

Political parties and their candidates compete for control of the presidency, each offering different visions of what government should do. Parties unify and mobilize disparate groups in society, simplify the choices facing voters, and bring efficiency and coherence to government policy making.

## PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS

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Rather than being hierarchical organizations, American political parties are composed of three separate and largely independent pieces. Though they generally share the same general goals, these pieces rarely act in an organized manner and have no obligation to work together.

1. The **party organization** is the structure of national, state, and local parties, including party leaders and workers.
2. The **party in government** is made up of the politicians who were elected as candidates of a specific political party.
3. The **party in the electorate** includes all the citizens who identify with the party.

The term **party system** is used to describe periods in which the major parties' names, their groups of supporters, and the issues dividing them are all constant. In all, there have been six party systems in American history, separated by periods of realignment.

- The First Five Party Systems

- The First Party System, 1789–1828

- The first political parties were the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. Federalists favored a strong central government and a national bank, whereas Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans opposed these positions in favor of concentrating power at the state level.

- The Second Party System, 1829–56

- The Federalist party disintegrated. After a brief period as the only major political party, the Democratic-Republicans became the Democratic Party, and the Whig Party emerged.

The new Democratic Party embodied two important innovations:

1. The Democratic Party cultivated electoral support as a way of strengthening the party's hold on power in Washington. The party built organizations at the state and local levels to mobilize citizens to support the party's candidates.
2. The second innovation became known as the **party principle**, the idea that a political party exists as an organization distinct from its elected officials or party leaders. In addition, the Democrats developed the **spoils system**, whereby party supporters were rewarded with benefits such as federal government jobs.

- The Third Party System, 1857–92

- Slavery split the second party system. The Republican Party was formed by antislavery Whigs and antislavery Democrats. The Democratic Party became the party of the South and the party defending slavery. This transition illustrates that parties exist only because elites, politicians, party leaders, and activists want them to.

- The Fourth Party System, 1893–1932

- Although the Civil War settled the issue of slavery, the Democrats and Republicans remained the dominant parties, each one using its **political machine** in the fight for control of the political system. The parties divided on concerns such as the withdrawal of the Union Army from the southern states and whether the federal government should involve itself in the rapidly growing American cities and swelling number of recent immigrants.

- The Fifth Party System, 1933–68

- In the wake of the Great Depression, the Democratic Party emerged out of the **New Deal Coalition**, drawing support from African Americans, Catholics, Jewish people, union members, and white southerners. This transformation established the basic division between the Republican and Democratic parties that would persist for the rest of the twentieth century. Democrats generally favored a large federal government that took an active role in managing the economy and regulating individual and corporate behavior. Republicans believed that many of these programs should either be provided by state and local governments or kept entirely separate from government.

- The Sixth Party System, 1969–Present

- Changes in political issues and technology drove the transition from the fifth to the sixth party system. Democrats came out against the "separate but equal" system of racial discrimination in southern states and in favor of programs designed to ensure equal opportunity for minority citizens. Furthermore, whereas Republicans opposed expanding the role of government, Democrats argued in favor of expanding the federal government to provide health care funding, antipoverty programs, education, and public works. The party organizations were transformed into **parties in service**, each one recruiting, training, and campaigning for its party's congressional and presidential candidates.

- Realignments

Each party system is separated from the next by a **realignment**, a change in the size or composition of the party coalitions or in the nature of the issues that divide the parties. A realignment begins with the emergence of a new question or issue debate that captures the attention of large numbers of ordinary citizens, activists, and politicians.

In order to spur a realignment, the issue has to be crosscutting, meaning that within each party coalition, people disagree on what government should do. Realignments typically occur within an election cycle or two, but they can also occur gradually over the course of a decade or more.

## MODERN AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

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- The Party Organization

The principal policy-making body in each party organization is the **national committee**, comprising party representatives from each state. Parties include a number of constituency groups (the Democrats' term) or teams (the Republicans' term), which are organizations within the party that work to attract the support of particular demographic groups considered likely to share the party's issue concerns.

Many other groups are loosely affiliated with one of the major parties. **Political action committees (PACs)** are interest groups or divisions of interest groups that can raise money to contribute to campaigns or to spend on ads in support of candidates. The amount they can receive from each of their donors and their expenditure on federal electioneering are strictly limited.

**527 organizations** are tax-exempt groups formed primarily to influence elections through voter-mobilization efforts and issue ads that do not directly endorse or oppose a candidate. Unlike political action committees, they are not subject to contribution limits and spending caps. Although these groups often favor one party or the other, they are not part of the party organization and do not always agree with the party's positions or support its candidates.

Because the parties stand for different things, in terms of both their preferred government policies and their ideological leanings, the party names themselves are like **brand names**, because they offer a shorthand way of providing information to voters about the parties' candidates.

Party organizations are not hierarchies. Because individual committee members are not appointed by their state party organizations, they have freedom of action. If the majority of committee members disagree with the party leader, they can remove him or her from office. The national party organization is also unable to force state and local parties to share its positions on issues or to comply with other requests. State and local parties make their own decisions about state- and local- level candidates and issue positions.

