The Evolution of Political Parties

KEY TOPICS
After reading this chapter, you should be able to understand these core concepts and explain their significance:

- Definition of Political Party
- Functions of Political Parties
- Political Party Components
- Candidate-Centered Politics
- Historical Evolution of Parties in America
- Pragmatic Party Model
- Responsible Party Model

One of the great ironies of American politics is that the forces that many of the constitutional framers feared the most have proven to be the instruments that have made elections work—and many believe have made the American democratic process endure through the ages. Political parties burst on the scene in the late 1790s and forever changed the way elections are conducted and the way the American system of government operates. Many shun the very idea of “partisan politics,” but few scholars, pundits, or politicians could imagine a democratic system where parties are not an integral part of the system. Parties are the black sheep of American politics—shunned, but still very much a part of the family. As noted by a team of scholars, political parties are “institutions Americans love to hate.”

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WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

There is no single definition of “political parties” that satisfies everyone. In fact, two scholars or students of politics might define “parties” in different ways. The principal difference seems to be what we might expect from parties—the goals of party activity. One definition, often called the pragmatic party model, suggests that parties are organizations that sponsor candidates for political office under the organization’s name with the hopes of controlling the apparatus of government. The ends are control of government, which has often meant the perquisites of control (e.g., patronage jobs, government contracts). On the other side of the spectrum is the responsible party model. Here “parties” implies organizations that run candidates to shape the outcome of government—to redirect public policy. Rational parties work to win elections to control government, while responsible parties work hard during elections in order to shape public policy. The former is instrumental; the latter, ideological. Which of the two better fits American political parties? This is a hotly debated issue and there is no clear answer. What is clear, however, is that there are three characteristics that distinguish political parties from other organizations such as interest groups, unions, trade associations, and political action committees. These differences are as follows:

- Political parties run candidates under their own labels. Many groups work hard to win elections. The National Rifle Association (NRA) and the American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), for example, help particular candidates in every election. But such organizations do not nominate candidates to run under their labels. Only political parties do this.
-Political parties have a broad range of concerns, dubbed a platform. They are umbrella organizations that develop positions on an array of policy questions. Most interest groups limit their efforts to a narrow range of topics. The NRA, for instance, is concerned with regulations on guns, and the Environmental Defense League is primarily concerned with issues related to pollution and the protection of ecosystems.
- Ever since the Progressive Period—roughly the turn of the 20th century—political parties have been subject to numerous state and local laws. They are “quasi-public” institutions. Interest groups, on the other hand, are purely private and free of government regulations. Indeed, the extent to which parties are also private organizations has been recently debated in the federal courts.

Party Functions

Just as there is disagreement over the precise definition of “party,” so too there is dispute over party functions. Following is a list that most agree upon. It contains numerous overt functions—activities that the public can see and clearly measure—and it also boasts many latent functions—theoretical activities one hopes that parties provide. The extent to which a function is manifest or latent has changed over time.

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2The following list is culled, in large measure, from White and Shea, New Party Politics, 19.
Organizing the Election Process  Creating a system of elections to pick governmental leaders is much easier said than done. One could imagine dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of citizens vying for a single office, thus leaving voters confused and discouraged. How would one study the positions, personalities, and qualifications of each candidate? Parties serve important organizing functions as they trim the pool of office-seekers to party nominees, and they also establish a platform of issues for their candidates. Both of these functions help organize the process for voters.

Providing a Voting Shortcut  Psychologists tell us that humans are cognitive misers: We wish to make rational decisions with the least amount of information necessary. Parties help in this regard, given that voters need not know everything or even very much about a candidate, other than his or her party affiliation, to cast an informed, rational vote. If, for example, a voter prefers Republican policies and an election pits a Republican against a Democrat, then the voter can make an informed choice with no other additional information. Without party labels, the voter would have to study each candidate's positions in detail. Forced to undertake such a chore, many voters would simply sit on the sidelines.

Recruiting Candidates  Anxious to win elections, parties often recruit good, qualified citizens to run for office. By doing so, parties ensure that voters are given solid choices and that the winner is qualified to govern.

Providing a Screening Mechanism  On the other hand, parties often screen unqualified, perhaps even corrupt, would-be candidates. Receiving a party nomination is a critical step in winning a post in government. Parties deny endorsements to weak office-seekers, not wishing to be tarnished by their shortcomings. (Unfortunately, most would agree that this screening mechanism is far from perfect!)

Helping Candidates  Parties help candidates put their best foot forward to voters. In the past, assistance was primarily labor; party workers would spread the word about their party’s candidates. More recently, parties provide numerous high-technology campaign services, such as polling, computerized targeting, radio and television productions, and direct mail. Of course, fund-raising has also become a huge part of how parties lend a hand.

Organizing a Complex Government  One can be struck by the complexity of the American government. There are three branches of the federal government, two houses in one of those branches, a massive bureaucracy, and a state/local sphere with an equally intricate system. This complexity was, by design, part of the checks and balances envisioned by the framers, but the outcome has been what some have called constitutional obstruction—the many ways the Constitution makes swift action difficult. Parties help bring the many pieces of the American system into united action. For example, throughout American history, political parties have helped bridge the gap between executives (presidents, governors, or mayors) and the legislature, and to bring bicameral legislatures into united action. Strong parties are no guarantee of overcoming constitutional obstruction, as we have seen throughout American history, but one can only imagine how much worse things would be without them.
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Aggregating Interests  In their efforts to win elections, parties try to build coalitions of groups. Just as the American government is complex, so too is American society. Parties want to win elections, and citizen groups want a say in the policy process. The outcome of this mutually beneficial relationship is that individual and group interests are melded into a broad philosophy of governing. While many would find this hard to believe, political parties can often help to transform special interests into the public interest.

