Political Parties 9

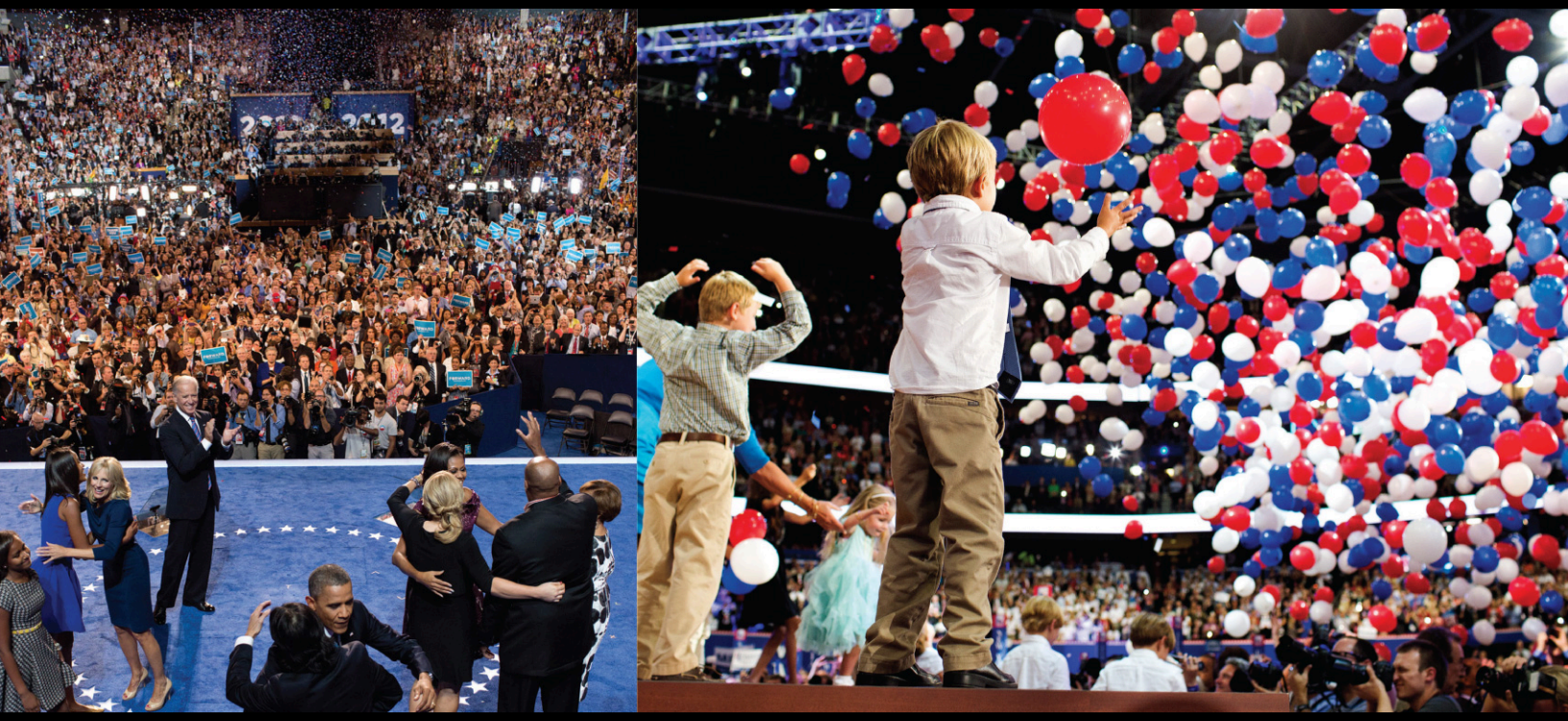


FIGURE 9.1 The families of the 2012 presidential candidates joined in the festivities at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, (left) and the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida (right). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented both the Democrats and the Republicans from staging traditional nominating conventions. In 2024, both parties again held traditional large conventions. (credit right: modification of work by "PBS NewsHour"/Flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

9.1 What Are Parties and How Did They Form?
9.2 The Two-Party System
9.3 The Shape of Modern Political Parties
9.4 Divided Government and Partisan Polarization

INTRODUCTION In 2012, Barack Obama accepted his second nomination to lead the Democratic Party into the presidential election (Figure 9.1). During his first term, he had been attacked by pundits for his failure to convince congressional Republicans to work with him. Despite that, he was wildly popular in his own party, and voters reelected him by a comfortable margin. His second term seemed to go no better, however, with disagreements between the parties resulting in government shutdowns and the threat of credit defaults. Yet just a few decades ago, then-president Dwight D. Eisenhower was criticized for failing to create a clear vision for his Republican Party, and Congress was lampooned for what was deemed a lack of real conflict over important issues. Political parties, it seems, can never get it right—they are either too polarizing or too noncommittal.

While people love to criticize political parties, the reality is that the modern political system could not exist without them. This chapter will explore why the party system may be the most important component of any true democracy. What are political parties? Why do they form, and why has the United States typically had only

two? Why have political parties become so highly structured? Finally, why does it seem that parties today are more polarized than they have been in the past?

9.1 What Are Parties and How Did They Form?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe political parties and what they do
- Differentiate political parties from interest groups
- Explain how U.S. political parties formed

At some point, most of us have found ourselves part of a group trying to solve a problem, like picking a restaurant or movie to attend, or completing a big project at school or work. Members of the group probably had various opinions about what should be done. Some may have even refused to help make the decision or to follow it once it had been made. Still others may have been willing to follow along but were less interested in contributing to a workable solution. Because of this disagreement, at some point, someone in the group had to find a way to make a decision, negotiate a compromise, and ultimately do the work needed for the group to accomplish its goals.

This kind of collective action problem is very common in societies, as groups and entire societies try to solve problems or distribute scarce resources. In modern U.S. politics, such problems are usually solved by two important types of organizations: interest groups and political parties. There are many interest groups, all with opinions about what should be done and a desire to influence policy. Because they are usually not officially affiliated with any political party, they generally have no trouble working with either of the major parties. But at some point, a society must find a way of taking all these opinions and turning them into solutions to real problems. That is where political parties come in. Essentially, **political parties** are groups of people with similar interests who work together to create and implement policies. They do this by gaining control over the government by winning elections. Party platforms guide members of Congress in drafting legislation. Parties guide proposed laws through Congress and inform party members how they should vote on important issues. Political parties also nominate candidates to run for state government, Congress, and the presidency. Finally, they coordinate political campaigns and mobilize voters.

POLITICAL PARTIES AS UNIQUE ORGANIZATIONS

In *Federalist* No. 10, written in the late eighteenth century, James Madison noted that the formation of self-interested groups, which he called factions, was inevitable in any society, as individuals started to work together to protect themselves from the government. Interest groups and political parties are two of the most easily identified forms of factions in the United States. These groups are similar in that they are both mediating institutions responsible for communicating public preferences to the government. They are not themselves government institutions in a formal sense. Neither is directly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution nor do they have any real, legal authority to influence policy. But whereas interest groups often work indirectly to influence our leaders, political parties are organizations that try to directly influence public policy through its members who seek to win and hold public office. Parties accomplish this by identifying and aligning sets of issues that are important to voters in the hopes of gaining support during elections; their positions on these critical issues are often presented in documents known as a **party platform** (Figure 9.2), which is adopted at each party's presidential nominating convention every four years. If successful, a party can create a large enough electoral coalition to gain control of the government. Once in power, the party is then able to deliver, to its voters and elites, the policy preferences they choose by electing its partisans to the government. In this respect, parties provide choices to the electorate, something they are doing that is in such sharp contrast to their opposition.

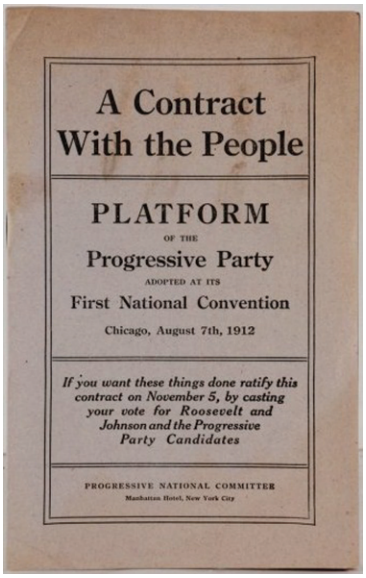


FIGURE 9.2 The party platform adopted at the first national convention of the Progressive Party in 1912. Among other items, this platform called for disclosure requirements for campaign contributions, an eight-hour workday, a federal income tax, and women's suffrage.

LINK TO LEARNING

You can read the full platform of the Republican Party (https://openstax.org/l/29gopplatform) and the Democratic Party (https://openstax.org/l/29demplatform) at their respective websites.

Winning elections and implementing policy would be hard enough in simple political systems, but in a country as complex as the United States, political parties must take on great responsibilities to win elections and coordinate behavior across the many local, state, and national governing bodies. Indeed, political differences between states and local areas can contribute much complexity. If a party stakes out issue positions on which few people agree and therefore builds too narrow a coalition of voter support, that party may find itself marginalized. But if the party takes too broad a position on issues, it might find itself in a situation where the members of the party disagree with one another, making it difficult to pass legislation, even if the party can secure victory.

It should come as no surprise that the story of U.S. political parties largely mirrors the story of the United States itself. The United States has seen sweeping changes to its size, its relative power, and its social and demographic composition. These changes have been mirrored by the political parties as they have sought to shift their coalitions to establish and maintain power across the nation and as party leadership has changed. As you will learn later, this also means that the structure and behavior of modern parties largely parallel the social, demographic, and geographic divisions within the United States today. To understand how this has happened, we look at the origins of the U.S. party system.

HOW POLITICAL PARTIES FORMED

National political parties as we understand them today did not really exist in the United States during the early years of the republic. Most politics during the time of the nation's founding were local in nature and based on elite politics, limited suffrage (or the ability to vote in elections), and property ownership. Residents of the various colonies, and later of the various states, were far more interested in events in their state legislatures than in those occurring at the national level or later in the nation's capital. To the extent that national issues did exist, they were largely limited to collective security efforts to deal with external rivals, such as the British or the French, and with perceived internal threats, such as conflicts with Native Americans.

Soon after the United States emerged from the Revolutionary War, however, a rift began to emerge between two groups that had very different views about the future direction of U.S. politics. Thus, from the very beginning of its history, the United States has had a system of government dominated by two different philosophies. Federalists, who were largely responsible for drafting and ratifying the U.S. Constitution, generally favored the idea of a stronger, more centralized republic that had greater control over regulating the economy.[1] Anti-Federalists preferred a more confederate system built on state equality and autonomy.[2] The Federalist faction, led by Alexander Hamilton, largely dominated the government in the years immediately after the Constitution was ratified. Included in the Federalists was President George Washington, who was initially against the existence of parties in the United States. When Washington decided to exit politics and leave office, he warned of the potential negative effects of parties in his farewell address to the nation, including their potentially divisive nature and the fact that they might not always focus on the common good but rather on partisan ends. However, members of each faction quickly realized that they had a vested interest not only in nominating and electing a president who shared their views, but also in winning other elections. Two loosely affiliated party coalitions, known as the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, soon emerged. The Federalists succeeded in electing their first leader, John Adams, to the presidency in 1796, only to see the Democratic-Republicans gain victory under Thomas Jefferson four years later in 1800.

MILESTONE

The "Revolution of 1800": Uniting the Executive Branch under One Party

When the U.S. Constitution was drafted, its authors were certainly aware that political parties existed in other countries (like Great Britain), but they hoped to avoid them in the United States. They felt the importance of states in the U.S. federal structure would make it difficult for national parties to form. They also hoped that having a college of electors vote for the executive branch, with the top two vote-getters becoming president and vice president, would discourage the formation of parties. Their system worked for the first two presidential elections, when essentially all the electors voted for George Washington to serve as president. But by 1796, the Federalist and Anti-Federalist camps had organized into electoral coalitions. The Anti-Federalists joined with many others active in the process to become known as the Democratic-Republicans. The Federalist John Adams won the Electoral College vote, but his authority was undermined when the vice presidency went to Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson, who finished second. Four years later, the Democratic-Republicans managed to avoid this outcome by coordinating the electors to vote for their top two candidates. But when the vote ended in a tie, it was ultimately left to Congress to decide who would be the third president of the United States (Figure 9.3).

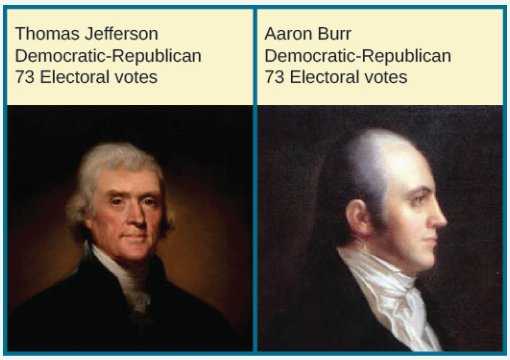


FIGURE 9.3 Thomas Jefferson almost lost the presidential election of 1800 to his own running mate when a flaw in the design of the Electoral College led to a tie that had to be resolved by Congress.

In an effort to prevent a similar outcome in the future, Congress and the states voted to ratify the Twelfth Amendment, which went into effect in 1804. This amendment changed the rules so that the president and vice president would be selected through separate elections within the Electoral College, and it altered the method

that Congress used to fill the offices in the event that no candidate won a majority. The amendment essentially endorsed the new party system and helped prevent future controversies. It also served as an early effort by the two parties to collude to make it harder for an outsider to win the presidency.

Does the process of selecting the executive branch need to be reformed so that the people elect the president and vice president directly, rather than through the Electoral College? Should the people vote separately on each office rather than voting for both at the same time? Explain your reasoning.

