manageable task—learning about only two candidates instead of a pack of them.

The most common method of nominating candidates today is the **direct primary**—an election in which voters and not party leaders directly choose a party's nominees for office. There are three different types of primaries, which vary according to who is allowed to vote. *Closed primaries*, used in about forty states, require voters to indicate their party affiliations before Election Day, when they register to vote. *Open primaries* allow voters to choose which party primary they will vote in on Election Day, when they arrive at the polls. *Blanket primaries* permit voters to cast their ballots for candidates from any party, casting one vote for each office. In all types of primaries, the winner of the primary becomes the party's nominee and goes on to run in the general election against the nominees of other parties.

An alternative nomination method is the **caucus/convention system**—in which registered party members attend a party caucus, or meeting, to choose a nominee. If the election were for a large district such as a state, the party would hold a number of local caucuses. Each caucus would then choose representatives, or delegates, to express their views and vote on their behalf at a statewide convention. In either case, people who consider themselves members of the party and who care enough to show up at the caucuses (which are far more time consuming than merely voting) make the nominations.

Third, parties mobilize voters. Through party identification, parties develop emotional bonds with voters and use these bonds to encourage voting (see chapter 6). In a more practical vein, parties organize voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives all across the country. They are by no means the only groups to do this. Candidate campaign organizations and interest groups also run registration and get-out-the-vote drives. But parties often lead these activities.

Fourth, parties contest elections. They play a role in providing the candidates, the money, the managers, and the army of campaign workers that make up the campaigns. For most party activists, this is a party's core purpose—the campaigns.

Fifth, parties form governments. Once elected, officials organize governments along party lines. Presidents and governors normally choose from their own party ranks for appointments (see chapter 11). Members of Congress and state legislatures choose their leaders and fill their committees on the basis of party lines (see

chapter 10). Forming governments along party lines makes sense because each party consists of politicians representing voters who generally take the same side on the basic cleavages dividing society—the cleavages around which the parties formed.

Sixth, parties coordinate policy across independent units of government. Few problems can be dealt with effectively by a single branch of government; rather, most require the cooperation of the president, Congress, and state and local governments. Party loyalties often provide the basis for building the coalitions needed to develop public policies, to enact them with legislation or executive action, and to implement them. The cleavages underlying the party coalitions bolster that loyalty.

Seventh, parties provide accountability. The party labels offer easy cues for voting decisions because they identify which side politicians are likely to take on particular issues. Moreover, voters who like recent government policies or performance can express their approval by voting for members of the party that controls the White House or the statehouse. Those who dislike recent policies or performance can vote to “throw the rascals out.” The party labels make it easy for voters to identify whom to reward or punish.

Politicians, of course, did not set up political parties for the purpose of providing accountability. The politicians who invented parties thought that parties would help them win elections and control government. Accountability turned out to be a by-product—but a crucial one for our system of government.

As you can see, the seven functions that political parties serve extend well beyond just winning elections. Although the primary role of political parties is to act as electoral organizations, they also play a role in government—organizing it and forming the coalitions around which policy disputes are fought. In addition, they play a role in the electorate—organizing voters into large, informal coalitions of party identifiers and offering comprehensible choices to the voters.

By performing these functions, political parties form a critical link between the people and their government. They provide the organization and information that make understanding government, following politics, and choosing among competing candidates manageable tasks. Without parties, the chaotic free-for-all of elections would be difficult or impossible for ordinary citizens to understand. Indeed, some observers have suggested that mass democracy cannot function at all without political parties to organize it.⁴

CHARACTERISTICS OF U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES

Two of the fundamental characteristics of our political system are that we have a **two-party system** and that the dominant parties are **centrist**, or close to the political center. Since the development of political parties shortly after the founding of the nation, two major political parties have normally dominated U.S. politics. During a brief period from 1816 to 1824, only one party was strong enough to contest the presidency seriously, and serious minor party challenges and independent presidential candidacies have cropped up from time to time (for example, George Wallace’s American Independent party in 1968 and Ross Perot’s independent campaigns for the presidency in 1992 and 1996), but for the most part, only two parties have had a serious chance to win the presidency or any substantial number of seats in Congress. Since the formation of the Republican Party in 1854, those two parties have been the Democrats (who were organized in the early 1800s) and the Republicans.