Educating Citizens  When each party moves to build support for its candidates, the by-product is voter education. Voters not only know more about the candidates because of party activities, but know more about government policies and the workings of the American system as well.

Providing an Accountability Mechanism  Because the American political system is so complex, it is difficult for voters to make accountability judgments. Whom should Americans blame if the economy turns sour or medical costs skyrocket? Who should get credit if crime rates fall or inflation stays in check? A growing inclination is to give the president credit or blame, but this is often an oversimplification. More likely, and indeed more accurately, voters have used parties to forge these assessments. If the party in power has done a good job, its candidates are voted back into office at all levels. If things have gotten worse, the other party is given a chance. This process works best when one party controls all parts of the government, called unified party control. Divided party control is when each party controls at least one part of the government. During most of American history, control has been unified, but during the past 30 years divided system has been the norm. Much more will be said on this issue later.

Performing Social Functions  Although less today than in the past, parties provide many Americans with civic/social opportunities. Party-sponsored potluck dinners, ice cream socials, and barbecues have been a common feature in many communities throughout the United States. These political events bring people out of their homes into the public realm—they help turn individuals into citizens.

Promoting Civic Participation  Either as part of their mission to build a fuller democratic system or simply in an effort to win the election at hand, parties promote political participation. This has included the cultivation of candidates, donors, volunteers, and of course voters on Election Day through get-out-the-vote efforts. Many studies have found that communities with strong political parties have higher levels of voting and political participation.3

THE COMPONENTS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

One of the most confusing aspects of political parties is precisely what the term implies. By the 1950s, political scientists developed what is called the tripartite view of parties. As suggested in Figure 4.1, political parties boast three interrelated elements: party-in-government (PIG), party-in-the-electorate (PIE), and party-as-organization (PO). Indeed, “PIG-PIE-PO”

became the mantra of an entire generation of party scholars. This is often referred to as the “tripod” model of political parties in the United States.

*Party-in-government* refers to officials elected under a particular party banner. All the Republicans in the House of Representatives, for example, make up one piece of the GOP (Grand Old Party) PIG. They call themselves the House Republican Conference. If they have a majority in the chamber, their leader is the Speaker of the House; if not, he or she is the minority leader. Other segments of the Republican PIG include the Republicans in the Senate and the president when he (or she) is a member of the GOP. There are also sub-branches of the national PIG, such as governors, state-level elected officials, municipal officials, and so on. There is also a “Republican Governors Association.” The Democrats in the House of Representatives call themselves the House Democratic Caucus. This structure extends all the way down to municipal government. For example, all of the Democrats in the Buffalo City Council consider themselves more or less part of the same group.

Although all the elected members of a party consider themselves, broadly speaking, part of the same “team,” official structures are office-specific. For instance, there is an actual Senate Democratic Caucus and a House Democratic Caucus—they meet, debate, plan strategy, and vote—but there is no “Congressional Democratic Caucus.”

The American system is rather unique in that PIG structures are weak. In many other democracies, there is an expectation that elected officials will vote with their parties on most matters. Dissenters, or those who vote with the opposition party on issues, are rare. At times, there is a great deal of pressure designed to force officials to “stay in line.” In the American system, however, party leaders hope that members vote with the party, but the tradition is that elected officials can stray without serious repercussion. To be sure, most voters in America look down upon “party politics” and applaud their elected official’s “independence.” One should keep in mind that the single-best predictor of how a legislator will vote on any given bill is his or her party affiliation. Most elected officials vote with their parties most of the time, but in the American political system, a degree of autonomy is both expected and accepted.

There are many ways to measure the extent to which legislators stick with their parties, and the most common is called party unity scores. This is the percentage
of votes on legislation in which a majority of Republicans oppose a majority of Democrats, for example. It is a measure that can be used to describe the partisan nature of any legislative body, including Congress, state legislatures, county legislatures, and city councils. Regarding Congress, party unity scores have shifted over time. A low point was the middle decades of the 20th century when the Democrats controlled Congress, but their caucus was made up of an awkward mix of northeastern liberals and Southern conservatives—the latter being dubbed boll weevils. The two wings of the Democratic Party disagreed passionately on many issues, especially civil rights legislation, leading unit scores to drop into the 30-percent range. By the 1990s, the Republican Party in the South had become significant, making it a more comfortable home for conservative politicians. Today, most federal legislators from the South are Republicans, and party unity scores are much higher, as noted in Figure 4.2.

Party-in-the-electorate refers to those who attach themselves to a particular party. When an average citizen says that he or she is a “Democrat,” a “Republican,” a “Green,” or a “Libertarian,” that person is acknowledging membership in a PIE.4

PIE is an ambiguous concept and the source of much scholarly debate. Some suggest that one’s attitude, or his or her party identification (ID), is enough to consider him or her partisan. Party ID is the deep-seated feeling that a particular party best represents one’s interests and outlook toward government and society. For example, if a citizen suggests to a pollster that he or she thinks of himself as a “strong Republican,” this person would be considered part of the PIE. Most assessments of PIE in America rely upon such attitudinal measures—the most common is a 7-point scale where “strong Democrat” and “strong Republican” are at the ends of the scale, and true “independents” are at the “4” mark. Using such a measure, social scientists estimate that about 70 percent of Americans consider themselves partisan. As Figure 4.3 suggests, this percentage has dropped a good bit since the 1950s. Figure 4.4 takes a look at party identification using a three point scale—Democratic, Republican, and Independent. Here about 60 percent consider themselves partisan.