- The Party in Government

The party in government consists of elected officials holding national, state, and local offices who took office as candidates of a particular party. Because it is composed of officeholders, it has a direct impact on government policy. Democratic and Republican parties in government in the U.S. House and Senate are organized around working groups. Democrats call theirs **caucus**, and Republicans have a **conference**. The caucus or conference is a forum for debate, compromise, selection of party leadership, and strategy planning among party leaders.

The modern Congress is **polarized**; in both the House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats hold different views on government policy with little crossover support for the other party's policy goals. Over the last 60 years, the magnitude of ideological difference between the parties in Congress has increased considerably. Nonetheless, the Democrats and Republicans are still quite internally heterogeneous, and compromise within a party caucus is not inevitable.

- The Party in the Electorate

The party in the electorate consists of citizens who identify with and show some loyalty to a particular political party. **Party identification (party ID)** is a critical variable in understanding votes and other forms of political participation. If you are trying to predict how someone will vote, the most important predictor is party identification.

Real participation in party operations is open to all citizens, though few dedicate their time, effort, and money to supporting a party organization or one of its candidates. These party **activists** make up only about 5 percent of the population.

Early theories of party identification described it as a deeply felt attachment. Further work, however, has shown that party ID is more of a **running tally**—a frequently updated mental evaluation of parties and candidates that allows citizens to incorporate new information in their choice to identify with one or another party. Thus, when a citizen chooses a political party, that decision is based on what he or she has seen in American politics. *New information tends to reinforce existing loyalties*

The parties in the electorate have transformed considerably in the past 40 years. During the 1970s, nearly half of adults identified with the Democratic Party, and only about 20 percent identified with Republicans. During the 1990s, the percentage of Democratic identifiers decreased significantly, and the percentage of Republican identifiers increased slightly, to the point that since 2002, the parties have had roughly the same percentage of identifiers.

**Party coalitions** are groups who identify with a political party, usually described in demographic terms, such as African American Democrats or evangelical Republicans. The Republican and Democratic party coalitions differ systematically in terms of their policy preferences.

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## THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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- **Contesting Elections**

Virtually everyone elected to a state or national political office is either a Republican or Democrat.

- The process of recruiting candidates has become very systematic, with national party leaders playing a central role in finding and recruiting candidates.

Parties do not control who runs in House or Senate races. In most states, candidates for these offices are selected in a primary election or a caucus. A **primary** is a ballot vote in which citizens select a party's nominee for the general election. A political **caucus** is a local meeting in which party members select a party's nominee for the general election.

Running as a party's nominee is the easiest way to get on the ballot. In most states, the number of signatures required to earn a candidate a spot on the ballot is much lower for the major party candidates than for independent and minor-party candidates. Thus, virtually all prominent candidates for Congress and the presidency run as Democrats or Republicans, even if they do not agree with all the party stands for.

National parties also manage the nomination process for presidential candidates, which involves a series of primaries and caucuses. Voters in these primaries and caucuses determine how many of each candidate's supporters become delegates to the party's national **nominating convention**, where delegates from each state select the party's presidential and vice presidential nominees and approve the party platform.

- One of the parties' primary activities is helping candidates with their campaigns. Along with supplying campaign funds, party organizations give candidates other kinds of assistance, ranging from offering campaign advice to conducting polls.
- A **party platform** is a set of objectives outlining the party's issue positions and priorities. Although candidates are not required to support their party's platform, party platforms generally reflect the brand-name differences between the parties, giving citizens an easy way to make judgments about candidates.

- **Cooperation in Government**

Parties seek to cooperate on policy plans and strategies for enacting proposals.

- Throughout the year, the parties in government meet to devise strategies for legislative action. Congressional leaders use their power to control when proposals are considered, which amendments are allowed, and how long debate will proceed to ensure speedy consideration and to prevent the opposing minority party from delaying votes or offering alternatives.
- Political parties can play an important role in coordinating the actions taken in different branches of government. Such coordination is important for enacting new laws: unless supporters in Congress can amass a two-thirds majority to override a veto, they need the president's support. Similarly, the president needs congressional support to enact proposals that he or she favors. Thus, the president routinely meets with congressional leaders from his or her party and occasionally meets with the entire caucus or conference.
- One of the most important roles of political parties in a democracy is giving citizens identifiable groups to reward or punish for government actions, thereby providing a means for voters to focus their desire for accountability.

During periods of **unified government**, one party holds a majority of seats in the House and Senate, and the president is a member of that same party. That party is the **party in power**; it has enough votes to enact policies in Congress. During times of **divided government**, when one party controls Congress but not the presidency or when the House and Senate are controlled by different parties, the president's party is considered the party in power.

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## MINOR PARTIES

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Minor political parties in America are so minor that they are not significant players on the political stage. Very few Americans identify with minor parties, especially because most minor parties exist for only a short period of time. People vote for minority-party candidates because they find those candidates' positions more attractive than those of the major parties, and also because they believe that neither major party can govern effectively.