Growing regional tensions eroded the Federalist Party's ability to coordinate elites, and it eventually collapsed following its opposition to the War of 1812.[3] The Democratic-Republican Party, on the other hand, eventually divided over whether national resources should be focused on economic and mercantile development, such as tariffs on imported goods and government funding of internal improvements like roads and canals, or on promoting populist issues that would help the "common man," such as reducing or eliminating state property requirements that had prevented many men from voting.[4]

In the election of 1824, numerous candidates contended for the presidency, all members of the Democratic-Republican Party. Andrew Jackson won more popular votes and more votes in the Electoral College than any other candidate. However, because he did not win the majority (more than half) of the available electoral votes, the election was decided by the House of Representatives, as required by the Twelfth Amendment. The Twelfth Amendment limited the House's choice to the three candidates with the greatest number of electoral votes. Thus, Andrew Jackson, with 99 electoral votes, found himself in competition with only John Quincy Adams, the second place finisher with 84 electoral votes, and William H. Crawford, who had come in third with 41. The fourth-place finisher, Henry Clay, who was no longer in contention, had won 37 electoral votes. Clay strongly disliked Jackson, and his ideas on government support for tariffs and internal improvements were similar to those of Adams. Clay thus gave his support to Adams, who was chosen on the first ballot. Jackson considered the actions of Clay and Adams, the son of the Federalist president John Adams, to be an unjust triumph of supporters of the elite and referred to it as "the corrupt bargain."[5]

This marked the beginning of what historians call the Second Party System (the first parties had been the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans), with the splitting of the Democratic-Republicans and the formation of two new political parties. One half, called simply the Democratic Party, was the party of Jackson; it continued to advocate for the common people by championing westward expansion and opposing a national bank. The branch of the Democratic-Republicans that believed that the national government should encourage economic (primarily industrial) development was briefly known as the National Republicans and later became the Whig Party[6]. In the election of 1828, Democrat Andrew Jackson was triumphant. Three times as many people voted in 1828 as had in 1824, and most cast their ballots for him.[7]

The formation of the Democratic Party marked an important shift in U.S. politics. Rather than being built largely to coordinate elite behavior, the Democratic Party worked to organize the electorate by taking advantage of state-level laws that had extended suffrage from male property owners to nearly all White men.[8] This change marked the birth of what is often considered the first modern political party in any democracy in the world.[9] It also dramatically changed the way party politics was, and still is, conducted. For one thing, this new party organization was built to include structures that focused on organizing and mobilizing voters for elections at all levels of government. The party also perfected an existing spoils system, in which support for the party during elections was rewarded with jobs in the government bureaucracy after victory.[10] Many of these positions were given to party bosses and their friends. These men were the leaders of **political machines**, organizations that secured votes for the party's candidates or supported the party in other ways. Perhaps more importantly, this election-focused organization also sought to maintain power by creating a broader coalition and thereby expanding the range of issues upon which the party was constructed.[11]

LINK TO LEARNING

Each of the two main U.S. political parties today—the Democrats (https://openstax.org/l/29demcratsorg) and the Republicans (https://openstax.org/l/29gopwebsite)—maintains an extensive website with links to its affiliated statewide organizations, which in turn often maintain links to the party's country organizations.

By comparison, here are websites for the Green Party (https://openstax.org/l/29greenparty) and the Libertarian Party (https://openstax.org/l/29libertarian) that are two other parties in the United States today.

The Democratic Party emphasized **personal politics**, which focused on building direct relationships with voters rather than on promoting specific issues. This party dominated national politics from Andrew Jackson's presidential victory in 1828 until the mid-1850s, when regional tensions began to threaten the nation's very existence. The growing power of industrialists, who preferred greater national authority, combined with increasing tensions between the northern and southern states over slavery, led to the rise of the Republican Party and its leader Abraham Lincoln in the election of 1860, while the Democratic Party dominated in the South. Like the Democrats, the Republicans also began to utilize a mass approach to party design and organization. Their opposition to the expansion of slavery, and their role in helping to stabilize the Union during Reconstruction, made them the dominant player in national politics for the next several decades.[12]

The Democratic and Republican parties have remained the two dominant players in the U.S. party system since the Civil War (1861–1865). That does not mean, however, that the system has been stagnant. Every political actor and all citizens have the ability to determine for themselves whether one of the two parties meets their needs and provides an appealing set of policy options, or whether another option is preferable.

At various points in the past 170 years, elites and voters have sought to create alternatives to the existing party system. Political parties that are formed as alternatives to the Republican and Democratic parties are known as **third parties**, or minor parties (Figure 9.4). In 1892, a third party known as the Populist Party formed in reaction to what its constituents perceived as the domination of U.S. society by big business and a decline in the power of farmers and rural communities. The Populist Party called for the regulation of railroads, an income tax, and the popular election of U.S. senators, who at this time were chosen by state legislatures and not by ordinary voters.[13] The party's candidate in the 1892 elections, James B. Weaver, did not perform as well as the two main party candidates, and, in the presidential election of 1896, the Populists supported the Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan. Bryan lost, and the Populists once again nominated their own presidential candidates in 1900, 1904, and 1908. The party disappeared from the national scene after 1908, but its ideas were similar to those of the Progressive Party, a new political party created in 1912.

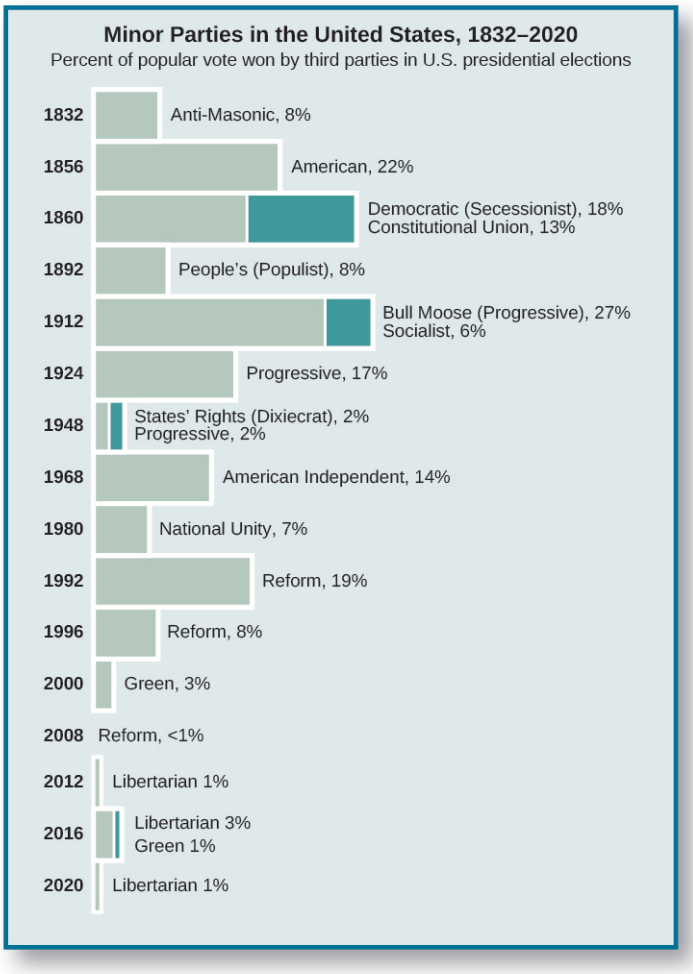


FIGURE 9.4 Various third parties, also known as minor parties, have appeared in the United States over the years. Some, like the Socialist Party, still exist in one form or another. Others, like the Anti-Masonic Party, which wanted to protect the United States from the influence of the Masonic fraternal order and garnered just under 8 percent of the popular vote in 1832, are gone.

In 1912, former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt attempted to form a third party, known as the Progressive Party, as an alternative to the more business-minded Republicans. The Progressives sought to correct the many problems that had arisen as the United States transformed itself from a rural, agricultural nation into an increasingly urbanized, industrialized country dominated by big business interests. Among the reforms that the Progressive Party called for in its 1912 platform were women's suffrage, an eight-hour workday, and workers' compensation. The party also favored some of the same reforms as the Populist Party, such as the direct election of U.S. senators and an income tax, although Populists tended to be farmers while the Progressives were from the middle class. In general, Progressives sought to make government more responsive to the will of the people and to end political corruption in government. They wished to break the power of party bosses and political machines, and called upon states to pass laws allowing voters to vote directly on proposed legislation, propose new laws, and recall from office incompetent or corrupt elected officials. The Progressive Party largely disappeared after 1916, and most members returned to the Republican Party.[14] The party enjoyed a brief resurgence in 1924, when Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette ran unsuccessfully for president under the Progressive banner.

In 1948, two new third parties appeared on the political scene. Henry A. Wallace, a vice president under Franklin Roosevelt, formed a new Progressive Party, which had little in common with the earlier Progressive Party. Wallace favored racial desegregation and believed that the United States should have closer ties to the

Soviet Union. Wallace's campaign was a failure, largely because most people believed his policies, including national healthcare, were too much like those of communism, and this party also vanished. The other third party, the States' Rights Democrats, also known as the Dixiecrats, were White, southern Democrats who split from the Democratic Party when Harry Truman, who favored civil rights for African Americans, became the party's nominee for president. The Dixiecrats opposed all attempts by the federal government to end segregation, extend voting rights, prohibit discrimination in employment, or otherwise promote social equality among races.[15] They remained a significant party that threatened Democratic unity throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Other examples of third parties in the United States include the American Independent Party, the Libertarian Party, United We Stand America, the Reform Party, and the Green Party.

None of these alternatives to the two major political parties had much success at the national level, and most are no longer viable parties. All faced the same fate. Formed by charismatic leaders, each championed a relatively narrow set of causes and failed to gain broad support among the electorate. Once their leaders had been defeated or discredited, the party structures that were built to contest elections collapsed. And within a few years, most of their supporters were eventually pulled back into one of the existing parties. To be sure, some of these parties had an electoral impact. For example, the Progressive Party pulled enough votes away from the Republicans to hand the 1912 election to the Democrats. Thus, the third-party rival's principal accomplishment was helping its least-preferred major party win, usually at the short-term expense of the very issue it championed. In the long run, however, many third parties have brought important issues to the attention of the major parties, which then incorporated these issues into their platforms. Understanding why this is the case is an important next step in learning about the issues and strategies of the modern Republican and Democratic parties. In the next section, we look at why the United States has historically been dominated by only two political parties.

9.2 The Two-Party System

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the effects of winner-take-all elections
- Compare plurality and proportional representation
- Describe the institutional, legal, and social forces that limit the number of parties
- Discuss the concepts of party alignment and realignment

One of the cornerstones of a vibrant democracy is citizens' ability to influence government through voting. In order for that influence to be meaningful, citizens must send clear signals to their leaders about what they wish the government to do. It only makes sense, then, that a democracy will benefit if voters have several clearly differentiated options available to them at the polls on Election Day. Having these options means voters can select a candidate who more closely represents their own preferences on the important issues of the day. It also gives individuals who are considering voting a reason to participate. After all, you are more likely to vote if you care about who wins and who loses. The existence of two major parties, especially in our present era of strong parties, leads to sharp distinctions between the candidates and between the party organizations.

Why do we have two parties? The **two-party system** came into being because the structure of U.S. elections, with one seat tied to a geographic district, tends to lead to dominance by two major political parties. Even when there are other options on the ballot, most voters understand that minor parties have no real chance of winning even a single office. Hence, they vote for candidates of the two major parties in order to support a potential winner. Of the 535 members of the House and Senate, only a handful identify as something other than Republican or Democrat. Third parties have fared no better in presidential elections. No third-party candidate has ever won the presidency. Some historians or political scientists might consider Abraham Lincoln to have been such a candidate, but in 1860, the Republicans were a major party that had subsumed members of earlier parties, such as the Whig Party, and they were the only major party other than the Democratic Party.

ELECTION RULES AND THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain why the structure of U.S. elections has resulted in a two-party system. Most of the blame has been placed on the process used to select its representatives. First, most elections at the state and national levels are winner-take-all: The candidate who receives the greatest overall number of votes wins. Winner-take-all elections with one representative elected for one geographic district allow voters to develop a personal relationship with "their" representative to the government. They know exactly whom to blame, or thank, for the actions of that government. But these elections also tend to limit the number of people who run for office. Otherwise-qualified candidates might not stand for election if they feel the incumbent or another candidate has an early advantage in the race. And since voters do not like to waste votes, third parties must convince voters they have a real chance of winning races before voters will take them seriously. This is a tall order given the vast resources and mobilization tools available to the existing parties, especially if an incumbent is one of the competitors. In turn, the likelihood that third-party challengers will lose an election bid makes it more difficult to raise funds to support later attempts.[16]

Winner-take-all systems of electing candidates to office, which exist in several countries other than the United States, require that the winner receive either the majority of votes or a plurality of the votes. U.S. elections are based on **plurality voting**. Plurality voting, commonly referred to as **first-past-the-post**, is based on the principle that the individual candidate with the most votes wins, whether or not they gain a majority (51 percent or greater) of the total votes cast. For instance, Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 even though he clearly lacked majority support given the number of candidates in the race. In 1860, four candidates competed for the presidency: Lincoln, a Republican; two Democrats, one from the northern wing of the party and one from the southern wing; and a member of the newly formed Constitutional Union Party, a southern party that wished to prevent the nation from dividing over the issue of slavery. Votes were split among all four parties, and Lincoln became president with only 40 percent of the vote, not a majority of votes cast but more than any of the other three candidates had received, and enough to give him a majority in the Electoral College, the body that ultimately decides presidential elections. Plurality voting has been justified as the simplest and most cost-effective method for identifying a victor in a democracy. A single election can be held on a single day, and the victor of the competition is easily selected. On the other hand, systems in which people vote for a single candidate in an individual district often cost more money because drawing district lines and registering voters according to district is often expensive and cumbersome.[17]

In a system in which individual candidates compete for individual seats representing unique geographic districts, a candidate must receive a fairly large number of votes in order to win. A political party that appeals to only a small percentage of voters will always lose to a party that is more popular.[18] Because second-place (or lower) finishers will receive no reward for their efforts, those parties that do not attract enough supporters to finish first at least some of the time will eventually disappear because their supporters realize they have no hope of achieving success at the polls.[19] The failure of third parties to win and the possibility that they will draw votes away from the party the voter had favored before—resulting in a win for the party the voter liked least—makes people hesitant to vote for the third party's candidates a second time. This has been the fate of all U.S. third parties—the Populist Party, the Progressives, the Dixiecrats, the Reform Party, and others.