Other social scientists suggest that one’s behavior is more important than his or her attitude when it comes to determining partisanship. If a person votes for Democrats most of the time, then perhaps this person should be tagged a “Democrat” regardless of what he or she might tell a pollster. Straight-ticket voters are those who support candidates of the same party in each election, and in one election after another. Voters who switch back and forth between the parties on Election Day, or from one election to the next, are called split-ticket voters. They might vote for the Republican gubernatorial candidate, the Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives, and the Green Party candidate for mayor. Voting behavior of this sort would suggest that the citizen is a non-partisan, or what we often call an independent. (Contrary to what many believe, as of yet there is no official “independent party.”) As noted in Figure 4.5, the number of split-ticket voters has also grown, although there has been a slight decline in recent elections. This is another indicator that the number of hardcore partisans in the electorate is shrinking.

For those who consider themselves true partisans, the impact of this allegiance on their vote choice is significant. Those who see themselves as a “strong Republican” or a “strong Democrat” nearly always vote with their party on Election Day. Conversely, very few strong partisans “defect,” and when they do so, it is usually caused by a powerful short-term force, such as a war or the state the economy. Generally they return to their parties in the next election.

Another possibility to measure PIE would be to rely on official voter registration lists. Is the voter enrolled at his or her local board of elections with a particular

FIGURE 4.2 Party Unity in Congressional Voting
party? Party enrollment, a legalistic approach to measuring PIE, makes some sense, except that many register with a party when they become voting age, only to change their attitudes and voting habits over time. Some might head off to their local board of elections to change their registration, but most would probably not.

Another possibility is that true membership in PIE comes from an active involvement with a party. There are two possibilities here: voting in primary elections and helping parties undertake activities. Primaries are elections that allow citizens to select party nominees. Each of the candidates on a primary election ballot is vying for the party’s nomination, the privilege of representing the party in the general election in November. There are many ways to conduct primary elections, which are discussed in the Chapter 6, but the point here is that it is still another concrete way of deciding who is a member of a party. Not surprisingly, the

**Figure 4.3 Seven-Point Partisanship Scale 1952–2008**

Question Text: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or other?” (If Republican or Democrat) “Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?” (If independent or Other [1966 and later: OR NO PREFERENCE]) “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?” Party Identification Seven-Point Scale 1952–2008.


*Note:* (a) In 1966, “don’t know” was combined with apolitical; in all other years, “don’t know” is excluded as missing data. (b) The American National Election Studies did not conduct a time series study in 1996.
FIGURE 4.4 Party Identification Using 3-Point Scale

number of citizens participating in primary elections has also shrunk over the years. In 2008, for example, a year characterized by a long, hard-fought presidential nomination contest, less than 20 percent of the electorate came to the polls to pick party nominees.

The second way citizens can be active with a party is by helping it undertake activities. This would be the most rigorous way of deciding which citizens are in a PIE, as only about 5 percent of Americans either give money or help parties undertake grassroots functions. Figure 4.6 shows two measures of direct party involvement over time: attending party functions and contributing money to the party.

We might also choose to measure the concept of PIE as the degree of connection between average citizens and the parties. Data indicate that a shrinking number of Americans appear anxious to build an emotional connection to a political party. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, the number of independents increased from 32 percent in 2008 to 34 percent in 2010, as noted in Figure 4.4.\(^5\) One explanation of this change is that the parties have somehow angered voters, and the

withdrawal is some sort of backlash. More likely is that a growing number of new voters are simply indifferent to parties. Political independence, once thought of as a sign of apathy and ignorance, has become a virtue.

*Party-as-organization* refers to the formal apparatus of the party, including party headquarters, offices, and leaders. It is the official bureaucracy of the party, and it is found in the form of “committees” in every state and in nearly every community in the nation. If one goes to the Internet and looks up “Republican Party” or “Democratic Party,” a local number and address can be found in most instances.

POs exist at each of the layers of the American political system. At the national level, there are the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee. Each state has both a Republican Party and a Democratic Party. There is an Indiana Democratic Party, a New York State Democratic Committee, an Arizona Democratic Party, a Republican Party of Texas, and a California Republican Party, for instance. Much the same can be found at the county and municipal levels; there is a Crawford County Republican Committee in Western Pennsylvania and a Farmington Democratic Town Committee in Massachusetts. At the very bottom of the structure, one occasionally finds ward or precinct organizations. The Chicago Democratic Committee is comprised of a mass of different precinct organizations.

Many casual observers of party politics believe that a formal hierarchy exists between the layers—that the national parties control the state parties and that the state organizations dictate orders to the county/municipal committees. This is not the case. A somewhat unique aspect of the American parties is that, while there is a good bit of interaction between layers of the system, most of it centering on the sharing of resources, few commands or orders are thrust upon lower-level committees. For the most part, party organizations at all levels of the system operate as semi-autonomous units. The same is true with regard to horizontal linkages; county organizations in a state might touch base occasionally, but for the most part they go it alone.

