Political Parties

Inquire: What Roles Do Parties Play in the American Political Process?

Overview

In America there are basically two parties: the Republican Party and the Democrat Party. While both parties have long and illustrative roots — the Democrats can trace back to Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, while the Republicans began in the 1850s with Lincoln as the first Republican president — both parties have changed their ideologies over time. Neither party is what it used to be.

So why are there only two parties? What part do these groups play in the American political drama? Through times when it is the American political tragedy and times when it is the American political comedy, how have these antiquated organizations stayed relevant?

Big Question: What is the impact of today's political parties on America?

Watch: “And in this Corner, Wearing the Blue Trunks…” Political Polarization in the Modern Era

The past 30 years have brought a dramatic change in the relationship between the two political parties, as fewer conservative Democrats and fewer liberal Republicans have been elected to office. As political moderates, or individuals with ideologies in the middle of the ideological spectrum, leave the political parties at all levels, the parties have grown farther apart ideologically: a result called party polarization. In other words, at least organizationally and in the government, Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly dissimilar from one another.

It also means a growing number of moderate voters aren’t participating in party politics. Either these voters are becoming independents or they are participating only in the general election, and therefore are not helping select party candidates in primaries.

With the exception of providing voters with more distinct choices, it is hard to find any positives of polarization; yet, there are many negative impacts. For one thing, rather than reducing inter-party conflict, polarization appears to have amplified it.

Recently a new voice has emerged and allied itself with the Republican Party. The Tea Party is hostile to government and views government intervention in all forms, especially taxation and the regulation of business, as a threat to capitalism and democracy. Some factions of the Tea Party
movement are also active in the intersection of religious liberty and social issues, especially in opposing such initiatives as same-sex marriage and abortion rights.

Movements on the left have also arisen. The Occupy Wall Street movement was born out of the government’s response to the Great Recession of 2008 and its assistance to endangered financial institutions, provided through the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP. The Occupy Movement believed the recession was caused by a government failure to properly regulate the banking industry.

Champions of the Democratic Party’s left wing, such as former presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, have ensured that the Occupy Movement’s calls for more social spending and higher taxes on the wealthy remain a prominent part of the national debate.

Why polarization has become so strong is the discussion of numerous papers and theories. Regardless, the old adage, “Reasonable minds could disagree” has been replaced with the new adage, “Anyone who disagrees with me does not have a reasonable mind.” Unfortunately, this leads to difficulty in doing a little thing called “governing.” As power continually shifts from left to right and back again, policies in the middle often get overlooked.

Read: How Parties Function

Overview

What exactly do political parties do? If the purpose of political parties is to work together to create and implement policies by winning elections, how do they accomplish this task, and who actually participates in the process?

Modern political parties consist of three components identified by political scientist V. O. Key: the party-in-the-electorate (the voters); the party organization (which helps to coordinate everything the party does in its quest for office); and the party-in-office (the office holders). To understand how these various elements work together, we must consider the key first step in influencing policy in any democracy: winning elections.

The Party-in-the-Electorate

A key fact about the U.S. political party system is that it’s all about the votes. If voters do not show up to vote for a party’s candidates on Election Day, the party has no chance of gaining office and implementing its preferred policies. The party-in-the-electorate are those members of the voting public who consider themselves to be part of a political party and/or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other.

At its most basic level, being a member of the party-in-the-electorate simply means a voter is more likely to voice support for a party. These voters are often called party identifiers, since they usually represent...
themselves in public as being members of a party and they may attend some party events or functions. Party identifiers are also more likely to provide financial support for the candidates of their party during election season. This does not mean self-identified Democrats will support all of the party’s positions or candidates, but rather that, on the whole, they feel their wants or needs are more likely to be met if the Democratic Party is successful.

Strictly speaking, party identification is not quite the same as party membership. People may call themselves Republicans or Democrats without being registered as members of the party. Additionally, the Republican and Democratic parties do not require individuals to join their formal organization in the same way that parties in some other countries do. For most voters, party identification is informal and often only matters in the weeks before an election.