Our two major parties have always tended to take stands close to the political center; that is, we have **centrist parties**. Democrats and Republicans certainly disagree about a wide range of issues, but their disagreements are narrower than disagreements among parties in many other democratic nations.⁵ For instance, several western European nations have communist and socialist parties, which favor far larger government roles in regulating business and economic relations in society. In the United States, by

Two-party system

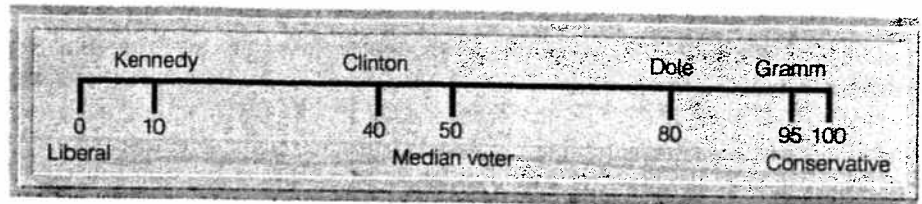
A political system in which two major parties dominate.

Centrist parties

Parties close to the political center.

FIGURE 8.1
The Spatial Model of Elections

The *median voter hypothesis* predicts that candidates will move toward the median, or political center, because that position gives them the greatest chance of winning.



contrast, even the most liberal Democrats favor capitalism and would reject the more extreme, heavy-handed government interference in the marketplace that occurs in some other countries.⁶ On the other end of the political spectrum, some western European countries have fascist or monarchist parties, which favor limiting who can participate in elections (usually on racial or ethnic grounds). In the United States, even the most conservative Republicans favor democracy and reject any proposal restricting the right to vote. So by standards of democracies around the world, the differences between the dominant American parties are relatively small; they tend to take stands not too far from one another.

The Spatial Theory of Elections

The *spatial theory of elections* helps us to understand why the United States has two centrist parties.⁷ The spatial model was developed to explain how politicians and voters would behave if they were acting rationally to achieve their goals. It shows how different sets of rules create different incentives and so cause politicians and voters to behave differently. Under American election rules, politicians are more likely to achieve their goals if they join one of two centrist parties; under other types of election rules used in other nations, many parties can thrive. Different rules produce different outcomes.

To focus on the effects of rules, the spatial model simplifies the real world and attempts to identify the essential characteristics of our political system that influence politicians and voters. As a description, therefore, the model does poorly; it doesn't take into account many of the complexities of particular elections. As a tool to help us understand how our system works, however, the model is useful.

The spatial theory assumes first that all political issues can be represented by a single left-right scale, and that all parties, politicians, and voters can be placed on this scale. The scale shown in figure 8.1, for instance, ranges from zero—an extreme liberal—to 100—an extreme conservative. On this scale, a liberal such as Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) might be placed at 10, while a conservative such as Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) might be placed at 95. The more moderate 1996 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, President Clinton and Senator Dole, would be somewhat closer to the center. The second assumption of the spatial model is that the voters know exactly where they and the candidates stand on the issue scale. That is, the model simplifies the real world by assuming that voters have “perfect information” about what politicians would do if they were elected. Third, the theory assumes that all people vote, choosing the candidate whose views are closest to theirs.

From these assumptions, the spatial model suggests a conclusion known as the **median voter hypothesis**—namely, that the best possible position for a politician who cares only about winning elections is the center. The “center” is the position of the median voter, that is, the individual voter who has exactly half of all other voters to his or her left, and the remaining half of all voters to his or her right. On the scale in figure 8.1, the center is the midpoint of the scale, 50.

The logic behind the median voter hypothesis can be seen in figure 8.1. Consider first what would happen if the two parties chose Kennedy and Gramm as candidates. Because every voter votes for the candidate closest to him or her on the scale, the voters to the left of Kennedy would vote for Kennedy, and those to the right of Gramm

Median voter hypothesis

The theory that the best possible position for a politician who cares only about winning elections is the center—that is, in the position of the median voter.

