American Government

Robert A. Heineman
Steven A. Peterson
Thomas H. Rasmussen

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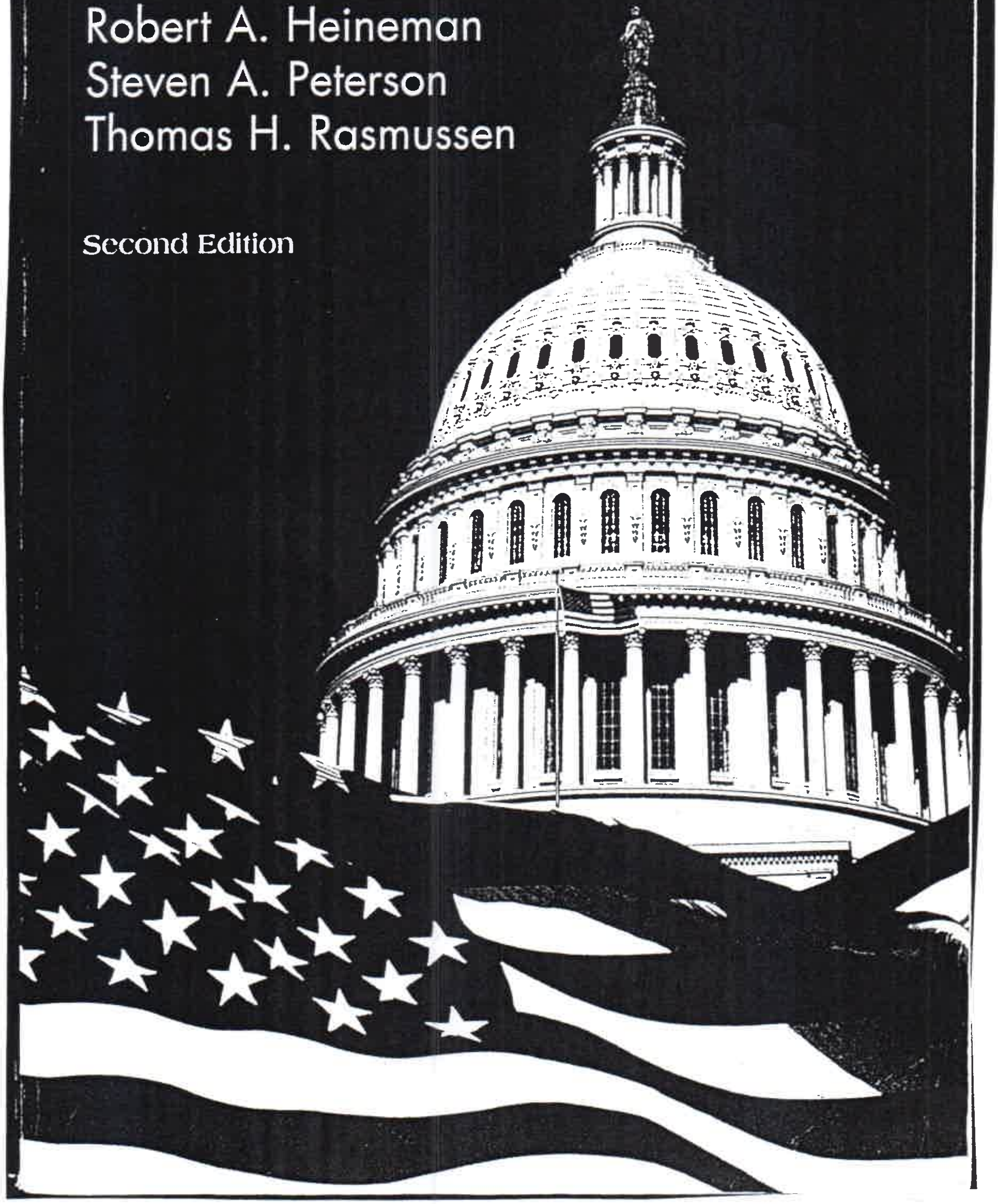

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CHAPTER 5

Political Parties

Time Line

1790s–1815	Federalists versus Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans
1830s–1850s	Whigs versus Democrats
1860–present	Democrats versus Republicans
1860–1896	Republicans marginally dominant
1896–1932	Republicans clearly dominant
1932–1964	New Deal realignment with Democrats dominant
1964–present	Dealignment? A new party era?

Political parties have been a prominent feature of American politics since near the beginning of the republic. For much of American history, parties have been viewed as important actors in linking citizens and their leaders. This chapter begins by discussing the nature and functions of American political parties, follows with a brief history of these parties, and outlines the role of parties in the electorate and with government officials and party organization itself. Are

America's parties disintegrating? Are they becoming more vital? Do they have a future? The chapter concludes by addressing these questions.

What Is a Political Party?

What is the exact nature of political parties? A host of definitions have been advanced over time, but the most common is, simply, that a political party is an organization that sponsors and supports candidates for office under its label.

The Three Components

American parties have three components, each of which plays a significant role.

Party in the Electorate. Within the electorate the party is made up of the people who identify with one of the parties and feel a sense of loyalty to it. Their links with the party are rather passive, and their party work is often no more strenuous than voting for its candidates.

Party Organization. This component includes the active party workers, from precinct captains to ward leaders to county chairperson to the state central committee to the national party committee. Party organization is the formal party structure.