In a proportional electoral system, however, parties advertise who is on their candidate list and voters pick a party. Then, legislative seats are doled out to the parties based on the proportion of support each party receives. While the Green Party in the United States might not win a single congressional seat in some years thanks to plurality voting, in a proportional system, it stands a chance to get a few seats in the legislature regardless. For example, assume the Green Party gets 7 percent of the vote. In the United States, 7 percent will never be enough to win a single seat, shutting the Green candidates out of Congress entirely, whereas in a proportional system, the Green Party will get 7 percent of the total number of legislative seats available. Hence, it could get a foothold for its issues and perhaps increase its support over time. But with plurality voting, it doesn't stand a chance.

Third parties, often born of frustration with the current system, attract supporters from one or both of the existing parties during an election but fail to attract enough votes to win. After the election is over, supporters experience remorse when their least-favorite candidate wins instead. For example, in the 2000 election, Ralph Nader ran for president as the candidate of the Green Party. Nader, a longtime consumer activist concerned with environmental issues and social justice, attracted many votes from people who usually voted for Democratic candidates. This has caused some to claim that Democratic nominee Al Gore lost the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush, because Nader won Democratic votes in Florida that might otherwise have gone to Gore (Figure 9.5).[20]

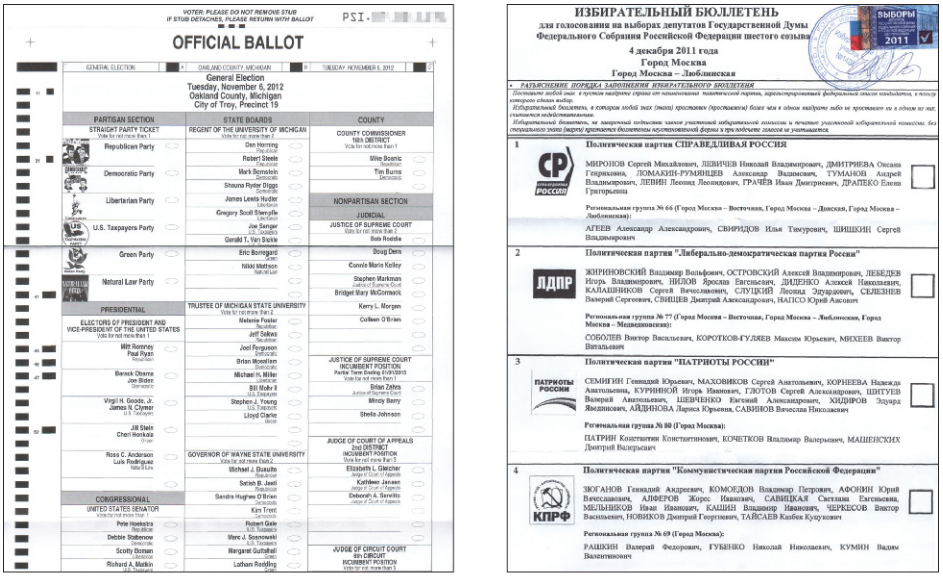


(a) (b)

FIGURE 9.5 Ralph Nader, a longtime consumer advocate and crusader for social justice and the environment, campaigned as an independent in 2008 (a). However, in 2000, he ran for the presidency as the Green Party candidate. He received votes from many Democrats, and some analysts claim Nader's campaign cost Al Gore the presidency—an ironic twist for a politician who would come to be known primarily for his environmental activism, even winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 (b) for his efforts to inform the public about climate change. (credit a: modification of work by "Mely-o"/Flikr"; credit b: modification of work by "kangotraveler"/Flickr)

Abandoning plurality voting, even if the winner-take-all election were kept, would almost certainly increase the number of parties from which voters could choose. The easiest switch would be to a **majoritarian voting** scheme, in which a candidate wins only if they enjoy the support of a majority of voters. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round of voting, a run-off election is held among the top contenders. Some states conduct their primary elections within the two major political parties in this way.

A second way to increase the number of parties in the U.S. system is to abandon the winner-take-all approach. Rather than allowing voters to pick their representatives directly, many democracies have chosen to have voters pick their preferred party and allow the party to select the individuals who serve in government. The argument for this method is that it is ultimately the party and not the individual who will influence policy. Under this model of **proportional representation**, legislative seats are allocated to competing parties based on the total share of votes they receive in the election. As a result, any given election can have multiple winners, and voters who might prefer a smaller party over a major one have a chance to be represented in government (Figure 9.6).



(a) (b)

FIGURE 9.6 While a U.S. ballot (a) for first-past-the-post elections features candidates' names, the ballots of proportional representation countries list the parties. On this Russian ballot (b), the voter is offered a choice of Social Democratic, Nationalist, Socialist, and Communist parties, among others.

One possible way to implement proportional representation in the United States is to allocate legislative seats based on the national level of support for each party's presidential candidate, rather than on the results of individual races. If this method had been used in the 1996 elections, 8 percent of the seats in Congress would have gone to Ross Perot's Reform Party because he won 8 percent of the votes cast. Even though Perot himself lost, his supporters would have been rewarded for their efforts with representatives who had a real voice in government. And Perot's party's chances of survival would have greatly increased.

Electoral rules are probably not the only reason the United States has a two-party system. We need only look at the number of parties in the British or Canadian systems, both of which are winner-take-all plurality systems like that in the United States, to see that it is possible to have more than two parties while still directly electing representatives. The two-party system is also rooted in U.S. history. The first parties, the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans, disagreed about how much power should be given to the federal government, and differences over other important issues further strengthened this divide. Over time, these parties evolved into others by inheriting, for the most part, the general ideological positions and constituents of their predecessors, but no more than two major parties ever formed. Instead of parties arising based on region or ethnicity, various regions and ethnic groups sought a place in one of the two major parties.

Scholars of voting behavior have also suggested at least three other characteristics of the U.S. system that are likely to influence party outcomes: the Electoral College, demobilized ethnicity, and campaign and election laws. First, the United States has a presidential system in which the winner is selected not directly by the popular vote but indirectly by a group of electors known collectively as the Electoral College. The winner-take-all system also applies in the Electoral College. In all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), the total of the state's electoral votes go to the candidate who wins the plurality of the popular vote in that state. Even if a new, third party is able to win the support of a lot of voters, it must be able to do so in several states in order to win enough electoral votes to have a chance of winning the presidency.[21]

Besides the existence of the Electoral College, political scientist Gary W. Cox has also suggested that the relative prosperity of the United States and the relative unity of its citizens have prevented the formation of "large dissenting groups" that might give support to third parties.[22] This is similar to the argument that the United States does not have viable third parties, because none of its regions is dominated by mobilized ethnic minorities that have created political parties in order to defend and to address concerns solely of interest to

that ethnic group. Such parties are common in other countries.

Finally, party success is strongly influenced by local election laws. Someone has to write the rules that govern elections, and those rules help to determine outcomes. In the United States, such rules have been written to make it easy for existing parties to secure a spot for their candidates in future elections. But some states create significant burdens for candidates who wish to run as independents or who choose to represent new parties. For example, one common practice is to require a candidate who does not have the support of a major party to ask registered voters to sign a petition. Sometimes, thousands of signatures are required before a candidate's name can be placed on the ballot (Figure 9.7), but a small third party that does have large numbers of supporters in some states may not be able to secure enough signatures for this to happen.[23]



FIGURE 9.7 Costa Constantinides (right), while campaigning in 2013 to represent the 22nd District on the New York City Council, said, "Few things are more important to a campaign than the petition process to get on the ballot. We were so pumped up to get started that we went out at 12:01 a.m. on June 4 to start collecting signatures right away!" Constantinides won the election later that year. (credit: modification of work by Costa Constantinides)

LINK TO LEARNING

Visit Fair Vote (https://openstax.org/l/29fairvoteweb) for a discussion of ballot access laws across the country.

Given the obstacles to the formation of third parties, it is unlikely that serious challenges to the U.S. two-party system will emerge. But this does not mean that we should view it as entirely stable either. The U.S. party system is technically a loose organization of fifty different state parties and has undergone several considerable changes since its initial consolidation after the Civil War. Third-party movements may have played a role in some of these changes, but all resulted in a shifting of party loyalties among the U.S. electorate.

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND REALIGNMENT

Political parties exist for the purpose of winning elections in order to influence public policy. This requires them to build coalitions across a wide range of voters who share similar preferences. Since most U.S. voters identify as moderates,[24] the historical tendency has been for the two parties to compete for "the middle" while also trying to mobilize their more loyal bases. If voters' preferences remained stable for long periods of time, and if both parties did a good job of competing for their votes, we could expect Republicans and Democrats to be reasonably competitive in any given election. Election outcomes would probably be based on the way voters compared the parties on the most important events of the day rather than on electoral strategy.

There are many reasons we would be wrong in these expectations, however. First, the electorate isn't entirely stable. Each generation of voters has been a bit different from the last. Over time, the United States has become more socially liberal, especially on topics related to race and gender, and Millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996 are more liberal than members of older generations.[25] The electorate's economic preferences have changed, and different social groups are likely to become more engaged in politics now than they did in

the past. Surveys conducted in 2016, for example, revealed that candidates' religion is less important to voters than it once was. Also, as young Latinos reach voting age, they seem more inclined to vote than do their parents, which may raise the traditionally low voting rates among this ethnic group.[26] Internal population shifts and displacements have also occurred, as various regions have taken their turn experiencing economic growth or stagnation, and as new waves of immigrants have come to U.S. shores.

Additionally, the major parties have not always been unified in their approach to contesting elections. While we think of both Congress and the presidency as national offices, the reality is that congressional elections are sometimes more like local elections. Voters may reflect on their preferences for national policy when deciding whom to send to the Senate or the House of Representatives, but they are very likely to view national policy in the context of its effects on their area, their family, or themselves, not based on what is happening to the country as a whole. For example, while many voters want to reduce the federal budget, those over sixty-five are particularly concerned that no cuts to the Medicare program be made.[27] One-third of those polled reported that "senior's issues" were most important to them when voting for national officeholders.[28] If they hope to keep their jobs, elected officials must thus be sensitive to preferences in their home constituencies as well as the preferences of their national party.

Finally, it sometimes happens that over a series of elections, parties may be unable or unwilling to adapt their positions to broader socio-demographic or economic forces. Parties need to be aware when society changes. If leaders refuse to recognize that public opinion has changed, the party is unlikely to win in the next election. For example, people who describe themselves as evangelical Christians are an important Republican constituency; they are also strongly opposed to abortion.[29] Thus, even though the majority of U.S. adults believe abortion should be legal in at least some instances, such as when a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or threatens the life of the mother, the position of many Republican presidential candidates in 2016 was to oppose abortion in all cases.[30] As a result, many women view the Republican Party as unsympathetic to their interests and are more likely to support Democratic candidates.[31] Similarly (or simultaneously), groups that have felt that the party has served their causes in the past may decide to look elsewhere if they feel their needs are no longer being met. Either way, the party system will be upended as a result of a **party realignment**, or a shifting of party allegiances within the electorate (Table 9.1).[32]

Periods of Party Dominance and Realignment

Era	Party Systems and Realignments
1796–1824	First Party System: Federalists (urban elites, southern planters, New England) oppose Democratic-Republicans (rural, small farmers and artisans, the South and the West).
1828–1856	Second Party System: Democrats (the South, cities, farmers and artisans, immigrants) oppose Whigs (former Federalists, the North, middle class, native-born Americans).
1860–1892	Third Party System: Republicans (former Whigs plus African Americans) control the presidency. Only one Democrat, Grover Cleveland, is elected president (1884, 1892).
1896–1932	Fourth Party System: Republicans control the presidency. Only one Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, is elected president (1912, 1916). Challenges to major parties are raised by Populists and Progressives.

TABLE 9.1 There have been six distinctive periods in U.S. history when new political parties have emerged, control of the presidency has shifted from one party to another, or significant changes in a party's makeup have occurred.

Era	Party Systems and Realignments
1932–1964	Fifth Party System. Democrats control the presidency. Only one Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, is elected president (1952, 1956). Major party realignment as African Americans become part of the Democratic coalition.
1964–present	Sixth Party System. No one party controls the presidency. Ongoing realignment as southern White people and many members of the working class begin to vote for Republicans. Latino and Asian people immigrate, most of whom vote for Democrats. Moderate candidates increasingly find it harder to win nomination and election and the parties diverge on diversity initiatives.

TABLE 9.1 There have been six distinctive periods in U.S. history when new political parties have emerged, control of the presidency has shifted from one party to another, or significant changes in a party's makeup have occurred.

One of the best-known party realignments occurred when Democrats moved to include African Americans and other minorities into their national coalition during the Great Depression. After the Civil War, Republicans, the party of Lincoln, were viewed as the party that had freed the enslaved. Their efforts to provide Black people with greater legal rights earned them the support of African Americans in both the South, where they were newly enfranchised, and the Northeast. When the Democrats, the party of the Confederacy, lost control of the South after the Civil War, Republicans ruled the region. However, the Democrats regained control of the South after the removal of the Union army in 1877. Democrats had largely supported slavery before the Civil War, and they opposed postwar efforts to integrate African Americans into society after they were liberated. In addition, Democrats in the North and Midwest drew their greatest support from labor union members and immigrants who viewed African Americans as competitors for jobs and government resources, and who thus tended to oppose the extension of rights to African Americans as much as their southern counterparts did.[33]

While the Democrats' opposition to civil rights may have provided regional advantages in southern or urban elections, it was largely disastrous for national politics. From 1868 to 1931, Democratic candidates won just four of sixteen presidential elections. Two of these victories can be explained as a result of the spoiler effect of the Progressive Party in 1912 and then Woodrow Wilson's reelection during World War I in 1916. This rather-dismal success rate suggested that a change in the governing coalition would be needed if the party were to have a chance at once again becoming a player on the national level.