Party activities and functions are conducted by the party organizations through activists—sometimes called party hacks. In most cases, these are volunteers, giving their time and efforts because they believe in the party’s mission (its approach to government). Some see their efforts helping at some point in the future with perhaps a job or a chance to run for office, or they simply enjoy the social aspects of involvement. National parties—and a growing number of state party committees—use a mix of volunteers and paid staffers. Some of the larger county and city committees do much the same, but most at the municipal level are purely amateur (nonpaid).

Throughout much of American history, some party organizations took on a rather distinctive, aggressive form. These units, called party machines, were especially strong in larger cities around the turn of the 20th century, such as in New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Kansas City. The leader of a machine was referred to as “the boss.” Party machines carried a double-edge sword: On the one hand, their strong desire to win elections to control patronage jobs, city contracts, and regulations, coupled with an efficient, military-like organization, had the effect of bringing otherwise disenfranchised citizens into the process. This was particularly important for newly arrived immigrants, of which there was a flood in the second half of the 19th century. In exchange for their help on Election Day, party bosses
and their machines provided them a social safety net. If someone needed a job, if some citizens were evicted from their apartments and needed another place to live, if someone needed a loan to pay for a funeral, or if some cash was needed to post bond for a “confused” son, the machine would often lend a hand. In exchange for this help, voters would support the party’s slate of candidates on Election Day. To many—including many of the residents of these cities—machines created a democratic accountability mechanism: If the machine failed to take care of the citizens of the community, that party was simply voted out of office and a new group was given a chance.

On the other hand, a great deal of corruption was thrown into the mix of machine politics. Election fraud was rampant. One of the last of the big city bosses, Richard Daley of Chicago would proclaim to his workers on Election Day, with only a veneer of levity, that they should “vote early and vote often.”6 As the machines controlled the reins of government, they also rigged the workings of the government to suit their political needs and to line their own pockets. For example, in many cities, public employees were required to kick back a portion of their pay to the machine—generally about 2 or 3 percent. The humanitarian efforts of the party machines extended only to supporters and to those who were able to vote. Many minority groups, namely African-Americans, did not benefit from machine assistance because these groups were of no use to party machines, given that most could not vote.

For these reasons and others, a series of reforms were ushered in at the end of the 19th century, collectively called the Progressive Movement, as discussed in Chapter 2. This movement was successful in bringing about big changes in the workings of party machines: The civil service robbed machines of patronage (jobs to hand out to loyal supporters), the secret ballot removed the machines’ control of people’s votes on Election Day, and the direct primary stripped their ability to control nominations. Local party organizations survived these changes, but machines faced overwhelming challenges and slowly faded from the American scene.

Unlike the decline with regard to individual partisanship, the fate of party organizations at the dawn of the 21st century is muddled. State and national party organizations seem to be doing well; they have benefited from a massive influx of campaign contributions and have more equipment and staff and better facilities than at any other point in American history. But the picture is much different at the local level. Local party organizations, what two scholars call the “mom and pop shops of the party system,”7 are finding it difficult to survive. This is true mostly because they rely on volunteers. As individuals seem less interested in partisan politics, they are even less interested in putting in a few hours at the party headquarters. Whereas a few decades ago many local committees were vibrant, dynamic organizations, today this would be the exception. America has entered a “baseless” party system—an era where parties are strong at the national and state level, but decrepit at the community level.8

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6Ibid., 50.
7Ibid., Chapter 7.
8Ibid., Conclusion.
Has the Tripod Outlived Its Usefulness?

Fifty years ago, when the tripod view of parties was introduced, it seemed to make perfect sense. There was a tight connection between each of the components. Party organizations were responsible for picking nominees, and selected candidates ran in the general election with their party’s help. Once in office, these elected officials paid close attention to the wishes of the local parties, or else risked abandonment in the next election. Through all this work at the local level, party organizations helped to build a strong attachment among average citizens to the parties. It was a tight, complete package. But today, the picture is more complicated. Local party organizations are withering at the same time state and national units are thriving. Fewer voters consider themselves partisan than in the past, but elected officials seem quite interested in talking about their independence while back home, while sticking to the party line when at the capital. Given these changes, many have begun to question the usefulness of the tripod. Perhaps it is an outdated concept. This issue will be debated for some time to come, but for our concerns, it is important to recognize that “political party” has different components in the United States and that the relationship between these parts is dynamic.

THE HISTORY OF PARTIES IN AMERICA

As with nearly every aspect of the American political system, the nature of the party system has changed over time. Following is a review of four periods in American history. Two points will emerge from this exploration: First, from nearly the beginning, political parties have been the centerpiece of the American electoral process. Second, the story of parties in the United States continues to unfold; what they look like, what functions they serve, and how they fit in the electoral pathway today will likely be much different in the years ahead.

Phase I: The Arrival of Parties in America (1792 to 1800)

James Madison warned his fellow Americans about the dangers of party-like organizations, which he called “factions,” in “The Federalist No. 10.” “The friend of popular government,” wrote Madison, “never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate as when he contemplates their propensity for this dangerous vice.” A few years later, George Washington suggested much the same. In his famous “farewell address,” Washington proclaimed: “Let me . . . warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party . . . It is truly [Americans’] worst enemy.” Many other statesmen and early political thinkers drew a similar word of caution: Political parties were the bane of democratic systems.

