

## WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

- One definition:
  - A political organization that sponsors candidates for public office under its own “brand” name.
- Another definition:
  - A coalition of political candidates who seek public office with a common political agenda (platform).

## PARTIES VS. INTEREST GROUPS

- An *interest group* is in many ways a lot like a party.
- Both parties and interest groups are **linkage institutions**.
- Parties primarily seek to influence the political system by electing candidates to public office.
- Interest groups try to influence politics by both:
  - Working with those candidates already in office.
  - Working to elect candidates who are expected to favor their organization's goals.

## A “NECESSARY EVIL”?

- Founders' view: parties were forms of *faction*; inimical to republican government.
- Political scientist E.E. Schattschneider: “Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.”
- Political parties exist in all democratic societies.
- Political scientists define democracy in part in terms of parties.

## HOW MANY PARTIES?

- Most democracies have more than two major parties:
  - Mexico: 3 major parties (PAN, PRI, PRD).
  - Canada: 4 major parties (Conservative, Liberal, Bloc Québécois, New Democrats).
  - Britain: 3 major parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats), with strong regional parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.



## WHY TWO PARTIES?

The **two-party system** persists in America for several reasons.

- The electoral system:
  - The U.S. uses *single member districts* with *plurality elections* (“first past the post”).
  - Many other democracies use some form of *proportional representation* or a mixture with a strong proportional element instead.
- The presidency and Electoral College:
  - The “big prize” encourages two *nationwide* major parties.
  - Parties need to win states to gain *any* electors.

## RULES FAVOR MAJOR PARTIES

- **Anti-fusion** and **sore loser** laws make it harder for minor parties to nominate popular candidates.
- The **Australian ballot** means minor parties face difficulty *qualifying* their candidates.
- Presidential candidate matching funds require at least 5% of the vote in *previous* election.
- Media downplays minor party candidates.

## CHANGES IN PARTY ALIGNMENTS

- Although the U.S. has had a two-party system since 1796, not always the *same* two parties.
- Transitions between eras of party competition (“party systems”) are fairly frequent—known as **realignments**.
- When large groups of voters change their party allegiances.
- Realignments can either help give rise to a new major party, or change the balance of power between the existing major parties.

## THE FIRST PARTY SYSTEM

- While “factions” existed in colonial times, early American elections had no true parties.
- During Washington's administration, two groups emerged and soon became political parties:
  - **Federalists** led by Alexander Hamilton supported a stronger central government, closer ties w/Britain.
  - **Democratic-Republicans** led by Thomas Jefferson supported decentralized government, closer ties w/France.

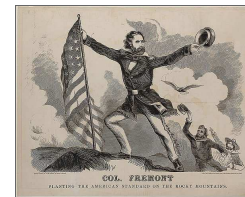


## THE SECOND PARTY SYSTEM

- As a result the Democratic-Republicans fragment into two factions that become separate parties:
  - Andrew Jackson's supporters called themselves **Democrats**. Supported national expansion, freer trade with Europe.
  - Opponents under Clay organized as the National Republicans but soon became the **Whigs**: disliked Jackson, opposed war with Mexico, support Clay's *American Plan*.
- Jackson (and the Democrats) go on to dominate politics for the next 30 years.

## THE END OF THE WHIGS

- By the 1850s, both parties were split by the question of slavery and other “sectional” issues.
- Some former Whigs organized a new party, the **Republicans**, in 1854; the party was unified against slavery and attracted both anti-slavery Whigs and Democrats.
- 1860: Democrats nominate two candidates; Whigs nominate nobody. Lincoln's election and Republican triumph in Congress leads to secession; civil war.



## THE THIRD PARTY SYSTEM

- The two parties that emerged after the Civil War remain with us today, but in altered forms.
- At the end of Reconstruction:
  - The Democrats had the overwhelming support of southern whites and, increasingly, farmers.
  - The Republicans' supporters were concentrated in the industrializing cities; also included southern blacks (although most were soon disenfranchised).

## THE FOURTH PARTY SYSTEM

- The 1896 election reinforced this division:
  - Democrats increasingly identified with the *populist* and agrarian movements, along with the South.
    - William Jennings Bryan.
- Republicans identified with industrialization and urbanization in the Midwest and Northeast.
- Both parties tried to attract support from *Progressives* with mixed success.



## THE FIFTH PARTY SYSTEM

- The Republicans dominated presidential elections until the beginning of the **Great Depression**.
  - Exception: Wilson (1912, 1916) against a divided Republican Party.
- Realignment based on economics (ca. 1932):
  - FDR and the Democrats were able to expand their coalition by adding working-class urban voters, including northern blacks.
  - Republicans became increasingly identified with the upper middle class and wealthy.

## A SIXTH PARTY SYSTEM?

- The economic division between the two parties persists to this day.
- However, the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to new issues in politics:
  - Democrats became increasingly identified with social liberalism; Republicans identified with cultural conservatism.
  - The rise of **dealignment**: many citizens no longer identify with either major party.
- No consensus among political scientists.



## A SEVENTH PARTY SYSTEM?

- Realignments historically have happened every 32 to 36 years—if one happened around 1968, one is now “due.”
- Although it's too early to be certain, there are some possible sources of realignment:
  - National security/terrorism.
  - Economic divisions returning to the forefront.
- On the other hand, true realignments may no longer be possible due to changes in the political system.

## THE TRIPARTITE MODEL

- Political scientists distinguish between three aspects of American political parties:
  - **Party organizations:** volunteers and professionals who raise money and recruit candidates.
  - **Party in government:** public officials who are affiliated with the party.
  - **Party in the electorate:** citizens who identify with the party and support its candidates
- To meaningfully discuss parties, we need to be clear which aspect(s) we are talking about.

## PARTY ORGANIZATIONS

- Parties are organized at the local, state, and national levels.
- Parties' national organizations are known as the **national committee**: runs party business between **national conventions**.
- Conventions choose presidential nominees; also establish the **party platform**.



## PARTY IDENTIFICATION

- **Party identification** refers to the feeling of attachment citizens have to the major political parties.
- Political scientists who see dealignment argue that the increase in *independent voters* reflects a decline in the importance of parties.
- Other political scientists have shown that while voters have become more likely to call themselves independent, many "independent" citizens *vote* as if they are partisans.

## EVALUATING PARTIES TODAY

- Many political scientists argue parties should be stronger than they are today.
- Benefits of strong parties:
  - Help overcome the separation of powers to make government more efficient, particularly under **unified government**.
  - Synthesize society's demands into policy.
  - Simplify voting by reducing the field of candidates and clarifying choices.
- An example: the **responsible party** model.

## EVALUATING PARTIES TODAY

- Others have argued that parties are *too strong*.
- Drawbacks of strong parties:
  - Do not always deliver on their promises.
  - Can be dictatorial towards their members.
  - Present stark “either/or” choices.
  - May block worthwhile policies for *partisan* instead of *substantive* reasons.
- Reformers have generally won the public arguments.

### ARE PARTIES WEAKER?

- In some ways, parties have become weaker:
  - National parties are coalitions of independent state parties; historically, the “national party” didn’t exist as a permanent organization.
  - Progressive reforms to reduce influence of “machines” gave outsiders control of party nominations, reduced patronage.
  - Campaign finance reform has limited party spending on campaigns.
  - Voters have fewer ties to local parties due to redistricting, population mobility.

### ARE PARTIES STRONGER?

- In other ways, parties have become stronger:
  - Fewer regional splits within the parties.
  - More “party-line” voting in Congress and state legislatures.
  - National parties have become better organized.
- Either way, parties today clearly fall short of the “responsible party” model.