The Party in Government. In government, the party is composed of candidates who have won their elections under a party label. The major examples at the national level are the president and members of Congress. These elected officials are generally the most visible spokespersons for their party.

Functions of Political Parties

Political parties have a variety of functions, as listed below:

1. They serve as linkage institutions. By this, scholars mean that the party helps to link the people with government and its policies. By choosing one party's candidate over another's, a majority of voters indicate where they want government policy to go, since the parties stand for (at least somewhat) different principles. Thus, by their support, the voters can influence the direction of policy.

2. They recruit candidates to run for office.

3. They provide a convenient label (the party's name and whatever else might symbolize the party to the voter) to attach to candidates to differentiate them.

4. To some extent, they educate the public by urging people to vote and by providing campaign materials that describe candidates and their political views and promises.

5. They help resolve conflict. There are myriad groups in society, each with its own priorities. Parties try to draw support from many groups; to do so, they must advance conciliatory positions. By taking more moderate positions, they stand to alienate smaller numbers of voters.

Basic Characteristics of American Political Parties

1. The United States has a two-party system. Most democracies are not structured in this way; France and Italy, for instance, have multiparty systems with many competing parties. A number of factors have been advanced to explain why the United States has two dominant parties. Some political commentators point to the common beliefs shared by party leaders and followers. They say that there has always been a basic consensus on the values of liberalism (recall the discussion in Chapter 4). Hence, two moderate parties with the ability to negotiate and compromise are, so it is claimed, a logical consequence.

However, the most powerful explanation is the nature of elections. The method of electing officials in the United States is basically the single-member district with a plurality vote (whoever gets the most votes wins—even if there is no majority). This system works against smaller parties, as statistical analyses of different democratic countries show.[1] Why is this the case?

To understand this system's impact, consider an alternative system for selecting officials—proportional representation. In this case, if a national legislature were being elected, a party—let's call it the Republicrat party—would receive, in one form of the system, seats in the legislature in proportion to the votes that the party received. Hence, if the Republicrats got 10 percent of the popular vote, they would earn 10 percent of the seats in the legislature (if 100 seats were at stake, the party would get 10 percent of these, or 10 seats). Thus, receiving only 10 percent of the popular vote still translates into the Republicrats having representation in the legislature. Proportional representation systems encourage smaller parties.

On the other hand, the single-member-district system can discourage small parties. The Republicrats, let us assume, still have 10 percent popular support in the electorate, Republicans 45 percent and Democrats 45 percent. That support, however, is scattered throughout 100 districts, each of which elects one representative. The Republicrats, if their support is 10 percent per district, will gain *no* representatives, since either Republicans or Democrats will have enough votes to win every district. In the end, the Republicrat voter wastes his or her vote by supporting the Republicrat candidate. Thus the voter will end up casting a ballot for either a Republican or a Democrat, who can win, rather than a Republicrat, who cannot win.

Still another factor favoring the strength and endurance of a two-party system is the nature of our election laws. Designed by officials of the two major parties (no coincidence!), these election laws make it difficult for third parties to even get their candidates on the ballot. For instance, some states demand a very large number of signatures on a petition before allowing a minor party to have its candidates placed on the ballot. This makes it quite unlikely that this party will find its candidates' names placed before the voting public.

2. Parties in the United States are pragmatically oriented. They tend to advance moderate positions; they are not rigidly ideological (debate is intense *within* the party over what its positions ought to be); and they appeal to many groups to gain support. Parties offer positions designed to appeal to a fairly wide spectrum of American political opinion. The Democrats have many conservative loyalists. There are also some relatively liberal Republican officeholders, such as Senator Robert Packwood. The parties, then, are accommodative, since they attempt to address a wide array of interests. And when they are perceived as *not* being open to a variety of views, they may lose support. This appears to have happened to the Republicans in the 1992 elections, when many voters saw them as responding only to the most conservative elements in the Republican party—and, hence, as being out of step with some mainstream opinions.[2]

3. Parties in the United States are not structurally centralized. Consequently, the party leaders find it a problem to discipline officeholders who do not go along with them. In votes in Congress, there are usually defectors who vote with members of the other party. For example, many conservative Democrats in the House of Representatives bolted the party leadership's position and supported President Reagan's budget in the early 1980s (the defectors were called "boll weevils"). Yet, it is very rare when a party will punish one of its members for so straying. One recent instance of penalizing a member of Congress for breaking with the party occurred in 1983. The Democratic leadership moved to take Representative Phil Gramm's seat on the House Budget Committee away from him because of his active support of President Reagan's budget against the party's position. However, these comments about loose party centralization should be read while keeping in mind evidence that party leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives has actually become stronger in recent years.[3]

The History of American Parties

Political factions had been prominent in the states under the Articles of Confederation (see Chapter 2). These were often referred to as parties. At the time of the Constitutional Convention, few American leaders had a favorable view of these organizations. Historian Richard Hofstadter calls their orientation "anti-party."[4] Alexander Hamilton and James Monroe, among the most negative toward political party, believed that parties were evil, reflecting the efforts of special interests to gain control of government for their own selfish goals. They felt that the norm for any society should be consensus on its goals and the rules of the game; this would produce peace and tranquility for that society. A party—in their view—represented minority interests working against the larger public interest. Hence party competition was a sign of disease in a political society—and must somehow be suppressed.