That change began with the 1932 presidential campaign of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR determined that his best path toward victory was to create a new coalition based not on region or ethnicity, but on the suffering of those hurt the most during the Great Depression. This alignment sought to bring African American voters in as a means of shoring up support in major urban areas and the Midwest, where many southern Black people had migrated in the decades after the Civil War in search of jobs and better education for their children, as well as to avoid many of the legal restrictions placed on them in the South. Roosevelt accomplished this realignment by promising assistance to those hurt most by the Depression, including African Americans.

The strategy worked. Roosevelt won the election with almost 58 percent of the popular vote and 472 Electoral College votes, compared to incumbent Herbert Hoover's 59. The 1932 election is considered an example of a **critical election**, one that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances. After this election, the political parties were largely identified as being divided by differences in their members' socio-economic status. Those who favor stability of the current political and economic system tend to vote Republican, whereas those who would most benefit from changing the system usually favor Democratic candidates. Based on this alignment, the Democratic Party won the next five consecutive presidential elections and was able to build a political machine that dominated Congress into the 1990s, including holding an uninterrupted majority in the House of Representatives from 1954 until 1994.

The realignment of the parties did have consequences for Democrats. African Americans became an

increasingly important part of the Democratic coalition in the 1940s through the 1960s, as the party took steps to support civil rights.[34] Most changes were limited to the state level at first, but as civil rights reform moved to the national stage, rifts between northern and southern Democrats began to emerge.[35] Southern Democrats became increasingly convinced that national efforts to provide social welfare and encourage racial integration were violating state sovereignty and social norms. By the 1970s, many had begun to shift their allegiance to the Republican Party, whose pro-business wing shared their opposition to the growing encroachment of the national government into what they viewed as state and local matters.[36]

Almost fifty years after it had begun, the realignment of the two political parties resulted in the flipping of post-Civil War allegiances, with urban areas and the Northeast now solidly Democratic, and the South and rural areas overwhelmingly voting Republican. The result today is a political system that provides Republicans with considerable advantages in rural areas and most parts of the Deep South.[37] Democrats dominate urban politics and those parts of the South, known as the Black Belt, where the majority of residents are African American.

9.3 The Shape of Modern Political Parties

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Differentiate between the party in the electorate and the party organization
- Discuss the importance of voting in a political party organization
- Describe party organization at the county, state, and national levels
- Compare the perspectives of the party in government and the party in the electorate

We have discussed the two major political parties in the United States, how they formed, and some of the smaller parties that have challenged their dominance over time. However, 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?

The answer was fairly straightforward in the early days of the republic when parties were little more than electoral coalitions of like-minded, elite politicians. But improvements in strategy and changes in the electorate forced the parties to become far more complex organizations that operate on several levels in the U.S. political arena. 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 begin by thinking about a 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. As we have seen, for much of their history, the two parties have been adapting to changes in the size, composition, and preferences of the U.S. electorate. It only makes sense, then, that parties have found it in their interest to build a permanent and stable presence among the voters. By fostering a sense of loyalty, a party can insulate itself from changes in the system and improve its odds of winning elections. 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.

What it means to be part of a party depends on where a voter lives and how much they choose to participate in politics. 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* the party's positions or candidates, but it does mean that, on the whole, they feel their wants or needs are more likely to be met if the Democratic Party is successful.

Party identifiers make up the majority of the voting public. Gallup, the polling agency, has been collecting data on voter preferences for the past several decades. Its research suggests that historically, over half of American adults have called themselves "Republican" or "Democrat" when asked how they identify themselves politically (Figure 9.8). Even among self-proclaimed independents, the overwhelming majority claim to lean in the direction of one party or the other, suggesting they behave as if they identified with a party during elections even if they preferred not to publicly pick a side. Partisan support is so strong that, in a poll conducted from August 5 to August 9, 2015, about 88 percent of respondents said they either identified with or, if they were independents, at least leaned toward one of the major political parties.[38] Thus, in a poll conducted in January 2016, even though about 42 percent of respondents said they were independent, this does not mean that they are not, in fact, more likely to favor one party over the other.[39]

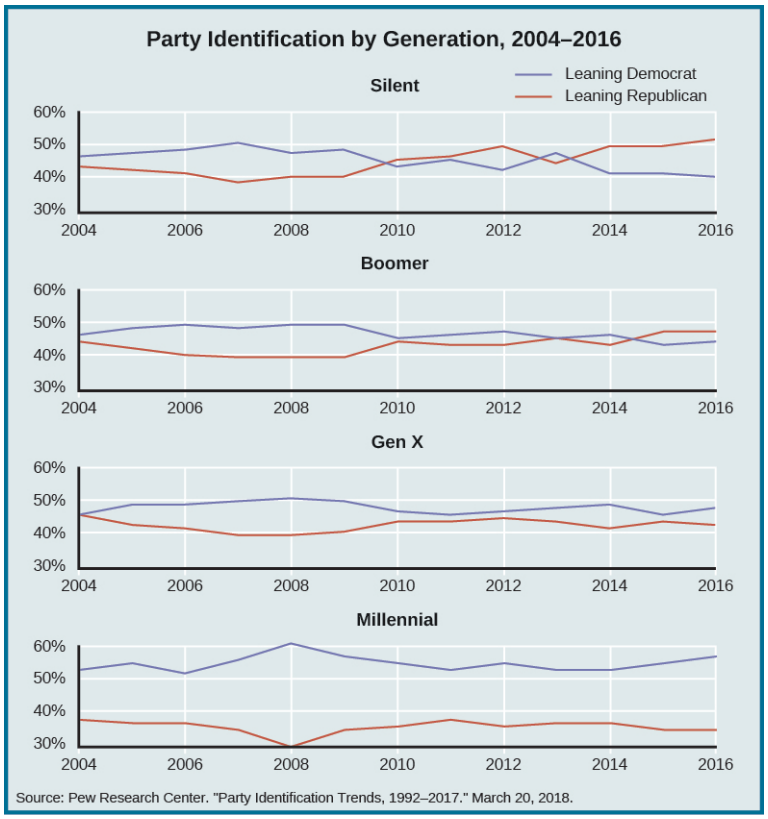


FIGURE 9.8 As the chart reveals, generation affects party identification. Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are more likely to identify as or lean towards the Democratic Party and less likely to favor Republicans than are their Baby Boomer parents and grandparents (born between 1946 and 1964). Gen Z (those born from 1997 onward) continue this trend, while also having a larger proportion than other generations of independents.[40]

Strictly speaking, party identification is not quite the same thing as party membership. People may call themselves Republicans or Democrats without being registered as a member of the party, and 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. Many states require voters to declare a party affiliation before participating in primaries, but primary participation is irregular and infrequent, and a voter may change identities long before changing party registration. For most voters, party identification is informal at best and often matters only in the weeks before an election. It does matter, however, because party identification guides some voters,

who may know little about a particular issue or candidate, in casting their ballots. If, for example, someone thinks of themself as a Republican and always votes Republican, they will not be confused when faced with a candidate, perhaps in a local or county election, whose name is unfamiliar. If the candidate is a Republican, the voter will likely cast a ballot for that candidate.

Party ties can manifest in other ways as well. The actual act of registering to vote and selecting a party reinforces party loyalty. Moreover, while pundits and scholars often deride voters who blindly vote their party, the selection of a party in the first place can be based on issue positions and ideology. In that regard, voting your party on Election Day is not a blind act—it is a shortcut based on issue positions.

THE PARTY ORGANIZATION

A significant subset of American voters views 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 the life of political parties. 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. It 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 local-state-federal structure of the U.S. political system. 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. The county-level organization is in many ways the workhorse of the party system, especially around election time. This level of organization frequently takes on many of the most basic responsibilities of a democratic system, including identifying and mobilizing potential voters and donors, identifying and training potential candidates for public office, and recruiting new members for the party. County organizations are also often responsible for finding rank and file members to serve as volunteers on Election Day, either as officials responsible for operating the polls or as monitors responsible for ensuring that elections are conducted honestly and fairly. They may also hold regular meetings to provide members the opportunity to meet potential candidates and coordinate strategy (Figure 9.9). Of course, all this is voluntary and relies on dedicated party members being willing to pitch in to run the party.

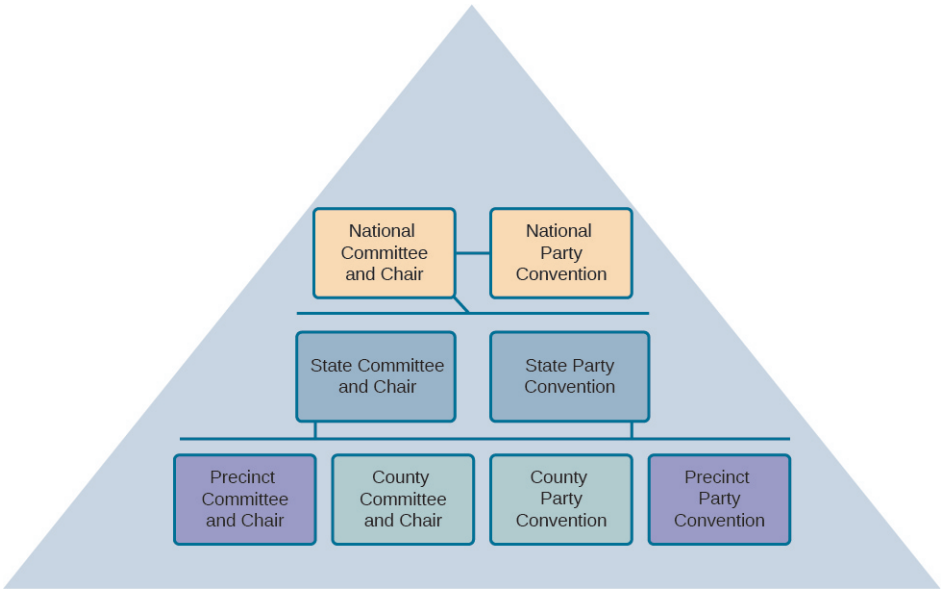


FIGURE 9.9 Political parties are bottom-up structures, with lower levels often responsible for selecting delegates to

higher-level offices or conventions.

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. While the county-level offices may be active in these local competitions, most of the coordination for them will take place in the state-level organizations. Like their more local counterparts, 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. The greater value of state- and national-level offices requires state organizations to take on several key responsibilities in the life of the party.

LINK TO LEARNING

Visit the following Republican (https://openstax.org/l/29iowagoporg) and Democratic (https://openstax.org/l/29ridemocrats) sites to see what party organizations look like on the local level. Although these sites are for different parties in different parts of the country, they both inform visitors of local party events, help people volunteer to work for the party, and provide a convenient means of contributing to the party.

First, state-level organizations usually accept greater fundraising responsibilities than do their local counterparts. Statewide races and races for national office have become increasingly expensive in recent years. The average cost of a successful House campaign was $2.4 million in 2020; for Senate races, it was $27.2 million.[41] While individual candidates are responsible for funding and running their own races, it is typically up to the state-level organization to coordinate giving across multiple races and to develop the staffing expertise that these candidates will draw upon at election time.

State organizations are also responsible for creating a sense of unity among members of the state party. Building unity can be very important as the party transitions from sometimes-contentious nomination battles to the all-important general election. The state organization uses several key tools to get its members working together towards a common goal. First, it helps the party's candidates prepare for state primary elections or caucuses that allow voters to choose a nominee to run for public office at either the state or national level. Caucuses are a form of town hall meeting at which voters in a precinct get together to voice their preferences, rather than voting individually throughout the day (Figure 9.10).



FIGURE 9.10 Caucus-goers gather at a Democratic precinct caucus on January 3, 2008, in Iowa City, Iowa. Caucuses are held every two years in more than 1650 Iowa precincts.

Second, the state organization is also responsible for drafting a state platform that serves as a policy guide for partisans who are eventually selected to public office. These platforms are usually the result of a negotiation between the various coalitions within the party and are designed to ensure that everyone in the party will

receive some benefits if their candidates win the election. Finally, state organizations hold a statewide convention at which delegates from the various county organizations come together to discuss the needs of their areas. The state conventions are also responsible for selecting delegates to the national convention.

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 of the local party's behavior unless there is a phone call or a knock on the door in the days or weeks before an election. The same is largely true of the activities of the state-level party. Typically, the only people who notice are those who are already actively engaged in politics or are being targeted for donations.

But most people are aware of the presence and activity of the national party organizations for several reasons. First, many Americans, especially young people, are more interested in the topics discussed at the national level than at the state or local level. According to John Green of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, "Local elections tend to be about things like sewers, and roads and police protection—which are not as dramatic an issue as same-sex marriage or global warming or international affairs."[42] Presidential elections and the behavior of the U.S. Congress are also far more likely to make the news broadcasts than the activities of county commissioners, and the national-level party organization is mostly responsible for coordinating the activities of participants at this level. The national party is a fundraising army for presidential candidates and also serves a key role in trying to coordinate and direct the efforts of the House and Senate. For this reason, its leadership is far more likely to become visible to media consumers, whether they intend to vote or not.

A second reason for the prominence of the national organization is that it usually coordinates the grandest spectacles in the life of a political party. Most voters are never aware of the numerous county-level meetings or coordinating activities. Primary elections, one of the most important events to take place at the state level, have a much lower turnout than the nationwide general election. In 2012, for example, only one-third of the eligible voters in New Hampshire voted in the state's primary, one of the earliest and thus most important in the nation; however, 70 percent of eligible voters in the state voted in the general election in November 2012.[43] People may see or read an occasional story about the meetings of the state committees or convention 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. These conventions are the definition of a media circus at which high-ranking politicians, party elites, and sometimes celebrities, such as actor/director Clint Eastwood (Figure 9.11), along with individuals many consider to be the future leaders of the party are brought before the public so the party can make its best case for being the one to direct the future of the country.[44] 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.

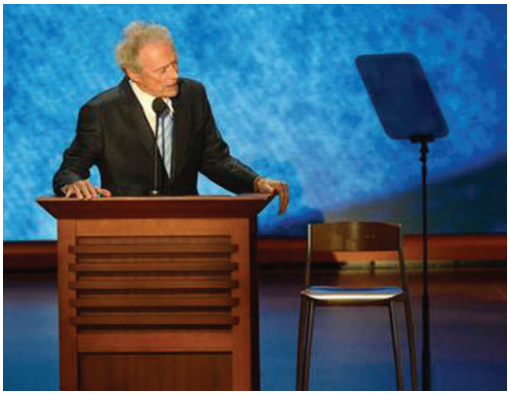


FIGURE 9.11 In August 2012, Clint Eastwood—actor, director, and former mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea,

California—spoke at the Republican National Convention accompanied by an empty chair representing the Democratic incumbent president Barack Obama.