What drove these apprehensions? Prior to this period, political systems that allowed average citizens the opportunity to speak out and organize invariably

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degenerated into rival groups, each vying for their own interests. Consideration of the “whole” came second to consideration of the “self.” This was particularly likely in early America, given that a national identity—and indeed a “national” citizenship—would not develop until much later. (Many have suggested that this national identity was forged by the Civil War.) The freedom to speak one’s mind and to come together with like-minded citizens made it even more likely that factions or parties would emerge.

The framers of the American political system were students of the Enlightenment—a 17th-century European intellectual movement that stressed the importance of human intellect and reason in answering all questions. They put a premium on discussion, debate, and deliberation in sorting out issues. Concerning public policy, the framers believed that with due time and careful deliberation, the just or correct answer would emerge, but a system wrapped in party politics would likely lead to prolonged dispute and in the end stalemate. In short, they believed that parties were antithetical to reason and careful deliberation.

Even so, within a decade after the adoption of the Constitution, parties burst on the American political scene. Wishing to fill his cabinet with the best and the brightest of the day, George Washington selected Thomas Jefferson for secretary of state and Alexander Hamilton as Treasury secretary. Both men were distinguished and intelligent, and each had impressive Revolutionary War credentials (deemed important for the legitimacy of the new government). The problem, nevertheless, was that Hamilton and Jefferson passionately disagreed about the future of the nation. Jefferson believed that America’s hope lay in small, agriculture-based communities. He had faith in ordinary citizens, particularly the farmer: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people.”

A second component of Hamilton’s plan was a heavy national investment in infrastructure improvements—for instance, in roads, bridges, ports, and canals. He believed that doing so would increase the flow of goods and services, thus leading to a general rise in living standards. But, of course, this too would require a great deal of national government resources.\(^\text{12}\)

To pay for these two projects, Hamilton proposed a tax on distilled spirits—which became known as the Whiskey Tax. This was not a sales tax, but rather an excise tax, meaning a levy on the production of the product. This was a heavy tax as well—eight cents per gallon. Given that a gallon of liquor cost about 32 cents in those days, this tax represented a 25-percent jump.\(^\text{13}\) More controversial was that most whiskey producers were farmers in the South and West, so to many, the plan reeked of northeastern industrial elites placing the burden of “economic development” on the backs of the working poor.

Opposition to Hamilton’s plans grew, with the leading critic being none other than Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton and Jefferson squared off on a daily basis, leading Washington to comment that the two went at it “like two cocks”\(^\text{14}\) in a pen during cabinet meetings. Soon the battle extended beyond Washington’s inner circle to the halls of Congress and to newspapers across the nation. Lines were being drawn, sides were being taken, and the public was slowly becoming “partisan.”

Hamilton’s plans passed through Congress. In a surprise move, Jefferson actually endorsed the plan in exchange for Hamilton’s support in moving the nation’s capital from New York to a small piece of land on the Potomac River in Virginia. But the controversy surrounding the plan continued to simmer in the hinterlands. In 1794, shortly after the plan’s approval, a group of farmers in western Pennsylvania refused to pay the tax. Federal troops were sent to collect but they were met with armed resistance. This event, called the Whiskey Rebellion, was one of the first tests of the rule of national law in the states. Washington decided to confront the farmers head-on. In September of 1794, Washington issued a proclamation ordering the militia to assemble and march against the insurgents:

Every form of conciliation not inconsistent with the being of Government, has been adopted without effect . . . [and] Government is set at defiance, the contest being whether a small portion of the United States shall dictate to the whole union, and at the expense of those, who desire peace, indulge a desperate ambition; Now therefore I, George Washington, . . . deploiring that the American name should be sullied by the outrages of citizens on their own Government; . . . but resolved . . . to reduce the refractory to a due subordination to the law; Do Hereby declare . . . that a force . . . adequate to the exigency, is already in motion to the scene of disaffection; . . . And I do, moreover, exhort all individuals, officers, and bodies of men, to


\(^{\text{13}}\)Ibid.

contemplate with abhorrence the measures leading directly or indirectly
to those crimes, which produce this resort to military coercion.\textsuperscript{15}

Over 150 prisoners were taken by federal troops, but all were later pardoned by
Washington.

A second issue that helped solidify the partisans behind Jefferson and Hamilton
was the French Revolution in 1793. Many, including Jefferson, thought the American
government owed the French revolutionaries its support. It was, after all, a struggle
for self-rule and the expulsion of aristocracy—precisely what had transpired on
American soil a few years earlier. Indeed, Thomas Paine, the great revolutionary pamphleteer, was so inspired by these events that he moved to France to help the revolutionary forces. But to Hamilton and his colleagues, the French Revolution signaled the emergence of anarchy and mob rule. When the violence spread into a war with Britain, Hamilton argued that America should support England. Washington sought to keep America out of the conflict, to remain neutral. He sent James Monroe to Paris and John Jay to London to negotiate neutrality treaties. But when Jay returned with an agreement that clearly supported Britain, a firestorm erupted. The debate over the Jay Treaty pitted Jefferson and his followers, who opposed it, against Hamilton and his group, who favored its ratification.\textsuperscript{16}

It is hard to overstate the extent to which these issues—Hamilton’s economic
policies and the Jay Treaty—stirred public emotions. These were huge issues and there
seemed little room for compromise, especially on the Jay Treaty. By the election of
1796, Jefferson had bolted from Washington’s cabinet and thrown his hat into the
ring for the presidency. By the election of 1796, Jefferson had bolted from Washington’s cabinet and thrown his hat into the ring for the presidency. Washington had decided to retire, leaving the position open to Vice President John Adams, who sided with Hamilton on policy matters. Adams edged out Jefferson on Election Day. A glitch in the Constitution outlining the electoral college noted that the second place candidate would become vice president, meaning that Jefferson was obligated to serve as the second-in-charge—an awkward arrangement, to be sure. (This provision was changed in 1804 with the passage of the Twelfth Amendment, mandating that presidential and vice presidential candidates run as a team.)