This line of reasoning is, in fact, typical of that of many developing countries. For example, after Zimbabwe achieved its independence, the party gaining control shortly thereafter tried to stamp out opposition parties. The new government's justification was that opposition parties bespoke plots to damage the country. Its position is very close to that of Hamilton and Monroe, who were, after all, leaders in a developing country in the 1790s. Despite this distaste for party, parties did indeed emerge in the 1790s.

Of course, the other antiparty position, exemplified by James Madison, was more moderate. Madison believed, too, that party had negative effects. However, as noted in *Federalist 10,* he felt that its harmful consequences could be controlled through representation and a larger republic encompassing more disparate perspectives.

Federalists and Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans

These two parties became contenders for power in the mid-1790s as Hamilton and his followers found themselves at odds with Jefferson, Madison, and their like-minded colleagues. The Federalists, with Hamilton and John Adams as early spokesmen, stood for a pro-England, anti-France foreign policy and a more active federal government, one involved in supporting business and manufacturing interests.

The Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans were less hospitable toward England and leaned toward France. They also opposed the somewhat more supportive stance of the Federalists toward manufacturing and commerce. The Jeffersonians were the party of the yeoman farmer, whereas the "better sort" were more likely to be Federalists.

What happened to those, the anti-Federalists, who had fought against the Constitution's approval? Many Americans were in this camp; what happened to them in the first party era? While anti-Federalists were not a political party as such during the ratification battles, they did become a part of the Federalist/Democratic-Republican system. They became allies of supporters of the Constitution (such as Madison), who were opposed to the policies of Hamilton and the Federalist party, to provide the backbone of the Jeffersonian party.[5]

The two parties competed fairly evenly for a couple of elections, but after 1800, the Federalists faded badly and were essentially dead as a party by 1815. This ended the first party era. After the demise of the Federalists, the heirs of Jefferson were the only party organization left. The term "Era of Good Feeling" (1816–1824) referred to the lack of party contention, not to the amicability of politics.

Whigs versus Democrats

Andrew Jackson's victory over John Quincy Adams in the 1828 presidential election was the catalyst leading to the rise of the second party era. The opposition to Jackson grew quickly and precipitated the rise of the Whig party to challenge Jacksonian Democrats. The Whigs were not a direct successor of the Federalists; its leaders were not old Federalists, and its organization had no ties to the Federalists. The Whigs were a very pragmatic party, based on a broad coalition of interests opposed to Jacksonian policies and to Jackson himself.

To the extent that the Whigs had a policy orientation, it was more nationalistic and business-oriented (as opposed to agriculture-oriented). The Whigs did court mass support, however. They ran war heroes for president (such as William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor) who had little experience and had few previously widely known political views. The two parties were competing on a national level by 1840. Party organization and political campaigning became recognizable in today's terms. If an American today were transported back to the Martin Van Buren–William Henry Harrison election of 1840, he or she would be familiar with the way the Democrats and Whigs conducted their campaigns.

The rise of race and slavery as issues in the 1850s precipitated the breakup of the Whig party. As a broad accommodationist party, the Whigs could not handle the sectional conflict over the issue of permitting slavery in the western territories, which broke out in the 1850s. The only question was what new party would replace them. Free-Soilers? Know-Nothings? Or a party originating in (take your pick) Ripon (Wisconsin), Angelica (New York), or Friendship (New York)—the Republicans?

The Long-Running Road Show: Democrats versus Republicans

The Republican party became the new rival of the Democrats and was marginally dominant from 1865 to 1896. Abraham Lincoln's victories in 1860 and 1864 signaled the beginning of this period, during which major changes took place in the United States. Perhaps most significant were industrialization and urbanization. Power moved from agriculture to business in the economic sphere. Regional conflict remained—the industrializing Northeast against the farmers of the South, the West, and the Midwest.

The Republicans were more supportive of industry, the Democrats of agriculture. By 1896 the Democratic party had become dominated by agricultural interests, which were increasingly disenchanted with being left in the wake of rapid industrialization. William Jennings Bryan electrified the Democratic presidential convention of 1896 with his "Cross of Gold" speech, which called for a policy favoring the small farmers. He won the nomination, only to be defeated in the election by William McKinley. From 1896 to 1932, the Republicans were clearly the dominant party.

Between 1928 and 1936, another massive change occurred, as the Republicans—cursed with the almost unimaginable dislocations caused by the Great Depression—saw new voters, children of immigrants, blacks, and the working class move toward support of the opposition Democrats. The Democrats, with Franklin Roosevelt's victories in 1932 and 1936, entrenched themselves as the new majority party.

In the New Deal era, the Democrats stood for what is called the positive state, the use of government power to help the disadvantaged and powerless and the working class and the belief that such power ought to be used for the good of the public. They supported civil rights of blacks (at least northern Democrats did). The Republicans remained more supportive of business interests and generally fought to reduce government regulation of the private sector.

Has the United States entered or is it entering yet another party era? Are the Republicans becoming the new majority party? Or does the victory of Bill Clinton in 1992 presage a return to the dominance of the New Deal Democratic coalition? These are frequently raised questions, and ones that will be addressed in detail in later sections.

Critical Elections

A few elections (or election periods) in American history have drastically altered the balance of power in American politics. These are called critical elections, of which there are two distinct types—converting and realigning.

Types of Critical Elections

Realigning Elections. The most dramatic elections are those in which a majority party sinks to minority status (or disappears altogether) and the underlying voter coalitions change. The years 1928 to 1936 form one such realigning period. A realigning election sees coalitions of party loyalists altered and a different party—either the minority party or a new party—coming to dominance. This situation nicely describes the beginnings of the New Deal era.

