

# POLITICAL PARTIES

There is no provision for political parties in the Constitution; indeed, the framers were extremely wary of what they called “factions,” and George Washington in his farewell address warned the American people “in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party. . . .” The divisions that surfaced over the ratification of the Constitution, however, quickly led to the creation of parties. The presidential election of 1796 pitted Federalist John Adams against Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson. From that point on, American politics has been a battleground between two political parties in contrast to the multi-party systems common in Europe and other parliamentary democracies.

## The Development of Political Parties

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In the early days of the country, the Federalist Party was identified with the ideas and programs of Alexander Hamilton, Washington’s Secretary of the Treasury. These ideas included a strong central government, economic development based on commerce and manufacturing, and loose construction of the Constitution. Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans, on the other hand, wanted to give more power to the states, keep the central government in check by strict construction of the Constitution and view the United States as a nation of small farmers. While the Democratic Republicans controlled the White House for a quarter of a century (1800–1824), the Federalist Party faded from the scene so quickly that it did not even put up a presidential candidate in 1820 or 1824. There were four Democratic-Republican candidates in 1824. Although Andrew Jackson received the most electoral votes, he did not have the majority needed to win and the election was thrown in the House of Representatives. In what became known as the “corrupt bargain,” Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House and one of the candidates, used his influence with the members to ensure that John Quincy Adams was elected. In return, Clay became Secretary of State, a position he wanted.

Although usually associated with the election of Jackson in 1828, the so-called Era of the Common Man began somewhat earlier with the significant expansion of suffrage. From as early as the 1790s and through the 1820s, the states dropped property qualifications for voting. Jacksonian Democrats drew support from the West and the South; from small farmers and the working class as well as recent immigrants. Opposition to Jackson came together around the Whig Party, which, much like the old Federalists, backed business, the national bank, and a strong federal government. The years before the Civil War also saw important changes in how presidential candidates were chosen. The national party convention made up of delegates from each state replaced the caucus of congressional members; presidential candidates ran on a **platform** that outlined the party’s goals and positions on issues facing the country. Each issue became a **plank** of the platform.

When the Whigs faded as a political force in the 1850s, they were replaced by the Republican Party; the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was the proximate cause of the Civil War. In the aftermath of war and Reconstruction, the Republicans emerged as the majority party. Only two Democratic presidents — Grover Cleveland (1885–1889 and 1893–1897) and Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921) — were elected up until 1932 even though the two parties vied for control of Congress. The South remained a stronghold for the Democrats even longer. With a few notable exceptions, the states of the old Confederacy remained solidly Democratic until the 1960s.

**Party realignment** occurs when voter loyalties shift in response to critical events. The onset of the Depression ushered in a period of Democratic ascendancy with Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932. Roosevelt was able to put together the **New Deal Coalition**, which included the South, labor, urban voters, immigrants, and ethnic minorities; this coalition remained a factor in national politics for more than three decades. African Americans, who had previously found a home in the party of Lincoln, turned to the Democrats after 1932, because the New Deal programs seemed to offer a way out of poverty. The Republican Party was able to make inroads into Democratic support by appealing to traditionally conservative voters in the South. Richard Nixon's **Southern Strategy** paid off for Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, divided government became increasingly common. Under Nixon, Gerald Ford, Reagan, and Bush, Congress was in the hands of the Democrats while Bill Clinton faced a Republican-controlled House and Senate after 1994.

From time to time in American politics, third parties have played a key role in presidential elections. Those who impact the election results or garner the most support in the popular and electoral vote are splinter parties that break off from the Democrats or Republicans. When Theodore Roosevelt ran as the Progressive Party candidate in 1912, he split the Republican vote and allowed Democrat Wilson to win. Southern Democrats, upset with the civil rights program adopted by the party's national convention in 1948, ran Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as the States' Rights Party candidate. Thurmond won 39 electoral votes in the Deep South and polled over a million votes. Similar concerns led Governor George Wallace of Alabama to run for president in 1968 under the banner of the American Independent Party. Wallace took Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi, but also showed strength outside of the South by receiving almost ten million votes. Ralph Nader and the Green Party were spoilers in the 2000 election, given the closeness of the vote in Florida and the likelihood that Nader votes would have gone to Democrat Al Gore.