In the past, national conventions were often the sites of high drama and political intrigue. As late as 1968, the identities of the presidential and/or vice-presidential nominees were still unknown to the general public when the convention opened. It was also common for groups protesting key events and issues of the day to try to raise their profile by using the conventions to gain the media spotlight. National media outlets would provide "gavel to gavel" coverage of the conventions, and the relatively limited number of national broadcast channels meant most viewers were essentially forced to choose between following the conventions or checking out of the media altogether. Much has changed since the 1960s, however, and between 1960 and 2004, viewership of both the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention had declined by half.[45]

National conventions are not the spectacles they once were, and this fact is almost certainly having an impact on the profile of the national party organization. Both parties have come to recognize the value of the convention as a medium through which they can communicate to the average viewer. To ensure that they are viewed in the best possible light, the parties have worked hard to turn the public face of the convention into a highly sanitized, highly orchestrated media event. 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. And while protests still happen, party organizations have becoming increasingly adept at keeping protesters away from the convention sites, arguing that safety and security are more important than First Amendment rights to speech and peaceable assembly. For example, protestors were kept behind concrete barriers and fences at the Democratic National Convention in 2004.[46]

With the advent of cable TV news and the growth of internet blogging, the major news outlets have found it unnecessary to provide the same level of coverage they once did. Between 1976 and 1996, ABC and CBS cut their coverage of the nominating conventions from more than fifty hours to only five. NBC cut its coverage to fewer than five hours.[47] One reason may be that the outcome of nominating conventions are also typically known in advance, meaning there is no drama. Today, the nominee's acceptance speech is expected to be no longer than an hour, so it will not take up more than one block of prime-time TV programming.

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. And even though the media is paying less attention, key insiders and major donors often use the convention as a way of gauging the strength of the party and its ability to effectively organize and coordinate its members. They are also paying close attention to the rising stars who are given time at the convention's podium, to see which are able to connect with the party faithful. Most observers credit Barack Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention with bringing him to national prominence.[48]

INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

Conventions and Trial Balloons

While both political parties use conventions to help win the current elections, they also use them as a way of elevating local politicians to the national spotlight. This has been particularly true for the Democratic Party. In 1988, the Democrats tapped Arkansas governor Bill Clinton to introduce their nominee Michael Dukakis at the convention. Clinton's speech was lampooned for its length and lack of focus, but it served to get his name in front of Democratic voters. Four years later, Clinton was able to leverage this national exposure to help his own presidential campaign. The pattern was repeated when Illinois state senator Barack Obama gave the keynote address at the 2004 convention. Although he was only a candidate for the U.S. Senate at the time, his address

caught the attention of the Democratic establishment and ultimately led to his emergence as a viable presidential candidate just four years later.

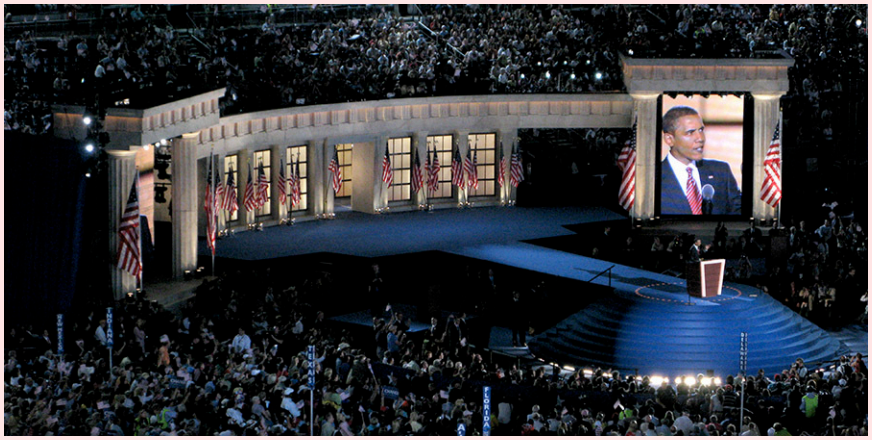


FIGURE 9.12 Barack Obama rose to national prominence with his "Two Americas" speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. In his convention speech four years later, he accepted the Democratic nomination for President. (Credit: modification of "Barack Obama" by Kelly DeLay/flickr, CC-BY).

Should the media devote more attention to national conventions? Would this help voters choose the candidate they want to vote for?

LINK TO LEARNING

Bill Clinton's lengthy nomination speech (https://openstax.org/l/29billclinnomsp) in 1988 was much derided, but served the purpose of providing national exposure to a state governor. Barack Obama's inspirational speech (https://openstax.org/l/29barobanomsp) at the 2004 national convention resulted in immediate speculation as to his wider political aspirations.

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. The means to do this is chosen in meetings of the two major parties; Republican meetings are called party conferences and Democrat meetings are called party caucuses. Members of each party meet in these closed sessions and discuss what items to place on the legislative agenda and make decisions about which party members should serve on the committees that draft proposed laws. Party members also elect the leaders of their respective parties in the House and the Senate, and their party whips. Leaders serve as party managers and are the highest-ranking members of the party in each chamber of Congress. The party whip ensures that members are present when a piece of legislation is to be voted on and directs them how to vote. The whip is the second-highest ranking member of the party in each chamber. Thus, both the Republicans and the Democrats have a leader and a whip in the House, and a leader and a whip in the Senate. The leader and whip of the party that holds the majority of seats in each house are known as the majority leader and the majority whip. The leader and whip of the party with fewer seats are called the minority leader and the minority whip. The party that controls the majority of seats in the House of Representatives also elects someone to serve as Speaker of the House. People elected to Congress as independents (that is, not members of either the Republican or Democratic parties) must choose a party to conference or caucus with. For example, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who originally ran for Senate as an independent candidate, caucuses with the Democrats and ran for the presidency as a Democrat. He returned to the Senate in 2017 as an independent.[49]

LINK TO LEARNING

The political parties in government must represent their parties and the entire country at the same time. One way they do this is by creating separate governing and party structures in the legislature, even though these are run by the same people. Check out some of the more important leadership organizations and their partisan counterparts in the House of Representatives (https://openstax.org/l/29hofreporg) and the Senate (https://openstax.org/l/29senateorga) leadership.

GET CONNECTED!

Party Organization from the Inside

Interested in a cool summer job? Want to actually make a difference in your community? Consider an internship at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) or Republican National Committee (RNC). Both organizations offer internship programs for college students who want hands-on experience working in community outreach and grassroots organizing. While many internship opportunities are based at the national headquarters in Washington, DC, openings may exist within state party organizations.

Internship positions can be very competitive; most applicants are juniors or seniors with high grade-point averages and strong recommendations from their faculty. Successful applicants get an inside view of government, build a great professional network, and have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of their friends and families.

Visit the DNC or RNC website and find out what it takes to be an intern. While there, also check out the state party organization. Is there a local leader you feel you could work for? Are any upcoming events scheduled in your state?

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 separation of powers. This complexity creates a number of problems for maintaining party unity. The biggest is that each level and unit of government has different constituencies that the office holder must satisfy. The person elected to the White House is more beholden to the national party organization than are members of the House or Senate, because members of Congress must be reelected by voters in very different states, each with its own state-level and county-level parties.

Some of this complexity is eased for the party that holds the executive branch of 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.[50]

Members of the legislature from the executive's party are under a great deal of pressure to make the executive look good, because a popular president or governor may be able to help other party members win office, or may support the primary opponent of an incumbent office holder. This incentive is likely why early in President Donald Trump's second term of office, in 2025, that House and Senate Republicans chose not to challenge or protest the president's aggressive moves, which started by challenging the judiciary, but eventually moved into areas of traditionally congressional power, including taxation, removing officials from independent regulatory commissions, and making personnel moves in institutions such as the Library of Congress.[51]

A second challenge is that each house of the legislature has its own leadership and committee structure, and those leaders may not be in total harmony with the president. Key benefits like committee appointments,

leadership positions, and money for important projects in their home district may hinge on legislators following the lead of the party. These pressures are particularly acute for the **majority party**, so named because it controls more than half the seats in one of the two chambers. The Speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader, the majority party's congressional leaders, have significant tools at their disposal to punish party members who defect on a particular vote. And, yet, when majority control is narrow, and the leaders need all members to unify, that puts individual members or coalitions of members in a strong position. We saw this dynamic emerge in the House between the Freedom Caucus of far-right Republicans and two House speakers–Kevin McCarthy and Mike Johnson. Speaker McCarthy was ousted from his position and Speaker Johnson continues to face challenges in unifying his party to the degree needed to pass budgets and legislation.[52]

9.4 Divided Government and Partisan Polarization

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the problems and benefits of divided government
- Define party polarization
- List the main explanations for partisan polarization
- Explain the implications of partisan polarization

In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties (APSA) published an article offering a criticism of the current party system. The parties, it argued, were too similar. Distinct, cohesive political parties were critical for any well-functioning democracy. First, distinct parties offer voters clear policy choices at election time. Second, cohesive parties could deliver on their agenda, even under conditions of lower bipartisanship. The party that lost the election was also important to democracy because it served as the "**loyal opposition**" that could keep a check on the excesses of the party in power. Finally, the paper suggested that voters could signal whether they preferred the vision of the current leadership or of the opposition. This signaling would keep both parties accountable to the people and lead to a more effective government, better capable of meeting the country's needs.

But, the APSA article continued, U.S. political parties of the day were lacking in this regard. Rarely did they offer clear and distinct visions of the country's future, and, on the rare occasions they did, they were typically unable to enact major reforms once elected. Indeed, there was so much overlap between the parties when in office that it was difficult for voters to know whom they should hold accountable for bad results. The article concluded by advocating a set of reforms that, if implemented, would lead to more distinct parties and better government. While this description of the major parties as being too similar may have been accurate in the 1950s; that is no longer the case.[53]

THE PROBLEM OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

The problem of majority versus minority politics is particularly acute under conditions of **divided government**. Divided government occurs when one or more houses of the legislature are controlled by the party in opposition to the executive. Unified government occurs when the same party controls the executive and the legislature entirely. Divided government can pose considerable difficulties for both the operations of the party and the government as a whole. It makes fulfilling campaign promises extremely difficult, for instance, since the cooperation (or at least the agreement) of both Congress and the president is typically needed to pass legislation. Furthermore, one party can hardly claim credit for success when the other side has been a credible partner, or when nothing can be accomplished. Party loyalty may be challenged too, because individual politicians might be forced to oppose their own party agenda if it will help their personal reelection bids.

Divided government can also be a threat to government operations, although its full impact remains unclear.[54] For example, when the divide between the parties is too great, government may shut down. A 1976 dispute

between Republican president Gerald Ford and a Democrat-controlled Congress over the issue of funding for certain cabinet departments led to a ten-day shutdown of the government (although the federal government did not cease to function entirely). But beginning in the 1980s, the interpretation that Republican president Ronald Reagan's attorney general gave to a nineteenth-century law required a complete shutdown of federal government operations until a funding issue was resolved (Figure 9.13).[55]

Clearly, the parties' willingness to work together and compromise can be a very good thing. However, the past several decades have brought an increased prevalence of divided government. Since 1969, the U.S. electorate has sent the president a Congress of his own party in only seven of twenty-three congressional elections, and during George W. Bush's first administration, the Republican majority was so narrow that a combination of resignations and defections gave the Democrats control before the next election could be held.

Over the short term, however, divided government can make for very contentious politics. A well-functioning government usually requires a certain level of responsiveness on the part of both the executive and the legislative branches. This responsiveness is hard enough if government is unified under one party. During the presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977–1980), despite the fact that both houses of Congress were controlled by Democratic majorities, the government was shut down on five occasions because of conflict between the executive and legislative branches.[56] Shutdowns are even more likely when the president and at least one house of Congress are of opposite parties. During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, for example, the federal government shut down eight times; on seven of those occasions, the shutdown was caused by disagreements between Reagan and the Republican-controlled Senate on the one hand and the Democrats in the House on the other, over such issues as spending cuts, abortion rights, and civil rights.[57] More such disputes and government shutdowns took place during the administrations of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, when different parties controlled Congress and the presidency. The most recent government shutdown, the longest in U.S. history, began in December 2018 under the 115th Congress, when the presidency and both houses were controlled by Republican majorities, but continued into the 116th, which features a Democratically controlled House and a Republican Senate.

For the first few decades of the current pattern of divided government, the threat it posed to the government appears to have been muted by a high degree of **bipartisanship**, or cooperation through compromise. Many pieces of legislation were passed in the 1960s and 1970s with reasonably high levels of support from both parties. Most members of Congress had relatively moderate voting records, with regional differences within parties that made bipartisanship on many issues more likely.



FIGURE 9.13 In the early 1980s, Republican president Ronald Reagan (left) and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil (right) worked together to pass key pieces of legislation, even though they opposed each other on several issues. (credit: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum)

For example, until the 1980s, northern and midwestern Republicans were often fairly progressive, supporting racial equality, workers' rights, and farm subsidies. Southern Democrats were frequently quite socially and racially conservative and were strong supporters of states' rights. Cross-party cooperation on these issues was fairly frequent. But in the past few decades, the number of moderates in both houses of Congress has declined. This has made it more difficult for party leadership to work together on a range of important issues, and for

members of the minority party in Congress to find policy agreement with an opposing party president.