Animosity between the two groups got even worse during Adams’s administration when, in an effort to stifle criticism of his policies, Adams pushed through Congress the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. These laws made it a crime to denounce the federal government, made it more difficult to become a naturalized citizen, and made it much easier for the federal government to deport outspoken, critical aliens.\textsuperscript{17} To Jefferson and his colleagues, it was an all-too-clear bit of evidence that Adams, Hamilton, and the rest of their followers had abandoned the cause of the Revolution.

The response was to organize at the community level for the next election in
1800. In other words, the plan was to create party organizations to rally support for
Jefferson and his party, now called the Democratic-Republicans. (Oddly, this was the

beginning of today’s Democratic Party.) Adams and Hamilton responded by creating the Federalist Party, and by also organizing at the local level. (One should not confuse the Federalist Party with the supporters of the Constitution in 1789, the Federalists.) One prominent scholar of American history dubbed this period the “great consolidation”; the period when parties finally emerged in America. \(^\text{18}\)

Jefferson won the election of 1800 narrowly, and his Republican colleagues stormed into the majority of both houses in Congress. Jefferson proclaimed his success the “second revolution.” The direction of public policy changed, and those who had been convicted under the Alien and Sedition Acts were pardoned. The election of 1800 also proved that parties could face each other in heated debate, but then let voters decide. The election marked the first time that one group replaced another group in control of government peacefully. Not only were parties not dangerous, as many speculated, but they seemed to exemplify precisely what citizens might want in a democratic system: a mechanism for airing differences of opinion regarding the proper course of government and then mobilizing support behind sets of candidates.

Finally, the election of 1800 galvanized the idea of legitimate opposition. This is the belief that in a democratic society the public is well served by organized opposition to the group in power. It is yet another check in the American system. As noted by one scholar, “The principle of uncontested elections never was accepted in the United States . . . The Republic was born as a result of political opposition, and with minor deviations from this principle, it was an orientation that was persistently maintained and exercised in the period up to 1800.”\(^\text{19}\)

**Phase II: The Heyday Period (1828 to 1900)**

The dispute over political parties was settled with the election of 1800. Even James Madison, who had written about the bane of “factions” in *The Federalist Papers*, embraced parties in his later years.\(^\text{20}\) Ironically, while there now seemed little to fear from political parties, the nation moved into a period of one-party politics, often referred to as the Era of Good Feelings. Jefferson was anxious to mend fences and to calm anxieties. The Federalists faded from the scene; from 1804 to 1820, the Republicans won between 53 and 92 percent of the electoral college votes, and between 53 and 92 percent of the seats in Congress.\(^\text{21}\)

The tranquility was shattered with the alleged Corrupt Deal of 1824. The Federalists had disappeared in Congress, but within the Republican ranks, blocks of legislators had developed. By 1824, five Republican candidates threw their hats into the ring for president: Henry Clay, Speaker of the House; John C. Calhoun, secretary of war; John Quincy Adams, son of John Adams and former secretary of state; William Crawford, former Treasury secretary; and Andrew Jackson, hero of the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. On Election Day, Jackson carried more votes

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than either of the other candidates, but did not receive a majority of electoral college votes. The election was turned over to the House of Representatives, pursuant to the Constitution, where most observers expected Jackson to carry the day given that he had won more votes and electors than either of the other candidates. But some believe a deal was made between second-place candidate John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, who had come in fourth: Clay would use his powers as Speaker of the House to throw the election in Adam’s favor if he would make Clay secretary of state—often considered the second-most important position in the federal government. Adams became president and shortly thereafter kept his promise to Clay.

The backlash from the deal spread across America, manifesting itself in two ways. First, the Democratic-Republicans were torn apart, leading to the creation of the Whig Party. Its leaders were Adams, Clay, and Calhoun. Their platform centered on states’ rights, individual freedom, and lower taxes. The remaining Democratic-Republicans shortened their name to the Democratic Party—and their leaders were Jackson and New York politician Martin Van Buren. Second, Jackson, with Van Buren’s advice, used local parties to rally opposition to Adams.

It was a rebirth of party politics, this time located at the community level. Party operatives spread the word that unless average citizens became involved, elite deals of this sort would be common. It was a call to the average citizen to stand up and exert his role in the political process. This emphasis on individual involvement ushered in a new era in electoral politics, what historians have called Jacksonian Democracy. This was a move toward egalitarian politics and social life. Politics was for the average person—not just the economic and social elite. Not surprisingly, Jackson won his rematch against Adams in 1828, and the percentage of the adult male population participating in 1828 was nearly four times higher than in 1824.22

The rage for electoral politics spread across the nation. Realizing the potential of average citizens to change the course of government, coupled with aggressive local party organizations that pushed, prodded, and pulled every male citizen into the process, individuals became political. Participation in elections reached record levels. Almost every aspect of social life centered on party politics and elections. Writing of the late 1830s, historian Joel Silbey notes, “For most Americans, politics was not a separate sphere divorced from their socioeconomic and personal concerns. Rather, politics was woven into the fabric of the society at all levels.”23 The reflections of European observers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, and many others, suggested the same—as did levels of turnout during most of the 19th century, which often approached 85 percent. In brief, the 62-year period stretching from the 1820s to the 1890s can be dubbed the heyday of local party politics and popular electoral participation.