Converting Elections. In this type of election, the majority party stays dominant, but the parties' coalitions change. In 1896, the Republican base changed to include residents of industrial cities. The key feature in such elections is the alteration of party coalitions. At the time of critical elections, changes normally follow as new issues come to the fore that demand new policy approaches.[6]

Critical elections are often thought of as happening abruptly. However, this need not be the case. V. O. Key, Jr., spoke of "secular realignment," in which the change process could take place over a lengthy time period:

> A secular shift in party attachment may be regarded as a movement of the members of a population category from party to party that extends over several presidential elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections. . . . A movement that extends over a half century is a more persuasive indication of the phenomenon in mind than is one that lasts less than a decade.[7]

Conditions Leading to Critical Elections

Research points to three kinds of contributors to critical elections: new issues arising, incompetent party leadership, and external factors (such as the rise of media and public opinion polling).

New Issues. One of the most common assumptions made in theorizing about critical elections is that one party (and it is normally the dominant one) becomes "out of step" with the times. New issues arise and the party is unable to adapt to these altered circumstances. The Democrats were dominant up until the Civil War as a more agriculturally oriented party. As industrialization reshaped the nation, the party began to lose sway over the electorate, for it was increasingly unable to speak to the new needs created by America's industrial revolution.

Incompetent Party Leadership. Party leaders can be inept and contribute to realignment. One can speak of the "intelligence of parties" in terms of adapting to the electoral environment.[8] More adaptive parties, presumably, are more likely to be successful in elections. If a party's leadership were to "lose touch" with the voters, then that party would be at risk of falling behind in party competition.

External Factors. Elements from the larger society can affect the odds of critical elections taking place. For instance, consider the use of public opinion polling. Now that parties' and candidates' use of this tool has become so widespread, the likelihood of critical elections occurring has diminished greatly, since a party has no excuse now to fall out of step with public opinion.[9] Consider, too, the level of information among the electorate about an election. In the past, realignment was primarily due to people not voting because they lacked information. Now, with the advent of television, with presidential debates commonly taking place, and with more investigative reporting, voters have much more information available to them, and hence realignment becomes less probable.[10]

Case Study: 1896

The McKinley-Bryan struggle illustrates the *converting election.* Republicans maintained their dominance, but underlying party coalitions changed dramatically. Some parts of the electorate, formerly Democratic supporters from rural areas, "dropped out" as they saw their political power erode and ceased voting as regularly for their party. Thus, the Democrats lost strength in one of their key constituencies.[11] At the same time, some urban blue-collar workers came to support the Republican party, out of fear of Bryan's—and the Democrats'—perceived lack of empathy with urban and industrial issues.[12] Thus, a shrinking of the electorate along with changes in party affinities produced a critical election.

Case Study: 1928–1936

1932 is looked at as the quintessential *realigning election.* Here, the majority Republicans were thrashed and became the minority party for many decades to come; party coalitions changed considerably, with urban areas, ethnics, and blacks moving predominantly into the Democratic Party.[13] However, the picture is not quite so clear. For one thing, 1928 (and even before) is when much of the realignment actually occurred.[14] For another, we find a combination of "mobilization" toward the Democratic party: (1) those not previously attached to either party, such as those just coming of voting age or those who had not voted before even though otherwise eligible to do so, and (2) "conversion," Republicans moving into the Democratic party permanently as well as vice versa.

One argument seems to make sense of the various data. Mobilization toward the Democratic party began in the mid-1920s, the culmination coming with Al Smith's unsuccessful run for the presidency as a Democrat in 1928. In 1932 and 1936, we find conversion becoming the dominant mechanism for change in the party universe. Thus, even though people often speak of the 1932 realignment, the process probably took place over more than a decade (perhaps meeting minimal requirements of a secular realignment), with different dynamics accounting for change in different elections.

Reflections on the Idea of Critical Elections

Some analysts believe that the whole idea of critical elections is not very fruitful, since there have been so few such elections. Indeed, much literature has focused on the emergence in 1932 of a new Democratic majority party, and some authors have used this as the basis for developing a complex theory of realignment. But this was just one election! Hence, although the concept of critical elections might be useful to sensitize people to sometimes dramatic changes in party dynamics, it probably should not be taken as seriously as it has been over time.[15]

Party in the Electorate

Party identification is one of the most important political orientations: it helps to shape candidate evaluation and actual voting behavior. Although it tends to be rather stable, there have been important changes from time to time, and the future of the party in the electorate is unclear.

Party System Support

One way of looking into the future of the party in the electorate is to consider the trends in people's support for a party system in the first place. Do people see parties as vital institutions that ensure responsive government? Or might they judge parties to be ineffective and actual causes of government problems? A study by Jack Dennis finds that the positive feelings of American citizens for their political party system declined greatly from the 1960s to about 1980. In the 1980s, people seemed to think that parties were not so bad after all. However, the level of approval of the party system was not up to what it was in the early 1960s (parties had recovered only about a third of their loss by 1984). Dennis believes that the more recent positive feelings toward the party system may be due to a change in the political atmosphere of the 1980s. He says that "the improved level of party system legitimation [that is, people's support for the party system] may also have something to do with the less politically traumatic 'era of good feelings' that has accompanied, in the public mind, the Reagan incumbency."[16] As long as the political arena featured approval of the Reagan administration and its successors, then positive feelings for the parties would be expected to at least continue or even to grow.