However, beginning in the 1990s, the parties began to diverge and moderates began to disappear in Congress. The era of bipartisanship seems to have ended as the parties now compete bitterly with one another and cross-party socialization or international trips across party lines no longer happen. While this trend tends to be evaluated negatively, there are benefits. Firstly, there are now very distinct choices for the voters. Secondly, the existence of competitive parties and competitive elections is a good sign that democracy is thriving. We may not really want to have one party with a monopoly on political discourse and policymaking, as exists in some U.S. states.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF POLARIZATION

The past thirty years have brought a dramatic change in the relationship between the two parties as fewer conservative Democrats and 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 government, Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly dissimilar from one another (Figure 9.14). In the party-in-government, this means fewer members of Congress have mixed voting records; instead they vote far more consistently on issues and are far more likely to side with their party leadership.[58] It also means a growing number of moderate voters aren't participating in party politics. Either they are becoming independents, or they are participating only in the general election and are therefore not helping select party candidates in primaries.

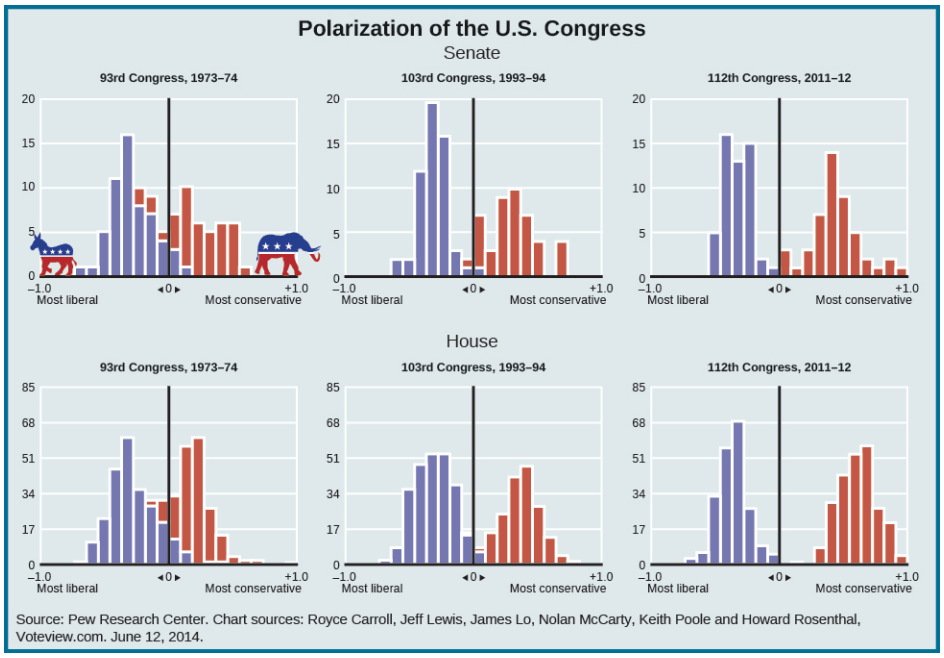


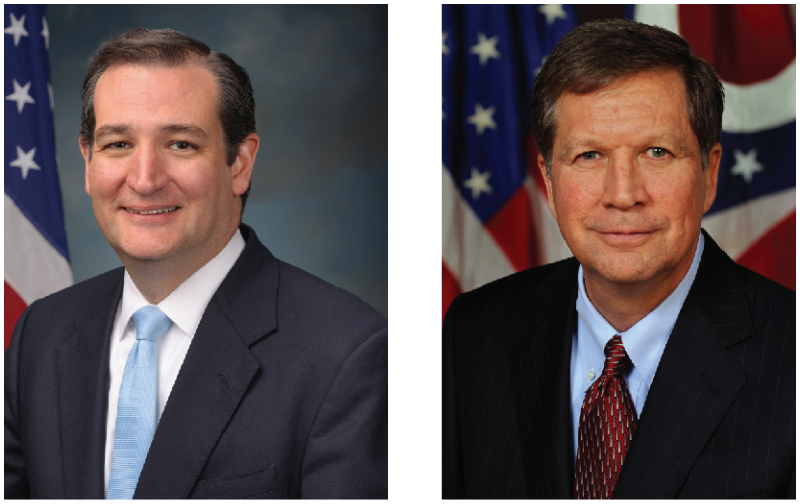
FIGURE 9.14 The number of moderates has plummeted since 1973 as the median of both parties has moved further away from the political center. These data points suggest that the Republicans have moved more clearly from the center than have Democrats. This trend has continued since 2014, with Democrats following the Republican trend with fewer centrists but with Republicans turning sharper right than Democrats turning left.[59]

What is most interesting about this shift to increasingly polarized parties is that it does not appear to have happened as a result of the structural reforms recommended by APSA. Rather, it has happened because moderate politicians have simply found it harder and harder to win elections. There are many conflicting theories about the causes of polarization, some of which we discuss below. But whatever its origin, party polarization in the United States does not appear to have had the net positive effects that the APSA committee was hoping for. With the exception of providing voters with more distinct choices, positives of polarization are

hard to find. The negative impacts are many. For one thing, rather than reducing intraparty conflict, polarization appears to have only amplified it. For example, the Republican Party (or the GOP, standing for Grand Old Party) has historically been a coalition of two key and overlapping factions: pro-business rightists and social conservatives. The GOP has held the coalition of these two groups together by opposing programs designed to redistribute wealth (and advocating small government) while at the same time arguing for laws preferred by conservative Christians. But it was also willing to compromise with pro-business Democrats, often at the expense of social issues, if it meant protecting long-term business interests.

Recently, however, a new voice emerged that allied itself with the Republican Party. Born in part from an older third-party movement known as the Libertarian Party, the Tea Party was more hostile to government and viewed government intervention in all forms, especially taxation and the regulation of business, as a threat to capitalism and democracy. It was less willing to tolerate interventions in the market place, even when they were designed to protect the markets themselves. Although an anti-tax faction within the Republican Party has existed for some time, some factions of the Tea Party movement were also active at the intersection of religious liberty and social issues, especially in opposing such initiatives as same-sex marriage and abortion rights.[60] The Tea Party argued that government, both directly and by neglect, was threatening the ability of evangelicals to observe their moral obligations, including practices some perceive as endorsing social exclusion.

Although the Tea Party was a movement and not a political party, 86 percent of Tea Party members who voted in 2012 cast their votes for Republicans.[61] Some members of the Republican Party were closely affiliated with the movement, and before the 2012 elections, Tea Party activist Grover Norquist exacted promises from many Republicans in Congress that they would oppose any bill that sought to raise taxes.[62] The inflexibility of Tea Party members led to tense floor debates and was ultimately responsible for the 2014 primary defeat of Republican majority leader Eric Cantor and the 2015 resignation of the sitting Speaker of the House John Boehner. In 2015, Chris Christie, John Kasich, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz, all of whom were Republican presidential candidates, signed Norquist's pledge as well (Figure 9.15).

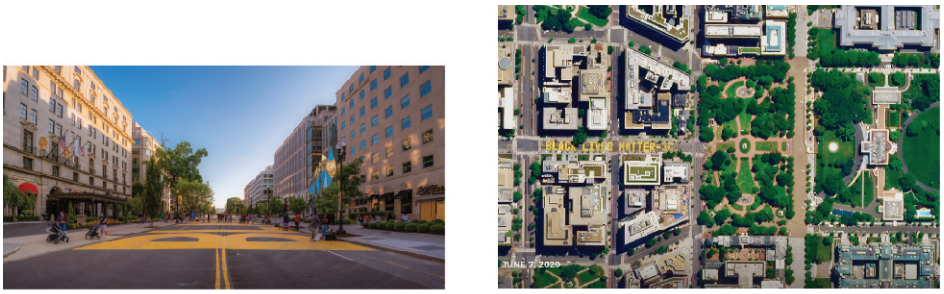


(a) (b)

FIGURE 9.15 Vying for the Republican nomination, 2016 presidential candidates Ted Cruz (a) and John Kasich (b), like many other Republicans, signed a pledge not to raise taxes if elected.

Movements on the left have also arisen. The Occupy Wall Street movement was born 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, TARP (Figure 9.16). The Occupy Movement believed the recession was caused by a failure of the government to properly regulate the banking industry. The Occupiers further maintained that the government moved swiftly to protect the banking industry from the worst of the recession but largely failed to protect the average person, thereby worsening the growing economic inequality in the United States.

While the Occupy Movement itself has largely fizzled, the anti-business sentiment to which it gave voice continues within the Democratic Party, and many Democrats have proclaimed their support for the movement and its ideals, if not for its tactics.[63] Champions of the left wing of the Democratic Party, however, 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. Their popularity, and the growing visibility of race issues in the United States, have helped sustain the left wing of the Democratic Party. Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run made these topics and causes even more salient, especially among younger voters. Several incidents since that time, most notably the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, have caused the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in April 2012, to expand. Black Lives Matter protests took place in record numbers in 2020.[64]



(a) (b)

FIGURE 9.16 In the wake of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests occurred all across the country. While there was widespread support initially for the movement from both major parties, Republican opinion of BLM subsequently became more critical, while Democrats continued to embrace the movement. The partisan divide came to a head outside the White House in Washington, DC, where massive BLM protests occurred, which were aggressively criticized by the Trump administration, and cleared with tear gas and other riot control tactics. Democratic mayor Muriel Bowser subsequently authorized the DC Public Works department to paint these massive block letters (a) on 16th Street across Lafayette Park from the White House (b). (credit a: modification of ""Black Lives Matter Plaza" by John Brighenti/Flickr, CC BY; credit b: modification of "In Space, We Can Hear Your Screams" by Steve Jurvetson/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

Unfortunately, party factions haven't been the only result of party polarization. By most measures, the U.S. government in general and Congress in particular have become less effective in recent years. Congress has passed fewer pieces of legislation, confirmed fewer appointees, and been less effective at handling the national purse than in recent memory. If we define effectiveness as legislative productivity, the 106th Congress (1999–2000) passed 463 pieces of substantive legislation (not including commemorative legislation, such as bills proclaiming an official doughnut of the United States). The 107th Congress (2000–2001) passed 294 such pieces of legislation. By 2013–2014, the total had fallen to 212.[65]

Perhaps the clearest sign of Congress' ineffectiveness is that the threat of government shutdown has become a constant. Shutdowns occur when Congress and the president are unable to authorize and appropriate funds before the current budget runs out. This is now an annual problem. Relations between the two parties became so bad that financial markets were sent into turmoil in 2014 when Congress failed to increase the government's line of credit before a key deadline, thus threatening a U.S. government default on its loans. While any particular trend can be the result of multiple factors, the decline of key measures of institutional confidence and trust suggest the negative impact of polarization. Public approval ratings for Congress have been low for decades, typically lower than presidential approval. Congressional approval dipped to single digits in November 2013. Levels early in 2021 were in the mid-30s. However, even then, disapproval was at greater than 60 percent.[66] In the wake of the Great Recession, President Obama's average approval rating remained low for several years, despite an overall trend in economic growth since the end of 2008, before he enjoyed an uptick in support during his final year in office.[67] Typically, economic conditions are a significant

driver of presidential approval, suggesting the negative effect of partisanship on presidential approval.

THE CAUSES OF POLARIZATION

Scholars agree that some degree of **polarization** is occurring in the United States, even if some contend it is only at the elite level. But they are less certain about exactly why, or how, polarization has become such a mainstay of American politics. Several conflicting theories have been offered. The first and perhaps best argument is that polarization is a party-in-government phenomenon driven by a decades-long **sorting** of the voting public, or a change in party allegiance in response to shifts in party position.[68] According to the sorting thesis, before the 1950s, voters were mostly concerned with state-level party positions rather than national party concerns. Since parties are bottom-up institutions, this meant local issues dominated elections; it also meant national-level politicians typically paid more attention to local problems than to national party politics.

But over the past several decades, voters have started identifying more with national-level party politics, and they began to demand their elected representatives become more attentive to national party positions. As a result, they have become more likely to pick parties that consistently represent national ideals, are more consistent in their candidate selection, and are more willing to elect office-holders likely to follow their party's national agenda. One example of the way social change led to party sorting revolves around race.

The Democratic Party returned to national power in the 1930s largely as the result of a coalition among low socio-economic status voters in northern and midwestern cities. These new Democratic voters were religiously and ethnically more diverse than the mostly White, mostly Protestant voters who supported Republicans. But the southern United States (often called the "Solid South") had been largely dominated by Democratic politicians since the Civil War. These politicians agreed with other Democrats on most issues, but they were more evangelical in their religious beliefs and less tolerant on racial matters. The federal nature of the United States meant that Democrats in other parts of the country were free to seek alliances with minorities in their states. But in the South, African Americans were still largely disenfranchised well after Franklin Roosevelt had brought other groups into the Democratic tent.

The Democratic alliance worked relatively well through the 1930s and 1940s when post-Depression politics revolved around supporting farmers and helping the unemployed. But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, social issues became increasingly prominent in national politics. Southern Democrats, who had supported giving the federal government authority for economic redistribution, began to resist calls for those powers to be used to restructure society. Many of these Democrats broke away from the party only to find a home among Republicans, who were willing to help promote smaller national government and greater states' rights.[69] This shift was largely completed with the rise of the evangelical movement in politics, when it shepherded its supporters away from Jimmy Carter, an evangelical Christian, to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election.

At the same time social issues were turning the Solid South towards the Republican Party, they were having the opposite effect in the North and West. Moderate Republicans, who had been champions of racial equality since the time of Lincoln, worked with Democrats to achieve social reform. These Republicans found it increasing difficult to remain in their party as it began to adjust to the growing power of the small government–states' rights movement. A good example was Senator Arlen Specter, a moderate Republican who represented Pennsylvania and ultimately switched to become a Democrat before the end of his political career.

A second possible culprit in increased polarization is the impact of technology on the public square. Before the 1950s, most people got their news from regional newspapers and local radio stations. While some national programming did exist, most editorial control was in the hands of local publishers and editorial boards. These groups served as a filter of sorts as they tried to meet the demands of local markets.

As described in detail in the media chapter, the advent of television changed that. Television was a powerful tool, with national news and editorial content that provided the same message across the country. All viewers saw the same images of the women's rights movement and the war in Vietnam. The expansion of news

coverage to cable, and the consolidation of local news providers into big corporate conglomerates, amplified this nationalization. Average citizens were just as likely to learn what it meant to be a Republican from a politician in another state as from one in their own, and national news coverage made it much more difficult for politicians to run away from their votes Figure 9.17. The information explosion that followed the heyday of network TV by way of cable, the Internet, and blogs has furthered this nationalization trend.