The Party Organization

A significant subset of American voters view their party identification as something far beyond simply a shortcut to voting. These individuals get more energized by the political process and have chosen to become more active in political party life. They are part of what is known as the party organization. The party organization is the formal structure of the political party, and its active members are responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates. The party organization is a vital component of any successful party because it bears most of the responsibility for building and maintaining the party “brand.” It also plays a key role in helping select and elect candidates for public office.

Local Organizations

Since winning elections is the first goal of the political party, it makes sense that the formal party organization mirrors the U.S. political system’s local-state-federal structure. While the lowest level of party organization is technically the precinct, many of the operational responsibilities for local elections fall upon the county-level organization.

State Organizations

Most of the county organizations’ formal efforts are devoted to supporting party candidates running for county and city offices. But, a fair amount of political power is held by individuals in statewide office or in state-level legislative or judicial bodies. State-level organizations are responsible for key party functions, such as statewide candidate recruitment and campaign mobilization. Most of their efforts focus on electing high-ranking officials, such as the governor or occupants of other statewide offices (e.g., the state’s treasurer or attorney general), as well as candidates to represent the state and its residents in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

National Party Organization

The local and state-level party organizations are the workhorses of the political process. They take on most of the responsibility for party activities and are easily the most active participants in the party formation and electoral processes. They are also largely invisible to most voters. The average citizen knows very little about
the local and state party’s efforts. However, most people are aware of the presence and activity of the national party organizations for several reasons.

People may see or read an occasional story about state committee meetings or conventions, but pay little attention. But, the national conventions, organized and sponsored by the national-level party, can dominate the national discussion for several weeks in late summer, a time when the major media outlets are often searching for news. National party conventions culminate in the formal nomination of the party nominees for the offices of president and vice president, and they mark the official beginning of the presidential competition between the two parties.

In today’s world, the parties have worked hard to turn the convention’s public face into a highly sanitized, highly orchestrated media event to ensure that they are viewed in the best possible light. Speakers are often required to have their speeches prescreened to ensure that they do not deviate from the party line or run the risk of embarrassing the eventual nominee — whose name has often been known by all for several months.

This is not to say the national conventions are no longer important, or that the national party organizations are becoming less relevant. The conventions, and the organizations that run them, still contribute heavily to a wide range of key decisions in the life of both parties. The national party platform is formally adopted at the convention, as are the key elements of the strategy for contesting the national campaign. Rising stars are given time at the conventions’ podiums, so the party can see which are able to faithfully connect. In fact, most observers credit Barack Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention with bringing him to national prominence.

The Party-in-Government

One of the first challenges facing the party-in-government, or the party identifiers who have been elected or appointed to hold public office, is to achieve their policy goals. One problem facing the party-in-government relates to the design of the country’s political system. The U.S. government is based on a complex principle of separation of powers, with power divided among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. The system is further complicated by federalism, which relegates some powers to the states, which also have the separation of powers.

Some of this complexity is eased for the party that holds the executive branch of the government. Executive offices are typically more visible to the voters than the legislature, in no small part because a single person holds the office. Voters are more likely to show up at the polls and vote if they feel strongly about the candidate running for president or governor, but they are also more likely to hold that person accountable for the government’s failures.

Reflect

Poll: The Role of Parties

Looking at the information in the Expand section, rank in importance the four roles political parties play, based on your own opinion:

- Running Candidates for Political Office
- Checking the Other Party
- Informing the Public
- Organizing the Government
Expand: Washington and Madison Were Wrong

Discover

In Federalist Paper #10, James Madison warns about the destructive nature of factions (political parties). In his 1796 Farewell Address to the nation, George Washington warned against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party." Yet, in the election of 1796, Washington’s vice president, John Adams, and Madison’s mentor, Thomas Jefferson, began our two-party system. By the re-match in 1800, they were fully entrenched in party politics.

How did this happen, and what is it that parties offer to have kept them at the center of American politics since 1796? As we will see, it is the uniqueness of the American government, human nature, and tradition and history. A large part is the services — the roles — the parties play in American politics.