What has been the record with respect to Dennis's prediction since 1984? Later in the decade, while parties were surely not loathed by the American people, they had not recaptured their once great support, either.[17]

Party Identification

Central to the party in the electorate is party identification. If there were ever to be a hall of fame for questionnaire items, the Survey Research Center's indicator of partnership would be a charter member: "Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

Basic trends are clear up to 1984. The number of Independents has increased dramatically—from 22 percent of those interviewed by the Survey Research Center in 1952 to 34 percent in 1984. The proportion of the electorate calling themselves Democrats (adding together weak and strong identifiers) has declined over time, from 47 percent in 1952 to 37 percent in 1984. Republican identification had been declining from 1952 to 1980, but it bounced back in 1984. The gap between Democrats and Republicans dwindled to 9 percent in 1984 (37 percent Democrats versus 28 percent Republicans), from 20 percent in 1952. By 1988, the gap had become 7 percent (35 percent Democrats as opposed to 28 percent Republicans).[18]

The increase in the number of Independents over time has been interpreted as implying that party has become less important to the electorate and as marking the decline of party significance. This may be a premature assessment. The number of Independents has been declining in the years since 1984. Also, the gap between the two parties in terms of how many citizens line up behind each has declined. The resurgence of the Republican party has signaled to some a realignment (to be discussed more extensively in a later section).

However, the increase in Independents over time may be illusory. A substantial proportion of those who call themselves Independent, when pressed by interviewers, will concede that they lean toward either the Republican or Democratic parties. These so-called independent leaders actually behave much like partisans; that is, Democratic leaners seem to behave pretty much like those people who call themselves Democrats without being prodded to do so.[19] From 1952 through 1960, an average of 8 percent of the electorate defined itself as pure Independent (not leaning one way or another); by 1990, that figure had risen to an eight-year average of 11 percent. From 1952 to 1960, Independent leaners averaged about 14 percent of the electorate; from 1984 to 1990, that figure had risen considerably—to 24 percent. Thus, the greatest increase in the number of Independent voters has been among the ranks of the leaners—who appear to be "closet" partisans in the first place.

What factors affect the proportion of Democrats versus Republicans in the electorate at large? First, economic conditions of the previous year and a half (ascertained by an index of consumer sentiment) are associated with "macropartisanship"; as consumer sentiment becomes more pessimistic, people begin shifting away from the party in power. Second, presidential approval plays a role. As support for the president increases, so, too, does support for the president's party, as people begin to shift toward it. However, people have short memories! Shifting of party support due to presidential approval reflects only the previous quarter's evaluations by the people. Thus, consumers' views of economic conditions have a longer-lasting, more enduring impact than presidential approval.[20]

Party Coalitions

The New Deal coalition was at the heart of Democratic partisan support for many decades. There is much talk about its disintegration today. Nonetheless, the traditional bases of party support continue to hold—even though they are much weakened. Robert Axelrod's analysis of coalition support shows that the most loyal supporters of the Democratic party are blacks, the poor, and residents of central cities. Catholics and southerners have become quite a bit less loyal over the past 30 years, and union loyalty has dropped somewhat. To compound the Democratic party's problems, its most tenacious supporters do not represent large proportions of the total population.[21]

In the meantime, Republicans win a majority of voters who are nonpoor, white, nonunion, Protestant, Northern, and non–central city. Moreover, there are substantial numbers of such people among the populace. In addition, Republicans are continuing to make inroads among white southerners. As Axelrod observed:

> The advantages for the Republicans and the problems for the Democrats are deeper than the personalities of their respective candidates in 1984, and are reflections of basic trends cutting across the traditional cleavages in the American population.[22]

Party Leaders and Followers

In 1957 and 1958, party leaders (about 3200 delegates from the Republican and Democratic national party conventions) and followers (almost 1500 American citizens) filled out questionnaires addressing the extent to which leaders and the rank-and-file party members shared political views. Leaders clearly differed, suggesting that there was a real distinction in the parties' perspectives. On issue after issue, Republican leaders were more conservative and Democratic leaders were more liberal. On the other hand, the followers tended to be more similar and lacked the striking differences found in the comparison of leaders. The Republican rank and file was actually closer to the Democratic leaders than to the Republican leaders, indicating that the Democratic leadership was more in tune with the mass party loyalists.[23]

In 1972 and 1976, the tides of public opinion had shifted, and now the rank and file of both parties tended to be nearer the Republican than the Democratic leadership. This may be saying that in the 1970s the Democratic leadership was losing touch with its rank-and-file party identifiers.[24]

In 1980, another study was carried out. Party leaders were defined as a sample of delegates to the two parties' 1980 presidential conventions, county chairs, state party chairs, and members of the Republican and Democratic National Committees. Citizens' views were ascertained by responses in several national surveys completed in 1980. This time, Democratic leaders ranked from moderate (county chairs) to liberal (the most liberal were delegates to the convention), whereas Republican leaders were quite homogeneous—and conservative. The mass identifiers also were different from one another, with more liberals and moderates in the Democratic ranks and more conservatives dominating the Republican rank and file. Even among Democratic identifiers, though, 42 percent called themselves conservative. At the party elite level, there were marked differences between the competing parties.