(a) (b)

FIGURE 9.17 Two examples of congressional representatives who have become polarizing national figures are former Congresswoman and House Majority Leader Liz Cheney (R-WY) (a) and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) (b). Seemingly cut from a very different mold, with Ocasio-Cortez trying to pull the Democratic Party in Congress to the left, and Cheney the staunch conservative who climbed the party leadership ladder somewhat quietly, both women found themselves on the enemy list of President Donald Trump. AOC took on Trump and his policy positions from the get-go, while Cheney became much more visible with her vote to impeach Trump in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. (credit a: modification of "Liz Cheney official 116th Congress portrait" by US House Office of Photography/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Official Portrait" by Franmarie Metzler, U.S. House Office of Photography/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

A final possible cause for polarization is the increasing sophistication of **gerrymandering**, or the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate (Figure 9.18). According to the gerrymandering thesis, the more moderate or heterogeneous a voting district, the more moderate the politician's behavior once in office. Taking extreme or one-sided positions on a large number of issues would be hazardous for a member who needs to build a diverse electoral coalition. But if the district has been drawn to favor a particular group, it now is necessary for the elected official to serve only the portion of the constituency that dominates.

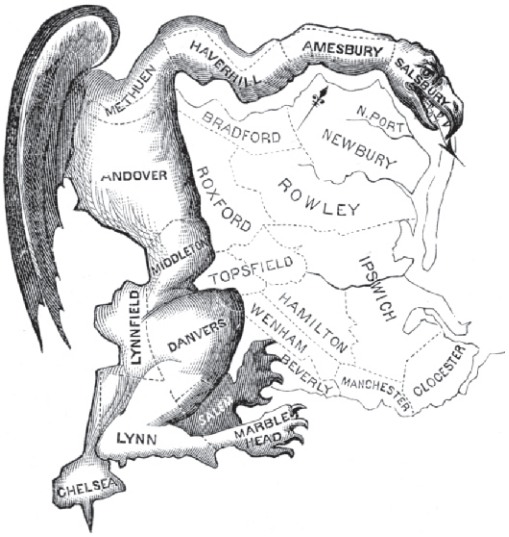


FIGURE 9.18 This cartoon, which inspired the term gerrymander, was printed in the *Boston Gazette* on March 26, 1812, after the Massachusetts legislature redistricted the state to favor the party of the sitting governor, Elbridge

Gerry.

Gerrymandering is a centuries-old practice. There has always been an incentive for legislative bodies to draw districts in such a way that sitting legislators have the best chance of keeping their jobs. But changes in law and technology have transformed gerrymandering from a crude art into a science. The first advance came with the introduction of the "one-person-one-vote" principle by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962. Before then, it was common for many states to practice **redistricting**, or redrawing of their electoral maps, *only* if they gained or lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. This can happen once every ten years as a result of a constitutionally mandated **reapportionment** process, in which the number of House seats given to each state is adjusted to account for population changes.

But if there was no change in the number of seats, there was little incentive to shift district boundaries. After all, if a legislator had won election based on the current map, any change to the map could make losing seats more likely. Even when reapportionment led to new maps, most legislators were more concerned with protecting their own seats than with increasing the number of seats held by their party. As a result, some districts had gone decades without significant adjustment, even as the U.S. population changed from largely rural to largely urban. By the early 1960s, some electoral districts had populations several times greater than those of their more rural neighbors.

However, in its one-person-one-vote decision in *Reynolds v. Simms* (1964), the Supreme Court argued that everyone's vote should count roughly the same regardless of where they lived.[70] Districts had to be adjusted so they would have roughly equal populations. Several states therefore had to make dramatic changes to their electoral maps during the next two redistricting cycles (1970–1972 and 1980–1982). Map designers, no longer certain how to protect individual party members, changed tactics to try to create **safe seats** so members of their party could be assured of winning by a comfortable margin. Designers sought to draw districts in which their preferred party had a 55 percent or better chance of winning a given district, regardless of which candidate the party nominated.

Of course, many early efforts at post-*Reynolds* gerrymandering were crude since map designers had no good way of knowing exactly where partisans lived. At best, designers might have a rough idea of voting patterns between precincts, but they lacked the ability to know voting patterns in individual blocks or neighborhoods. They also had to contend with the inherent mobility of the U.S. population, which meant the most carefully drawn maps could be obsolete just a few years later. Designers were often forced to use crude proxies for party, such as race or the socio-economic status of a neighborhood (Figure 9.19). Some maps were so crude they were ruled unconstitutionally discriminatory by the courts.

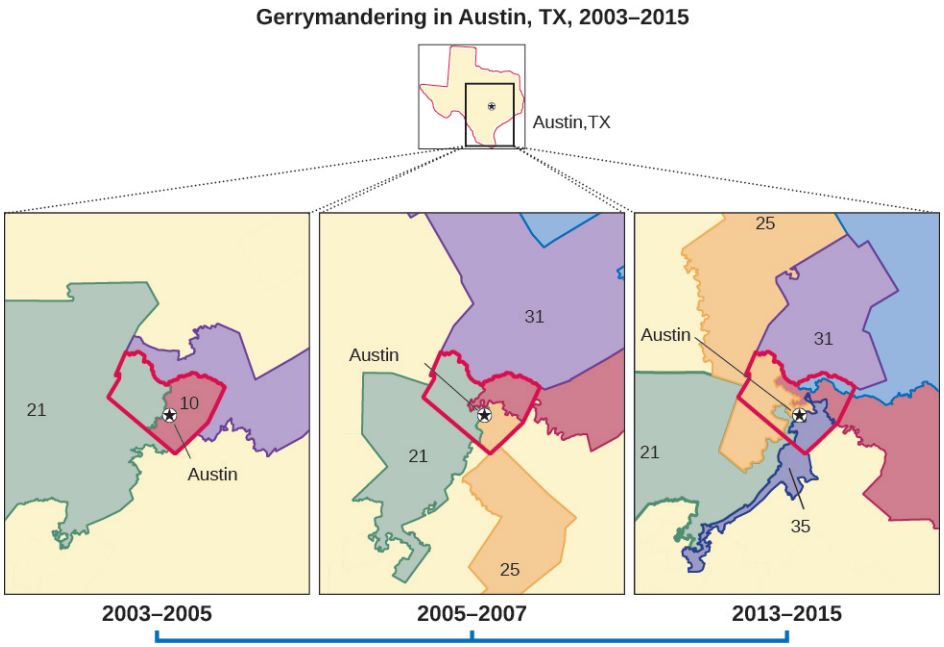


FIGURE 9.19 Examples of gerrymandering in Texas, where the Republican-controlled legislature redrew House districts to reduce the number of Democratic seats by combining voters in Austin with those near the border, several hundred miles away. Today, Austin is represented by six different congressional representatives.

Proponents of the gerrymandering thesis point out that the decline in the number of moderate voters began during this period of increased redistricting. But it wasn't until later, they argue, that the real effects could be seen. A second advance in redistricting, via computer-aided map making, truly transformed gerrymandering into a science. Refined computing technology, the ability to collect data about potential voters, and the use of advanced algorithms have given map makers a good deal of certainty about where to place district boundaries to best predetermine the outcomes. These factors also provided better predictions about future population shifts, making the effects of gerrymandering more stable over time. Proponents argue that this increased efficiency in map drawing has led to the disappearance of moderates in Congress.

According to political scientist Nolan McCarty, there is little evidence to support the redistricting hypothesis alone. First, he argues, the Senate has become polarized just as the House of Representatives has, but people vote for Senators on a statewide basis. There are no gerrymandered voting districts in elections for senators. Research showing that more partisan candidates first win election to the House before then running successfully for the Senate, however, helps us understand how the Senate can also become partisan.[71] Furthermore, states like Wyoming and Vermont, which have only one Representative and thus elect House members on a statewide basis as well, have consistently elected people at the far ends of the ideological spectrum.[72] Redistricting did contribute to polarization in the House of Representatives, but it took place largely in districts that had undergone significant change.[73]

Furthermore, polarization has been occurring throughout the country, but the use of increasingly polarized district design has not. While some states have seen an increase in these practices, many states were already largely dominated by a single party (such as in the Solid South) but still elected moderate representatives. Some parts of the country have remained closely divided between the two parties, making overt attempts at gerrymandering difficult. But when coupled with the sorting phenomenon discussed above, redistricting probably is contributing to polarization, if only at the margins.

FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND

The Politics of Redistricting

Voters in a number of states have become so worried about the problem of gerrymandering that they have tried to deny their legislatures the ability to draw district boundaries. The hope is that by taking this power away from whichever party controls the state legislature, voters can ensure more competitive districts and fairer electoral outcomes.

In 2000, voters in Arizona approved a referendum that created an independent state commission responsible for drafting legislative districts. But the Arizona legislature fought back against the creation of the commission, filing a lawsuit that claimed only the legislature had the constitutional right to draw districts. Legislators asked the courts to overturn the popular referendum and end the operation of the redistricting commission. However, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the authority of the independent commission in a 5–4 decision titled *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission* (2015).[74]

Currently, only five states use fully independent commissions—ones that do not include legislators or other elected officials—to draw the lines for both state legislative and congressional districts. These states are Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, and Washington. In Florida, the League of Women Voters and Common Cause challenged a new voting districts map supported by state Republicans, because they did not believe it fulfilled the requirements of amendments made to the state constitution in 2010 requiring that voting districts not favor any political party or incumbent.[75]

Do you think redistricting is a partisan issue? Should commissions draw districts instead of legislators? If commissions are given this task, who should serve on them?

LINK TO LEARNING

Think you have what it takes to gerrymander a district? Play the redistricting game (https://openstax.org/l/29redistrictgam) and see whether you can find new ways to help out old politicians.

Key Terms

bipartisanship a process of cooperation through compromise
critical election an election that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances
divided government a condition in which one or more houses of the legislature is controlled by the party in opposition to the executive
first-past-the-post a system in which the winner of an election is the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes cast, also known as plurality voting
gerrymandering the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate
majoritarian voting a type of election in which the winning candidate must receive at least 50 percent of the votes, even if a run-off election is required
majority party the legislative party with over half the seats in a legislative body, and thus significant power to control the agenda
minority party the legislative party with less than half the seats in a legislative body
moderate an individual who falls in the middle of the ideological spectrum
party identifiers individuals who represent themselves in public as being part of a party
party organization the formal structure of the political party and the active members responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates
party platform the collection of a party's positions on issues it considers politically important
party polarization the shift of party positions from moderate towards ideological extremes
party realignment a shifting of party alliances within the electorate
party-in-government party identifiers who have been elected to office and are responsible for fulfilling the party's promises
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
personal politics a political style that focuses on building direct relationships with voters rather than on promoting specific issues
plurality voting the election rule by which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of vote share
political machine an organization that secures votes for a party's candidates or supports the party in other ways, usually in exchange for political favors such as a job in government
political parties organizations made up of groups of people with similar interests that try to directly influence public policy through their members who seek and hold public office
precinct the lowest level of party organization, usually organized around neighborhoods
proportional representation a party-based election rule in which the number of seats a party receives is a function of the share of votes it receives in an election
reapportionment the reallocation of House seats between the states to account for population changes
redistricting the redrawing of electoral maps
safe seat a district drawn so members of a party can be assured of winning by a comfortable margin
sorting the process in which voters change party allegiances in response to shifts in party position
third parties political parties formed as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic parties, also known as minor parties
two-party system a system in which two major parties win all or almost all elections

Summary

9.1 What Are Parties and How Did They Form?

Political parties are vital to the operation of any democracy. Early U.S. political parties were formed by national elites who disagreed over how to divide power between the national and state governments. The system we have today, divided between Republicans and Democrats, had consolidated by 1860. A number of minor parties have attempted to challenge the status quo, but they have largely failed to gain traction despite having an occasional impact on the national political scene.

9.2 The Two-Party System

Electoral rules, such as the use of plurality voting, have helped turn the United States into a two-party system dominated by the Republicans and the Democrats. Several minor parties have attempted to challenge the status quo, but usually they have only been spoilers that served to divide party coalitions. But this doesn't mean the party system has always been stable; party coalitions have shifted several times in the past two hundred years.

9.3 The Shape of Modern Political Parties

Political parties exist primarily as a means to help candidates get elected. The United States thus has a relatively loose system of party identification and a bottom-up approach to party organization structure built around elections. Lower levels, such as the precinct or county, take on the primary responsibility for voter registration and mobilization, whereas the higher state and national levels are responsible for electing major candidates and shaping party ideology. The party in government is responsible for implementing the policies on which its candidates run, but elected officials also worry about winning reelection.

9.4 Divided Government and Partisan Polarization

A divided government makes it difficult for elected officials to achieve their policy goals. This problem has gotten worse as U.S. political parties have become increasingly polarized over the past several decades. They are both more likely to fight with each other and more internally divided than just a few decades ago. Some possible causes include sorting and improved gerrymandering, although neither alone offers a completely satisfactory explanation. But whatever the cause, polarization is having negative short-term consequences on American politics.

Review Questions

1. Which supporter of federalism warned people about the dangers of political parties?
   a. John Adams
   b. Alexander Hamilton
   c. James Madison
   d. George Washington

2. Which of the following was not a third-party challenger?
   a. Whig Party
   b. Progressive Party
   c. Dixiecrats
   d. Green Party

3. Why were the early U.S. political parties formed?

4. What techniques led the Democratic Party to national prominence in the 1830s through 1850s?

5. In which type of electoral system do voters select the party of their choice rather than an individual candidate?
   A. proportional representation
   B. first-past-the-post
   C. plurality voting
   D. majoritarian voting

6. Which of the following does *not* represent a major contributing factor in party realignment?
   A. demographic shifts
   B. changes in key issues

C. changes in party strategies
D. third parties

7. What impact, if any, do third parties typically have on U.S. elections?

8. In what ways do political parties collude with state and local government to prevent the rise of new parties?

9. Which level of party organization is most responsible for helping the party's nominee win the presidency?
A. precinct
B. county
C. state
D. national

10. How do members of the party organization differ from party identifiers? What role does each play in the party as a whole?