Roles of Political Parties

1. Running Candidates for Political Office. Parties select candidates for many elected positions in American politics. With so many officials to choose from, most voters would be overwhelmed by the decisions they would have to make if candidates did not wear party “labels.” Parties present policy alternatives for voters. Some voters even choose a straight ticket, or candidates from the same party for all positions in that election.

2. Checking the Other Party. A party that does not hold the Congressional majority often aims to keep the party in power from taking complete control. Party leaders can publicly criticize actions of a president who was elected by the opposite party. The criticism of partisanship comes from this party role because many Americans think that the “checking” becomes petty and self-serving.

3. Informing the Public. Parties take stands on issues and criticize the point of view of the other parties. Their well-publicized discussions help to inform citizens about important issues and present alternative ways of solving societal problems.

4. Organizing the Government. Congress and the state legislatures are organized according to party affiliations. Legislative representatives usually support their party's position when considering potential laws and policies. As a result, most votes fall roughly along party lines. Virtually all candidates run for public office with party labels that define their behavior after they win.

Why a Two-Party System?

Most other democratic nations have multi-party systems. Even though third parties have popped up regularly throughout American history, most have either died out or their ideas have been absorbed by a major party. Three good reasons for the American two-party system include the following:

1. Consensus of Values. It is easy to complain about petty bickering between Democrats and Republicans. What we sometimes forget is that Americans share a broad consensus, or agreement, of many basic political values. Both parties believe in liberty, equality, and individualism. Neither advocates that the Constitution be discarded. Both parties accept the election process and concede defeat to the winners. In many countries with multi-party systems, the range of beliefs is greater and disagreements run deeper. For example, in modern day Russia, one party advocates a return to communism, some offer modified socialism and/or capitalism, and one promotes ultra-nationalism.

2. Historical Influence. The nation began with two political parties — the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. During early American history, politicians tended to take sides, starting with the debate over the Constitution, and continuing with the disagreements between two of
George Washington's cabinet members — Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. The tendency has persisted throughout American history.

3. The Winner-Take-All System. The single most important reason for a two-party system is the winner-take-all electoral system. In contrast to systems with proportional representation, the winner in American elections is the one who receives the largest number of votes. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent, but only one vote more than his or her opponents. If a third party receives 15% of the vote for every contested Senate seat, that party wins zero seats in the United States Senate. Consequently, one of the two major parties almost always wins a plurality, and third parties are mostly shut out of national offices.

Even though political parties are often regarded as necessary evils, they still play an important role in American government and politics. Regardless of Washington and Madison’s opposition, party politics — and specifically the two-party system — appear to be a permanent part of the American political system.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Political Parties: Crash Course Government and Politics #40
- A Crash Course video covering political parties in the United States
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEmOUHxessE&t=187s

Political Ideology: Crash Course Government and Politics #35
- A Crash Course video covering political ideology
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_k_k-bHigM&t=88s

What are Political Parties?
- A short video giving a history of political parties
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLlvOv7JOXs

Lesson Glossary

- **party identifiers**: individuals who represent themselves in public as being part of a party
- **party-in-the-electorate**: members of the voting public who consider themselves part of a political party or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other
- **party organization**: the formal structure of the political party and the active members responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates
- **precinct**: the lowest level of party organization, usually organized around neighborhoods
- **party-in-government**: party identifiers who have been elected to office and are responsible for fulfilling the party’s promises
- **straight ticket**: selecting all candidates from the same party for all positions in an election
- **two-party system**: a system in which two major parties win all, or almost all, elections
- **third party**: a political party formed as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic parties, also known as a minor party
Check Your Knowledge

1. _________________ is the formal structure of a political party and the members responsible for organizing party behavior and supporting party candidates.
   A. Party identifiers
   B. Party-in-government
   C. Party organization
   D. Party-in-the-electorate

2. The Republican and Democratic parties require individuals to join their formal organization.
   A. True
   B. False

3. In America, the winner of a political election does not need more than 50 percent of votes, but only one more vote than their opponent.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. C  2. B  3. A

Citations

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