Among the masses, neither set of party leaders was clearly representative of the partisan identifiers. On social issues (such as the Equal Rights Amendment), both Republican and Democratic identifiers were much closer to the Democratic than the Republican leadership. On economic issues (cutting government spending and services), a fairly straightforward pattern emerged. Republican elites were more conservative, then came the Republican identifiers, then the Democratic identifiers, and, finally, the Democratic leaders as least conservative (actually, as liberal). Generally, Democratic followers were closer to their leaders than Republican followers were to their party elites. With defense expenditures, Republican leaders and followers were very similar, and Democratic identifiers were much closer to Republican leaders than to Democratic ones.[25] Analogous findings come from a comparison of nominating convention delegates and the electorate as a whole in 1988.[26]

What does all this mean? It seems that the two parties' elites have become more distinct over time, often teetering on the edge of losing touch with their constituents. Perhaps this is why Michael Dukakis, despite some advantages over George Bush, lost in 1988; he may not have been perceived as in the mainstream as a result of Bush's election campaign. And, in 1992, Bill Clinton was seen by Democrats as moderate, thus positioning himself more closely to the center of the Democratic rank and file.

The Republican party has come back from the brink of being a noncompetitive party to approaching parity with the Democrats. The old Democratic New Deal coalition is fraying. This package of changes may portend a major change in partisan politics—or it may not. This issue deserves fuller attention and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Party Organization

The Party Organization

On paper, the party organization for Democrats and Republicans is impressive. The foot soldier at the base of local organization is the precinct captain or committeeperson. This person's role is to get out the vote for the party on election day, although many really do very little. The next layer is likely to be the town or village committee (in rural areas) or the city or ward committee (in urban areas). Next is the county central committee, headed by the county chair. The county chair is normally the most important local political official, responsible for campaign strategy, fund-raising, and the dispensing of patronage (non–civil service jobs given to loyal party supporters).

The state party committee membership is selected from districts throughout the state (for example, congressional districts or counties). Normally, the state committee selects a state chair who is largely responsible for the ongoing work of the state party.

At the apex of this party pyramid is the national party committee. Members are selected to represent the various states. The national committee selects a national party chair, who, with his or her staff, administers party business on a day-to-day basis. Normally, the president handpicks a party chair who is routinely approved by the national committee. The presidential candidates in election years designate who the national chair will be. When a party loses the presidential race, its committee has a freer hand in selecting a chair later on.

The Decline of Party Organization

Despite having what look like well-defined organizational structures, the parties' organizations have often been described as weak and fragmented. Local parties can have much autonomy from their state central committee, and state and local organizations are not normally "under the thumb" of their national committees.

The most common view is that state and local party organizations are weaker than they used to be—and that the national organization has generally never been very powerful. The decline of state and local organization is due to several factors. One is the use of primary elections to select party candidates for office. This effectively removes the party's control over nominations for elective office, and as a result, those who are elected end up being less beholden to the party organization. One can now be nominated for and elected to office with little or no help from the party organization. Candidates use the media and their own set of supporters to win votes in the primary election; then they can use the same strategy to win office. Consequently, the party in government (elected officials and candidates) is often independent of the party organization.

Another blow to state and local organizations has been the increasing number of jobs under civil service protection. With fewer patronage jobs available to reward party loyalists, the ability of the party organizations to maintain a loyal cadre of workers is reduced.

Finally, at the local level, many positions are unfilled, especially at the precinct level. Moreover, many party workers are quite inactive. This means that rather few people are going to be doing any party work.

Party Organization Resurgence?

The prevailing picture of party organization is rather bleak. However, recent evidence suggests that party organizations may be reviving at all levels—local, state, and national.

Local Parties

One survey of county chairs throughout the United States reports that from 1964 to 1980 county parties were doing more in a number of areas. The local organizations became more active in raising money, distributing campaign literature, arranging political events, and sponsoring registration drives. Both the Republican and Democratic parties have become organizationally stronger at the local level. The local parties are still not well-oiled machines, though. There is minimal staffing and not a great deal of budgetary support; often there is even no permanent party headquarters.[27]

State Parties

When state organizations are compared from the 1950s and 1960s up to 1980, similar evidence for stronger parties emerges. Most states have developed a permanent headquarters with full-time leadership and a more professional staff. Party budgets have increased dramatically, and as one consequence, state organizations sponsor many more programs. Some of these focus on elections, such as helping to fund candidates' campaigns, providing services to candidates (for example, polls), and recruiting candidates to run for office. State organizations also have increased organization-building activities. They sponsor polls, publish newsletters, and work on developing party issue positions.[28] While both Republican and Democratic state party organizations got stronger up until 1970, improvements in Democratic organizations ceased about then. Meanwhile, Republican state organizations have continued their revitalization into the 1980s.

National Parties

The national committees, especially the Republicans, are playing larger roles.[29] In addition to the Republican National Committee, both the Senate and the House Republican Campaign Committees have been active. For instance, in the 1980 elections these three committees raised $100 million. They cooperated with one another in gaining these funds and in spending them. These organizations provided campaign contributions to candidates for national and state offices. The committees used something of a "triage" model, providing support for candidates who needed it and who had a chance to win. Less support went to sure winners and sure losers. In the long run, this might make the party in government more beholden to the Republican party organization. The Republican committees also organized a national advertising campaign on behalf of Republican candidates ("Vote Republican for a change"), sponsored get-out-the-vote drives for the local party organizations, and organized fund-raising activities to help state party organizations.