**The Civil War Disruption**

Although local party politics was cemented in American political and social life, the lines of cleavage between the parties shifted during the midpoint of the 19th century. The most significant disruption was caused by the issue of slavery. It is fair to say that both the Whigs and the Democrats were anxious to avoid the slavery question. Competition between the two was fierce and neither party wanted to alienate their Southern or northeastern supporters. It was better to dodge the question altogether. “Northern abolitionists were often uncomfortably seated next to slave holders in presidential cabinets and in the halls of Congress.”24 But as new states were admitted to the Union, the slave question was thrust to the fore and the delicate balance was tested. Should these new states be free or should they be allowed slavery? The halls of Congress erupted in controversy. In 1846, the Wilmot Proviso, which prohibited slavery in areas acquired during the Mexican–American war, was introduced in Congress. It passed the House, where members from Free States held a majority, but failed in the Senate due to the Southern bloc. Both parties were split into factions. The Whigs were broken into the conscience Whigs, who opposed slavery, and the cotton Whigs who did not. The Democrats were divided along similar lines. The Kansas–Nebraska Bill was an attempt at finding a compromise: New states would decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery—a concept dubbed popular sovereignty. But instead of satisfying each side, the measure added fuel to the fire. By 1854, a group of abolitionists from both of major parties met in Ripon, Wisconsin, to create a new political party: the Republican Party. One participant observed, “We came into the little meeting held in a schoolhouse Whigs, Free Soilers, and Democrats. We came out of it Republicans.”25

For the next few elections, several political parties battled it out. Things came to a head in the election of 1860. Abraham Lincoln, the Republican nominee, was able to secure an electoral college victory by receiving a majority of votes in the more populous Northern states. He lost all of the mid-coast states and every Southern state. His nationwide popular vote total fell well short of a majority. This seemed to be the final straw for Southern states, and many soon seceded from the Union—leading to the Civil War. The election also restructured the party system. By 1864, the system had once again settled into two camps: the Republican Party, essentially the party of the North, and the Democratic Party, the party of the South and Midwest.

**Phase III: The Party Decline Era (1900 to 1980)**

The Industrial Revolution was an important phase in America’s economic development, but it was also a dark era in American history. Economic prosperity for the owners and operators of factories came at the expense of workers. Colossal fortunes were being made by some, but most citizens found themselves working long hours in unsafe, unsanitary factories or sweatshops for minuscule wages. By the 1880s, a growing number of Americans—mainly middle class—set to work cleaning up the

25Ibid., 46.
political and economic system. This movement became known as the Progressive Movement, as noted earlier.

With regard to cleaning up corrupt politics, a number of changes were made: To strip political machines of their ability to use patronage jobs to fortify their hold on government, the merit system (also called the civil service system) was developed. To reduce the likelihood of pressure at polling places, the Australian ballot (or “secret ballot”) was instituted. And to reduce the chance that party bosses would simply hand-pick nominees who would tow the party line, the direct primary was established. In this system, average members of the party—the rank and file—would cast a secret ballot on primary Election Day to pick the party’s nominee. All told, these and many other reforms greatly reduced the potency of party machines.

Another blow to party bosses was disclosure of corruption in the popular press. “Muckraker” was a name given to investigative journalists who uncovered both political and economic misdeeds. “Newspapers, magazines, and books exposed evidence of abuse—from entire police departments in partnership with gangsters, to churches owning whole blocks of foul-smelling slums, to an entire U.S. Senate ‘on the take.’”

The effect of these new laws and the flurry of media coverage were devastating for party machines. The reins of government were slipping from machine hands, and the public’s affinity for party politics was shaken. The Progressive Era marked a sea change in the place of party organizations in American politics. Party machines were still important institutions, especially for candidates who needed party volunteers to reach out to voters, but their heyday had come to a close.

THE RISE OF CANDIDATE-CENTERED POLITICS. Public attitudes about political parties had grown especially sour by the late 1960s. This was a turbulent period in American history, and for many Americans, parties were “part of the problem.” The number of Americans considering themselves partisan took a nose dive, and it seemed that America was headed toward a partyless age. David Broder’s 1971 book The Party’s Over seemed to capture the mood of the times.

On top of this—and perhaps partly fueling this change—candidates came to realize that parties were no longer necessary or even desirable. Historically, party workers were needed to bring the candidates’ messages to the voters, but by the 1960s, television, radio, and direct mail could reach more voters in one single day than party operatives could contact in weeks. Party assistance also came with a price tag: dictates from the party boss and the perception that the candidate was a “pawn” of the party leaders. It became advantageous to run your own show and be seen as “independent minded.” On top of all this, new-style campaign consultants (discussed later) burst on the scene in the 1960s. These operatives could be hired, and their allegiance would be solely to the candidate.