Other types of third parties include single-issue parties like the Prohibition Party, whose platform is clear from the name, and the Free Soil Party that campaigned against the expansion of slavery into the western territories in 1848 and 1852. The Socialist Party, which won about 3% of the popular vote in presidential elections between 1904 and 1920, and today's Libertarian Party are examples of ideological parties on the left and the right. Third parties face significant obstacles in getting on the ballot. Requirements vary from state to state but may include getting a certain number of signatures or having a percentage of eligible voters register in the name of that party.

## **What Are Political Parties and What Do They Do?**

A party is a group that shares the same political beliefs or common interests and works to achieve political goals through the electoral process. Political scientists examine parties in several ways:

- **Party-as-organization.** This designation refers to the party professionals and activists as well as the infrastructure — county committee, state central committee, national committee — through which they function. Party professionals tend to be pragmatic, focused on winning elections. Ideology and specific issues are less of a concern for them than for the volunteer activists that the party attracts.
- **Party-in-government.** Politicians who hold municipal, state, or federal office and are members of a party make up this category. It is the president as party leader who is at the apex of this pyramid. The success of the party in translating its goals into policies depends on these officials, who have their own organizations, for example the Democratic Governors' Association, to formulate election strategy and develop issues.
- **Party-in-the-electorate.** Voters who identify with one party or the other and who usually support the candidates of that party are who make up this category.

The first task of a party is to find people to run for office and get as many of them elected as possible. Except for **nonpartisan elections** where candidates are effectively independents without party affiliation, anyone running for office needs to get the endorsement of a political party. While the party's county committee might choose a prominent businesswoman for an open seat in the state assembly, it is more likely that she will have to win a primary election to get the nomination. Those who want to become the party's candidate for governor will also have to battle it out in the primary, but cannot ignore speaking to the state party convention or the state central committee. Once the nomination is secure, candidates can expect help from the local, state, or national party organizations. Prior to the recent (2002) changes in campaign finance law, both the Democratic and Republican national committees funneled millions of dollars of "soft money" (unregulated money) into individual campaigns.

Political parties also provide the American people with choices — both broad policy positions and narrower party platforms. Perhaps because the Republican and Democratic Parties try to appeal to the broadest cross-section of the American public, there are those who argue there is essentially no difference between the two major parties, and it is true that each party does have its right and left wings. Essentially, however, Republicans are pro-business, conservative on social issues, and concerned with the growth of the federal government while Democrats support the regulation of business, are liberal on social issues, and see government as the solution to many of the problems facing the nation. Outside these broad policy positions, Republican and Democratic platforms adopted at their respective national conventions are likely to take opposing stands on issues ranging from abortion to defense spending to school vouchers. The nominee has a major role in shaping the platform, which becomes an important part of the political agenda of the administration if the nominee is elected. While most Americans never take the time to read the party platform before they vote, they should. The programs and policies put into effect by a president follow the platform quite closely.

## The Organization and Responsibilities of Political Parties

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Political parties are organized at the local, state, and national levels. This does not mean, however, that there is a strict hierarchy within the party; indeed, local and state party organizations often function quite independently from the national organization.

The importance of political parties at the local level is much different today than it was in the past. Many municipal and county elections are nonpartisan. Moreover, the days of the **party machine** and the **political boss** whose power was rooted in the neighborhood are long passed. From the late nineteenth century through a good part of the twentieth century, the promise of jobs on the city payroll as a reward for party service and loyalty (**patronage**) allowed the system to flourish. Changes in the civil service and particularly primary elections, which provided an opportunity to reformers to compete for the party's nomination, undermined the strength of the political machine. Today, depending on their strength in a particular community, political parties may either select or identify candidates for local office, as well as provide organizational and financial assistance to candidates, and stake out positions on issues of importance to voters.