The Democrats have lagged greatly behind the Republicans at the national party level, even though the gap has narrowed.[30] They have been able to raise less money and provide fewer services to Democratic candidates and state and local party organizations.

The Electoral Impact of Party Organization

A party organization working to get its voters to turn out in an election makes a real difference. One study found that activities by party organizations accounted for about 7 percent of the vote in selected statewide and national elections in 1984.[31] Other research suggests that vigorous efforts by a local party organization can affect between 4 percent and 20 percent of the votes cast for different offices.[32] Thus the strength and vitality of state and local party organizations can have a significant impact on election outcomes.

Party in Government

The party in government is the set of public officials elected under a party's banner and the influence of the party on these officials' behavior. The trend in the party in government over the past several decades is increased strength, largely at the expense of the party organization.

Some scholars decry the greater independence of the party in government from the party organization. Many would prefer a model of government referred to as responsible parties or party government. Political party organizations would develop a comprehensive set of issue positions (perhaps guided by an overarching ideological framework). They would insist that the candidates they sponsor for office work to advance their programs once elected. The party organization would discipline those who broke rank, thus ensuring cohesiveness (that is, members of the party in government voting together).

Advocates of responsible parties believe that this system, if put into operation, would make government decision making more principled, since legislators' votes, for example, would be determined by a coherent ideological framework. Interest-group lobbying or the need to curry favor with constituents by devoting great amounts of time to running errands for the folks back home (such as investigating why a person's social security check did not arrive on time) would be less influential. This would add an element of rationality to the policy process and would render government much more likely to enact policies in accord with the majority's wishes.

This situation, obviously, does not exist in the United States. On roll-call votes in the Senate and the House of Representatives, many legislators break from their party's position. The parties tend to advance an array of policy positions designed to appeal to heterogeneous groups within their coalition. This can lead to an incoherent program, as different promises are made to different groups with little regard for how well they fit together as a package.

And, of course, elected officials are relatively independent of their party organization. Many build their own campaign organizations apart from the official party organization. The new style of campaigning describes the increasingly typical way of getting elected. Candidates have their own set of campaign workers who are loyal to them and not necessarily to the party organization. Candidates can generate their own campaign funds and are not particularly dependent upon funds from the party, making those running for office less beholden to the party organization. Increasingly, campaigns are media-oriented, with professional consultants working with candidates to get them elected, all apart from the party machinery. In the end, the party in government cannot be effectively guided by the party organization.

This is even more the case for incumbents (elected persons already in office) who desire reelection. Incumbents engage in errand-running activities for their constituents (such as trying to take care of people's problems with government and bringing federal money into their districts). This leads the voters to reward the incumbents by supporting them in the next election. Once more, elected officials can build a base of support independent of the party organization.

Still, party is an important factor in the public lives of elected officials. The best way to predict how a member of Congress will vote on a bill is still his or her party affiliation. Since 1968, the extent of party cohesion (a majority of Democrats voting against a majority of Republicans) has risen in Congress.[33] This may signal an enhanced role of party in decision making in the national legislature. One need only note the Senate and House Republicans' remarkable unity in opposing the budget proposals advanced by President Bill Clinton in 1993. As well, party members align strongly together within committees in their votes, with some slight strengthening of party loyalty evident in recent years.[34] And, as noted earlier, party leadership in the House of Representatives is much stronger than it was two decades ago. Even federal judges' decisions are related to their party background.

Thus, although the party in government is hardly controlled by the party organization, as supporters of the responsible-party view would like, party is a key consideration in the behavior of elected officials. This at least says that party continues to play a role for government leaders.

Toward Party Realignment?

1964 and 1968 as Possible Realigning Years

Some claim that 1964 (or even 1968) was a critical election year in the United States, one in which race was the issue restructuring political coalitions. The logic for this contention can be outlined thus:[35]

1. From the 1940s until 1964, Republicans were more moderate and Democrats were more conservative in House of Representatives and Senate votes on civil rights bills. After 1964, Democrats in Congress became more moderate to liberal than Republicans.
2. Voters accurately perceived this change.
3. After 1964, new Republican identifiers became more conservative and new Democrats more liberal on racial issues.

This response by voters to changes in congressional behavior could help to explain the defection from the Democrats of blue-collar workers and southern whites, since both groups are more conservative on racial issues. This seems to be part of a two-stage process. First, southern whites came to see themselves as less Democratic (party identification as a Democrat weakens, fewer vote for Democratic presidential candidates, support of Republican candidates in subpresidential races increases). This is dealignment, where party becomes less relevant and important as a guide for the citizenry. A major reason for this change was the rapid loss of Democratic identification in young southern white voters (much of which occurred between 1964 and 1968). However, Democratic identification has weakened among older voters as well. Thus, this first stage involves weakening of Democratic party bonds in the south.

In the second stage, southern whites shifted toward Republican identification. In 1980 and 1981, for instance, dramatic shifts toward the Republican party occurred among whites in Florida. The key group, once more, was younger voters, with some older conservative/segregationist Democrats joining the rush.

In addition, many white southerners seem to carry a kind of dual identification. They see themselves as Republicans in national elections (presidential and congressional) and as Democrats in state and local elections. This dual identification began in earnest in 1964.