This phase in party history, referred to as the candidate-centered era, seemed to reverberate throughout the political system. As candidates pitched themselves as independent, voters saw little reason to hold to any notion of partisanship. Party
organizations lost even more sway, and as more citizens became “independent,” voting cues were lost, leading to lower election turnout. Once in office, elected officials saw little reason to stick to the caucus, leading to less policy coherence and a less-efficient legislative process. Moreover, because of these changes, divided government has been the norm since 1968, rather than the exception. In 1968, voters selected a Republican president (Richard Nixon) and kept a Democratic Congress. Since then—over 40 years—America has had unified government for just 7 years. The precise ramification of this is a contentious topic in political science—with some suggesting significant problems and others being a bit more sanguine. At the very least, divided government represents a new, significant development in American politics—due in large measure to the rise of candidate-centered politics.

**Phase IV: Organizational Resurgence**

Candidate-centered politics changed the American political landscape, and many had come to believe that parties were fading from the scene. But if anything is true about political parties, it is that they are adaptive creatures, anxious to adjust when confronted with adverse conditions. National party operatives, at first mostly at the Republican National Committee, realized that they were quickly becoming irrelevant and that changes needed to be made. Instead of sharpening their relations with voters, however, the parties chose to expand their services to candidates. Parties became service-oriented, meaning that they chose to broaden activities to include a host of high-technology services to candidates. They developed, for example, computerized direct mail operations, in-house television and radio production studios, and sophisticated polling operations. This also meant hiring new professionals—their own new-style campaign consultants—and greatly expanding their facilities.

Without raising huge sums of money, the service-oriented approach would fail. So, beginning in the 1980s, both parties implemented massive fund-raising operations. Table 4.1 charts the rise in national party funds from the early 1960s to 2010. Even when adjusted for inflation, the pace of growth is staggering.

There have been significant ramifications of this change. For one, the parties seemed back on their feet, once again central players in elections. Books like *The Party Goes On*, *The Party’s Just Begun*, and *The Parties Respond* each told a tale of adaption and rebirth. One team of scholars suggested “the phoenix has risen from the ashes.” Even a quick tour of either party’s national headquarters today would suggest parties are doing quite well—surely players in the electoral pathway of politics.

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On the other hand, there have been negative reverberations. Sophisticated services require ever more resources, and in an effort to get around campaign finance laws (discussed in Chapter 9), new loopholes were being discovered each year, leading to cynicism among voters. At precisely the same time that party organizations are regaining their footing, party identification has declined, and although the national parties have done well during this period, the revitalization has not stretched to the local, grassroots level. Finally, while many candidates appreciate the help they get, the parties have realized that they can get more mileage out of targeting their efforts to only a handful of races. Those candidates selected as part of this group are, of course, pleased, but those not chosen for help become bitter. In short, the revitalization of the national party committees has been significant, but it has also transformed the nature of the party system.

Conclusion

More will be said of party politics in America in Chapters 5 and 6. Here we have reviewed a few key definitions, such as what distinguishes parties from other organizations, and how we might think of the various components of parties. Moreover, we have charted the history of parties in America, dividing this material into periods.

At the dawn of the American experiment, most had assumed that any organization designed to capture control of government would be adverse to the interests of the whole. James Madison suggested as much in *The Federalist Papers,* 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party</th>
<th>Election Cycle</th>
<th>Amount Spent ($)</th>
<th>Difference from Previous Year ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>510,680,670</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>459,331,677</td>
<td>−51,348,993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>710,416,993</td>
<td>251,085,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>606,366,662</td>
<td>−104,050,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>956,049,411</td>
<td>349,682,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>736,953,436</td>
<td>−219,095,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>679,776,825</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>685,951,827</td>
<td>6,175,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>875,704,006</td>
<td>189,752,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>723,583,118</td>
<td>−152,120,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>792,186,627</td>
<td>68,603,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>618,304,450</td>
<td>−173,882,177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Open Secrets. Political Parties page.
and George Washington was explicit in his warnings about parties in his farewell address. But what these great men—and many others—failed to recognize is that parties or, at the very least, similar electoral organizations are inevitable in any free society. Whether they emerge in response to a desire to change public policy or simply to grab control of the reins of office is unclear. What seems elementary, nevertheless, is that they will emerge. Moreover, the services they can provide enhance the democratic process. Parties can educate voters, aggregate interests, afford a check on the ruling elite, mobilize opposition and, in short, turn private citizens into public beings. There is more to party politics than mere “partisan wrangling.”

There is not a modern democracy that does not boast political parties. Indeed, some time ago, a prominent political scientist went so far as to suggest, “It should be flatly stated that political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties.”31 While some might suggest this a bit of an overstatement, few would dispute that parties have been and will continue be an integral part of the election process for years to come. What these structures look like and what they seek to accomplish in the 21st century is, however, anyone’s guess.

**Critical Thinking**

1. Name some key functions of political parties. Is democracy well served by these structures or are they a hindrance? Do parties help empower average citizens?

2. What is the tripartite view of political parties? Has this model become outdated? If so, why?

3. How did parties become such an important part of American politics, especially given the many fears of the framers of the American system?

4. Do you think America would be better off if politicians shunned party labels—would non-partisan legislature better represent the wishes of Americans?

5. It has been said that individual party identification is a rational cognitive shortcut. What do you think this implies?

**On the Web**

If you are interested in viewing the platforms of the two major political parties, check out www.democrats.org, or www.gop.com. For third-party information, see the “On the Web” section following Chapter 5.

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