States regulate political parties and state law provides how they operate. They are responsible for finding candidates, strengthening party unity, and organizing elections; the state central committee and its chair generally oversee and direct these functions. Each party in the state legislature may have a campaign committee (similar to those in Congress) that channels money to candidates for office. Both the Democratic and Republican National Committees provide money to state parties as well. Party activists may be recognized by their appointment as electors in a presidential election. Electors for a particular party cast their votes in the electoral college only if their candidate wins the popular vote in the state.

The most important responsibility of a political party is the nomination of a candidate for president. This is done at the national convention, which also determines what the party stands for through the adoption of the platform and establishes the rules the party will follow. Traditionally most of the delegates to national conventions have been chosen by the party leadership. This was certainly the case at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, where party activists and elected officials were well represented. The violent clashes with anti-war protesters outside the convention hall and the heated debates inside prompted the party to appoint a commission to review the party structure and delegate the selection process. The **McGovern-Fraser Commission** brought about significant changes. To ensure a more open selection of delegates, the number of states holding presidential primaries doubled from 15 in 1968 to 30 in 1972. Quotas were imposed to ensure a broader representation of women and minorities. Although the quotas were ultimately replaced by guidelines, the makeup of each state delegation to the convention must still be half male and half female. The Commission's reforms, however, went too far in removing party activists from the process. After 1982, a portion of the delegates were reserved for party leaders and officeholders known as **superdelegates**, who are not necessarily bound by the primary results.

The **national committee** runs each party between nominating conventions. Each state elects its own members who are typically apportioned on the basis of population or party strength in the last election. But the national committee chair and his/her staff do the hardest work of the committee. He/she is responsible for day-to-day operations, including staffing, fundraising,

and scheduling. The chair also is a spokesperson for the party, particularly for the party out of power. The party's presidential nominee selects the chair, and, if the nominee does not win, the national committee replaces the chair. As party leader, the president can replace the chair at any time. While Robert Dole and George Bush both served as chair of the Republican National Committee, the position is not usually a stepping-stone to high elected office.

Each party has numerous groups affiliated with the national committee. The National Federation of Democratic Women, for example, encourages Democratic women to run for office and provides fundraising help for them and helps to write the party platform. It has three seats on the Democratic National Committee and one seat on the Executive Committee. The Young Republicans is a group for members of the party between the ages of 18 and 40, and has chapters in each state. There are also organizations of party members that work from the outside. The Democratic Leadership Council, which was formed in 1985, represents the moderate to conservative wing of the party.

## Political Parties Today

In recent years, American politics has become increasingly candidate-centered. Parties, for example, have no control over who or even how many candidates enter a primary; the winner is the nominee irrespective of what the party leadership thinks about the individual or his/her chances in the general election. When, for instance, David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, ran for governor of Louisiana as a Republican in 1990, both the state party organization and the Republican National Committee were opposed. Although parties remain sources of funding, provide help in getting out the vote, and political expertise, candidates today raise most of their own money and manage their campaign through their own staff.

Party identification develops early in the political socialization process; if your parents are Republicans, the likelihood is that you will be a Republican. Recent studies indicate, however, that party loyalty is weakening. Voters increasingly identify themselves as independents not aligned with either major party rather than Democrats or Republicans; ballots are cast for the candidate rather than the party label. When party loyalty is strong, people vote a **straight ticket**; for instance, if they are Democrats, they will vote for all Democrats on the ballot regardless of what they know about a candidate for a particular office. Today, **split-ticket voting** is more common. You may vote for the Democrat for Congress, but vote for the Republican for governor and president. The weakening of the bonds between voters and the two major parties is known as **party dealignment**.

Although the electorate as a whole may become more independent, there are exceptions to the general trend. African Americans remain strongly committed to the Democratic Party as the results of the 1992 and 1996 elections clearly show. Voter independence is not the only factor that seems to undermine the role parties have traditionally played in American politics. Candidates are increasingly independent as well. They do their own fundraising and hire their own pollsters or media specialists, and rely less on the party organization for assistance. The rise of single-issue politics has also had an impact. There are Americans who seem genuinely uninterested in the broad vision a party or a candidate has for the country. Their only focus is the candidate's stand on the single issue they care about—abortion, tax reduction/restructuring, defense spending, or homosexual rights, for example.