Performance-Based Voting

Thus, 1964 to 1968 were important elections. Race was an important part of the answer as to why change has occurred. So too was dissatisfaction with Democratic presidential performance. However, there is disagreement over what these findings mean. First, recall the earlier discussion which concluded by noting that some analysts do not believe that the concept of realignment or critical elections means very much. Second, party loyalties have been generally weakening. Martin Wattenberg refers to the alleged realignment as "hollow."[36] Evidence suggests that much of the gain in Republican identification was performance-based, a function of Ronald Reagan's success as president. Note that in 1992 George Bush, saddled with voters' perceptions that he was not a particularly skillful president, found voters deserting him and swinging toward Bill Clinton.

Political parties are becoming less salient and less important to voters. In an increasingly candidate-centered age, party does not have the same value as a cue for the electorate as it used to. Furthermore, the greatest shift from Democratic to Republican identification seems to be centered in the least educated, the least interested, and the least informed politically and, consequently, the most volatile in their views.[37] Results of the 1988 and 1992 elections further suggests the importance of performance-based voting, as we shall see in Chapter 6.

The Role of the Media

The media play a significant role in the declining relevance of party. Because media campaigns are often undertaken by candidates these days, party is becoming less important to aspirants for elective office. Data gathered during the 1978 congressional elections indicate that as media spending increases, party becomes less salient to the voters and the candidates themselves become more so. Candidates are becoming electoral entrepreneurs working for themselves and seeing party as secondary.

Media affect voters' behavior in other ways. Many people view television as the most trustworthy and dependable source of news. Unfortunately, reliance on television as a news source limits viewers' ability to distinguish candidates' positions, and, hence, leads to a reduction in voter turnout rates, since those who cannot see differences between candidates are less likely to vote. The lower levels of interest and information associated with television dependence are reducing the ability of Americans to judge parties and candidates. This, in turn, may render the electorate more volatile.

Future election outcomes may depend more on the short-term forces of candidate evaluation and specific issues than on the long-term force of party identification. Wattenberg notes:

> Even if the Republican surge is a long-lasting one, it will be of limited importance as long as partisanship in the electorate continues to decline. . . . The candidate-centered age will be with us for a long time to come, regardless of whether the next political era will be a Democratic or Republican one.[38]

Divided Government

Earlier, the concept of responsible-party government was discussed. Underlying this is the assumption that one party controls all branches of government. However, it is manifestly clear that divided government is the nature of the current party system. Since 1952, the Republicans have usually controlled the presidency and the Democrats Congress. In the 20 national elections since then (presidential elections plus midterm congressional elections), 7 have resulted in unified government and 13 in divided party control. In 1992, the country returned, at least temporarily, to unified government. But this rather rare unity is unlikely to continue unless voters see President Clinton as successful.

Furthermore, state government is divided, with one party having the governorship and the other a majority in one or the other state legislative houses. From 1946 to 1990, the percentage of unified state governments (both houses plus the governorship in one party's hands) has declined from 85 percent to just under 45 percent. Another symbol of divided government is the common occurrence of one U.S. Senator from a state being Republican and the other a Democrat. In 1946, about 30 percent of the states had a split-party Senate delegation; in 1990, that figure was almost 45 percent.[39] Why have these changes come about, and what do they mean? Chapter 6 discusses this in somewhat greater depth.

Democratic theorists emphasize the linkage function of parties and note how party helps to organize alternatives for voters to facilitate their choice on election day. A plurality of the electorate selects its leaders, who, in turn, reflect the basic party views approved by voters. This should lead to policies broadly reflective of the public's preferences.

Elitists would counter that there is little difference between the parties ("tweedledum-tweedledee") and that both parties are firmly in the mainstream liberal tradition, offering little meaningful choice to voters. Further, both parties are beholden to major powerful interests for financing. In the end, parties dance as the strings are pulled by elite puppeteers.

Pluralists contend that each party is composed of a coalition of interests. Much bargaining and negotiation take place among them to produce party positions that give each of the various constituent groups something of value. In this way, the interests of a multitude of people are taken into account by the parties' desire to gain backing.

Recommended Reading

Paul Allen Beck and Frank Sorauf: *Party Politics in America,* 7th ed., HarperCollins, New York, 1992.

John F. Bibby: *Politics, Parties, and Elections in America,* 2d ed., Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1992.

Walter Dean Burnham: *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics,* Norton, New York, 1970.

Everett Carll Ladd, Jr.: *American Political Parties,* Norton, New York, 1970.

Martin P. Wattenberg: *The Decline of American Political Parties,* 2d ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1986.

CHAPTER 6

Voting and Elections

If there is any single institution that both scholars and the mass population consider central for democracy it is elections. The United States has a near mania for them; it is unlikely that any other country has so many. Not only do Americans have the opportunity to elect officials to numerous offices at all levels of government, in some states they can also take part in a special type of election known as a recall, *to remove elected officials from office. In addition, some states provide for* initiative; *if enough signatures are obtained by petition, that issue can be put on a ballot. Once the proposal is on the ballot, the citizens will have the chance to vote for or against it in a* referendum. *The referendum allows citizens to make laws directly.*

The ideal civics textbook model of a citizen is the issue-oriented voter. This person examines the positions of competing candidates on the issues of the day and then votes for the one closest to his or her own views. Most political scientists do not believe that this accurately describes American voters. Weighing against this characterization, they point out, are citizens' low levels of political information, the importance of a person's habitual party identification, and the relative lack of interest in politics.

This chapter examines the structure of elections and the nature of the electorate, presidential and congressional election politics, and some basic issues involved with the American electoral process. The final section considers what elections can say about where power lies in the United States.