11. Why is winning votes so important to political parties? How does the need to win elections affect party structures?

12. What are the positives and negatives of partisan polarization?

13. What is the sorting thesis, and what does it suggest as the cause of party polarization?

14. Does gerrymandering lead to increased polarization?

15. How have the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Movement affected partisan politics?

Critical Thinking Questions

16. Is it possible for a serious third party to emerge in the United States, positioned ideologically between the Democrats on the left and the Republicans on the right? Why or why not?

17. In what ways are political parties of the people and in what ways might they be more responsive to elites?

18. If you were required to become active in some aspect of a political party, what activity and level of party organization would you choose and why?

19. Is it preferable for the U.S. government to have unified party control or divided government? Why?

20. In general, do parties make the business of government easier or harder to accomplish?

Suggestions for Further Study

Aldrich, John. 1995. *Why Parties?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brewer, Mark D., and L. Sandy Maisel. 2013. *The Parties Respond: Changes in American Parties and Campaigns*, 5th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Brunell, Thomas L. 2008. *Redistricting and Representation: Why Competitive Elections are Bad for America*. New York: Routledge Press.

Cox, Gary W., and Jonathan Katz. 2002. *Elbridge Gerry's Salamander: The Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fiorina, Morris P. 2006. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson Longman.

Hershey, Marjorie Randon. 2014. *Party Politics in America*, 16th ed. New York: Pearson Longman.

Hibbing, John R., and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1995. *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes towards American Political Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keith, Bruce E., et al. 1992. *The Myth of the Independent Voter*. Berkeley, CA. Berkeley University Press.

McCarthy, Nolan, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal. 2008. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Noel, Hans. 2014. *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, Barbara. 2005. *Party Wars*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Interest Groups and Lobbying 10

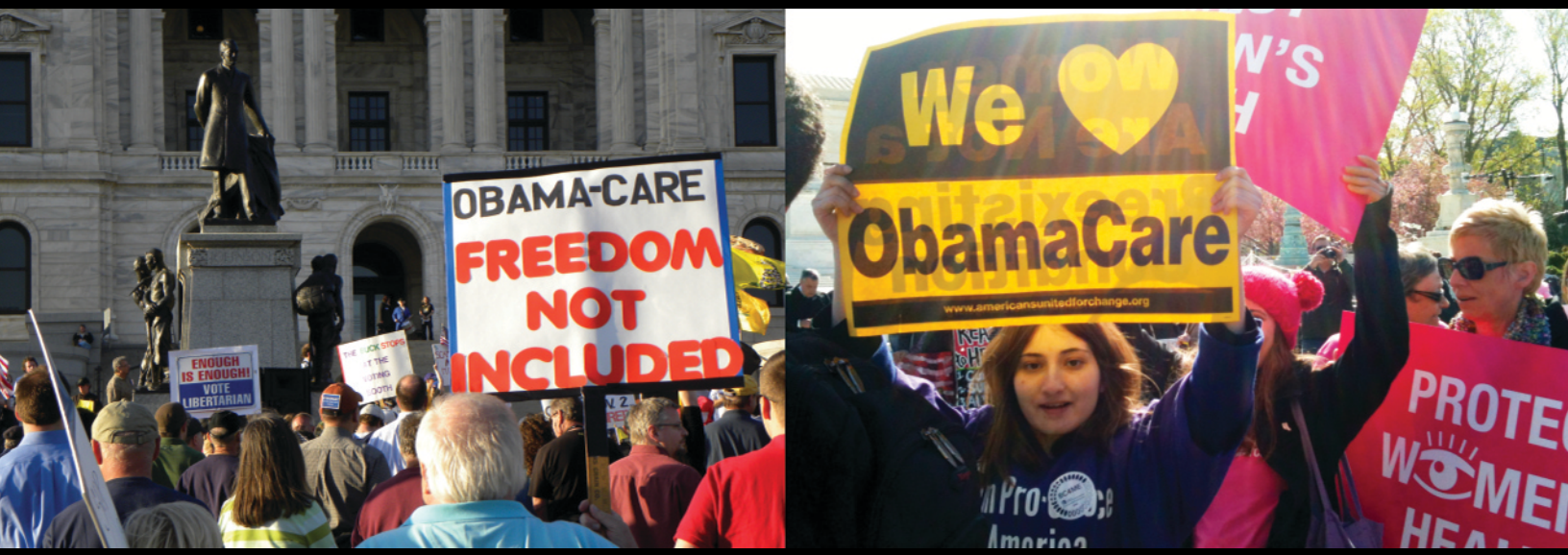


FIGURE 10.1 On April 15 (or "tax day"), 2010, members of the Tea Party movement rallied at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul in favor of smaller government and against the Affordable Care Act (left). Two years later, supporters of the law (right) demonstrated in front of the U.S. Supreme Court during oral arguments in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, in which the Court eventually upheld most provisions of the law. (credit left: modification of work by "Fibonacci Blue"/Flickr; credit right: modification of work by LaDawna Howard)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

10.1 Interest Groups Defined
10.2 Collective Action and Interest Group Formation
10.3 Interest Groups as Political Participation
10.4 Pathways of Interest Group Influence
10.5 Free Speech and the Regulation of Interest Groups

INTRODUCTION The 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare, represented a substantial overhaul of the U.S. healthcare system.[1] Given its potential impact, interest group representatives (lobbyists) from the insurance industry, hospitals, medical device manufacturers, and organizations representing doctors, patients, and employers all tried to influence what the law would look like and the way it would operate. Ordinary people took to the streets to voice their opinion (Figure 10.1). Some state governors sued to prevent a requirement in the law that their states expand Medicaid coverage. A number of interest groups challenged the law in court, where two Supreme Court decisions have left it largely intact.

Interest groups like those for and against the ACA play a fundamental role in representing individuals, corporate interests, and the public before the government. They help inform the public and lawmakers about issues, monitor government actions, and promote policies that benefit their interests, using all three branches of government at the federal, state, and local levels.

In this chapter, we answer several key questions about interest groups. What are they, and why and how do they form? How do they provide avenues for political participation? Why are some groups advantaged by the lobbying of government representatives, while others are disadvantaged? Finally, how do interest groups try to achieve their objectives, and how are they regulated?

10.1 Interest Groups Defined

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how **interest groups** differ from political parties
- Evaluate the different types of interests and what they do
- Compare public and private interest groups

While the term *interest group* is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, the framers were aware that individuals would band together in an attempt to use government in their favor. In *Federalist* No. 10, James Madison warned of the dangers of "factions," minorities who would organize around issues they felt strongly about, possibly to the detriment of the majority. But Madison believed limiting these factions was worse than facing the evils they might produce, because such limitations would violate individual freedoms. Instead, the natural way to control factions was to let them flourish and compete against each other. The sheer number of interests in the United States suggests that many have, indeed, flourished. They compete with similar groups for membership, and with opponents for access to decision-makers. Some people suggest there may be too many interests in the United States. Others argue that some have gained a disproportionate amount of influence over public policy, whereas many others are underrepresented.

Madison's definition of factions can apply to both interest groups and **political parties**. But unlike political parties, interest groups do not function primarily to elect candidates under a certain party label or to directly control the operation of the government. Political parties in the United States are generally much broader coalitions that represent a significant proportion of citizens. In the American two-party system, the Democratic and Republican Parties spread relatively wide nets to try to encompass large segments of the population. In contrast, while interest groups may support or oppose political candidates, their goals are usually more issue-specific and narrowly focused on areas like taxes, the environment, and gun rights or gun control, or their membership is limited to specific professions. They may represent interests ranging from well-known organizations, such as the Sierra Club, IBM, or the American Lung Association, to obscure ones, such as the North Carolina Gamefowl Breeders Association. Thus, with some notable exceptions, specific interest groups have much more limited membership than do political parties.

Political parties and interest groups both work together and compete for influence, although in different ways. While interest group activity often transcends party lines, many interests are perceived as being more supportive of one party than the other. The American Conservative Union, Citizens United, the National Rifle Association, and National Right to Life are more likely to have relationships with Republican lawmakers than with Democratic ones. Americans for Democratic Action, Campaign for America's Future, and People for the American Way all have stronger relationships with the Democratic Party. Parties and interest groups do compete with each other, however, often for influence. At the state level, we typically observe an inverse relationship between them in terms of power. Interest groups tend to have greater influence in states where political parties are comparatively weaker.

WHAT ARE INTEREST GROUPS AND WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Definitions abound when it comes to **interest groups**, which are sometimes referred to as special interests, interest organizations, pressure groups, or just interests. Most definitions specify that *interest group* indicates any formal association of individuals or organizations that attempt to influence government decision-making and/or the making of public policy. Often, this influence is exercised by a lobbyist or a lobbying firm.

Formally, a **lobbyist** is someone who represents the interest organization before government, is usually compensated for doing so, and is required to register with the government in which they lobby, whether state or federal. The lobbyist's primary goal is usually to influence policy. Most interest organizations engage in lobbying activity to achieve their objectives. As you might expect, the interest hires a lobbyist, employs one internally, or has a member volunteer to lobby on its behalf. For present purposes, we might restrict our

definition to the relatively broad one in the Lobbying Disclosure Act.[2] This act requires the registration of lobbyists representing any interest group and devoting more than 20 percent of their time to it.[3] Clients and lobbying firms must also register with the federal government based on similar requirements. Moreover, campaign finance laws require disclosure of campaign contributions given to political candidates by organizations.

LINK TO LEARNING

Visit this site (https://openstax.org/l/29opensecrets) to research donations and campaign contributions given to political candidates by organizations.

Lobbying is not limited to Washington, DC, however, and many interests lobby there as well as in one or more states. Each state has its own laws describing which individuals and entities must register, so the definitions of lobbyists and interests, and of what lobbying is and who must register to do it, also vary from state to state. Therefore, while a citizen contacting a lawmaker to discuss an issue is generally not viewed as lobbying, an organization that devotes a certain amount of time and resources to contacting lawmakers may be classified as lobbying, depending on local, state, or federal law.

Largely for this reason, there is no comprehensive list of all interest groups to tell us how many there are in the United States. Estimates of the number vary widely, suggesting that if we use a broad definition and include all interests at all levels of government, there may be more than 200,000.[4] Following the passage of the Lobbying Disclosure Act in 1995, we had a much better understanding of the number of interests registered in Washington, DC; however, it was not until several years later that we had a complete count and categorization of the interests registered in each of the fifty states.[5]

Political scientists have categorized interest groups in a number of ways.[6] First, interest groups may take the form of **membership organizations**, which individuals join voluntarily and to which they usually pay dues. Membership groups often consist of people who have common issues or concerns, or who want to be with others who share their views. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is a membership group consisting of members who promote **gun rights** (Figure 10.2). For those who advocate greater regulation of access to firearms, such as **background checks** prior to gun purchases, the Brady: United Against Gun Violence is a membership organization that weighs in on the other side of the issue.[7]



FIGURE 10.2 A Florida member of the NRA proudly displays his support of gun rights (a). After the mass shooting at

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, which resulted in seventeen deaths, massive demonstrations were quickly organized. On March 24, 2018, in Washington DC (b), San Francisco (c), and 880 sister sites, young Americans gathered and marched to highlight the need for gun control reform. (credit a: modification of work by Daniel Oines/Flickr, CC BY; credit b: modification of "March for Our Lives" by Phil Roeder/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY; credit c: modification of "March for Our Lives SF" by Roger Jones/Flickr, Public Domain)

Interest groups may also form to represent companies, corporate organizations, and governments. These groups do not have individual members but rather are offshoots of corporate or governmental entities with a compelling interest to be represented in front of one or more branches of government. Verizon and Coca-Cola will register to lobby in order to influence policy in a way that benefits them. These corporations will either have one or more **in-house lobbyists**, who work for one interest group or firm and represent their organization in a lobbying capacity, and/or will hire a **contract lobbyist**, individuals who work for firms that represent a multitude of clients and are often hired because of their resources and their ability to contact and lobby lawmakers, to represent them before the legislature.

Governments such as municipalities and executive departments such as the Department of Education register to lobby in an effort to maximize their share of budgets or increase their level of autonomy. These government institutions are represented by a **legislative liaison**, whose job is to present issues to decision-makers. For example, a state university usually employs a lobbyist, legislative liaison, or government affairs person to represent its interests before the legislature. This includes lobbying for a given university's share of the budget or for its continued autonomy from lawmakers and other state-level officials who may attempt to play a greater oversight role.

In 2015, thirteen states had their higher **education** budgets cut from the previous year, and nearly all states have seen some cuts to higher education funding since the recession began in 2008.[8] In 2015, as in many states, universities and community colleges in Mississippi lobbied the legislature over pending budget cuts.[9] These examples highlight the need for universities and state university systems to have representation before the legislature. On the federal level, universities may lobby for research funds from government departments. For example, the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security may be willing to fund scientific research that might better enable them to defend the nation.

Interest groups also include **associations**, which are typically groups of institutions that join with others, often within the same trade or industry (**trade associations**), and have similar concerns. The American Beverage Association[10] includes Coca-Cola, Red Bull North America, ROCKSTAR, and Kraft Foods. Despite the fact that these companies are competitors, they have common interests related to the manufacturing, bottling, and distribution of beverages, as well as the regulation of their business activities. The logic is that there is strength in numbers, and if members can lobby for tax breaks or eased regulations for an entire industry, they may all benefit. These common goals do not, however, prevent individual association members from employing in-house lobbyists or contract lobbying firms to represent their own business or organization as well. Indeed, many members of associations are competitors who also seek representation individually before the legislature.

LINK TO LEARNING

Visit the website of an association like the American Beverage Association (https://openstax.org/l/29ambevassoc) or the American Bankers Association (https://openstax.org/l/29amerbankassoc) and look over the key issues it addresses. Do any of the issues it cares about surprise you? What areas do you think members can agree about? Are there issues on which the membership might disagree? Why would competitors join together when they normally compete for business?

Finally, sometimes individuals volunteer to represent an organization. They are called amateur or volunteer