

5.2 Political Participation

5.4 Describe linkage institutions, 5.5 Explain the function and impact of political parties on the electorate and government and 5.6 Explain why and how political parties change and adapt.

LINKAGE INSTITUTIONS (POLITICAL PARTIES, INTEREST GROUPS, ELECTIONS, MEDIA)

Numerous institutions link the people to their government. Linkage institutions are channels that allow individuals to communicate their preferences to policy-makers. The leading linkage institutions in our democracy are political parties, interest groups, elections and media. Political parties, interest groups and social movements provide opportunities for participation and influence how people relate to government.

Political parties form for the expressed purpose of winning elections. In this way, when our political party candidates win elections “we the people” feel connected to our government. When party leaders pass critical pieces of legislation, or when our president follows through on campaign promises or even when courts rule favorably to our ideological liking we feel linked to the government. In doing so political parties live up to their calling. Political parties provide labels; issue platforms and most importantly choose candidates that represent our wishes. It is difficult to change government on our own but by joining political parties we can, or at least we feel we can.

Interest groups form for the expressed purpose of impacting the policy-making process. In this way, when interest groups that we have joined help to pass or block pieces of legislation, influence presidential decision making or even affect court outcomes we feel linked to the government. In doing so interest groups live up to their calling. Interest groups provide us a way to focus our political attention on single issues or policy priorities. There is strength in numbers. Interest groups are an important linkage institution to our democracy. They are vital in building any civil society.

Elections are another form of linkage institution. Elections give “we the people” the most direct way to influence our government and its decisions. When our candidates win elections we feel that our interests will be represented. In this way we are connected to our government. Here in America we are election crazy. No democracy has as many elected positions to fill as we do. Seemingly there are elections all of the time. Elections at the national, state and local levels fulfill an important function – they link us to the government. We are after all “a government of the people, by the people and for the people.”

Media is another critical linkage institution. The role of the media is to inform us about our government. They are gatekeepers, scorekeepers and watchdogs. Media sets priorities and helps to become agenda setters when deciding what to cover. Media tells us who is winning and losing in the political process at any given time. But perhaps most importantly the media holds our government accountable. They police the government for us. With the help of media we feel connected to our government.

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POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties play an important function in our democracy even though our Founders were afraid of their baneful effects. Political parties link the people to government. Political parties educate us and most importantly they help recruit and choose our candidates. Political party operatives also manage campaigns. Party leaders help to raise money and provide media strategies. Political scientists, however, tell us that political parties have grown weaker as mass media has given greater power to personal followings.

Political parties have one primary goal and that is to win elections. By winning elections political parties and their voters get to act upon their wishes because they now run the government. The more successful political parties are the more likely it is for their issues to become public policy. Despite not being mentioned in the U.S. Constitution and feared by the likes of George Washington and James Madison, American democracy is unthinkable without political parties.

Political parties in America play an important role not only in winning elections but in governing as well. The United States Congress is structured around political parties. The political party that holds the majority of the House and Senate respectively controls the chamber. For example, if Democrats make up the majority of the House of Representatives they hold the primary leadership positions including the Speaker role and all of the committee chairs. This means that political party platforms, the issues they fight for, become more likely to pass when parties hold majorities in both the House and the Senate. Sitting presidents as well are considered the Chief of their Party. They are expected to advocate for party platforms, candidates and fundraising efforts. Political parties through governing help deliver on the promises made during their campaigns.

In addition to winning elections and staffing the government political parties hope to educate the public. Political parties try to raise money to support candidates. They nominate candidates. In this way political parties play an important function as a filter in our electoral process. By nominating candidates political party prestige provides an important stamp of credibility. Political parties also provide a simple label for a broad based coalition of voters. For this reason we have in America a two-party system.

There are two major political parties in the United States – Democrats and Republicans. Both are broad based coalitions with the expressed purpose of attracting enough voters to win elections. Partisan identification is the number one determining factor of a person's vote. Partisan ID, however, is not as strong as it once was. More and more Americans, now close to 40%, see themselves as independent voters. This is clear when looking at the rise of split ticket voting. Many Americans on any single ballot will vote for candidates from both parties.

WHY AND HOW POLITICAL PARTIES CHANGE AND ADAPT

As we have seen, political parties, in theory, play a vital role in our government and politics. In practice, however, that role seems to have diminished. Most political scientists have recognized a weakening of political parties over time. Gary C. Jacobson has written,

A fundamental factor [in the decline of parties] is clearly institutional: the rise and spread of primary elections as the method for choosing party nominees for the general election... Primary elections have largely deprived parties of their most important source of influence over elected officials. Parties no longer control access to the ballot and, therefore, to political office. They cannot determine who runs under their label and so cannot control what the label represents... parties typically have few sanctions and little influence [on nominations].

Similarly, James E. Campbell suggests,

Since the 1960s the role of the political parties in American politics has fundamentally changed. A series of technological, institutional, legal, and cultural shifts diminished their once central function as the organizers and inclusive mobilizers of American elections. They ceded control over nominations and were pushed aside by new candidate-centered campaigns. Technological advances allowed candidates to speak directly to the people, and the parties lost their monopoly.

Political parties have been weakened by changes to the nomination process and changes in technology. The result is a more candidate-centered political process. The partisan has been replaced by the personal. Direct primaries replaced party caucuses. This put the power of nominating candidates directly in the hands of the people. Candidates now increasingly create their own brand, relying less on party symbols and messaging. Yet without a nomination from one of the two major parties, any candidate, regardless of brand, is practically un-electable. To remain competitive, parties modify their policies and messaging in order to appeal to various demographic coalitions.

Structurally political parties have always reflected our commitment to federalism. Party organization was never fully centralized. Rather, state and local coordination of political interests varied significantly. A Democrat in New York might actually be quite different than a Democrat in Texas. Likewise, a Republican in South Carolina is certainly different than a Republican in California. There are regional differences. As these differences manifest themselves in real ways, our political parties weaken. Certain regions have realigned their political loyalties. The South, once deeply loyal to the Democratic Party, is now solidly Republican. There was a time when California was consistently conservative, siding

with Republicans. Democrats now control our most populous state. When political parties realign, political scientists call this a critical election. Political parties have had to adapt to these structural and regional changes.

Historically political parties used to run like machines. Highly structured, they were the engines of our government. Loyalty was driven by patronage. New technologies like radio and television, however, challenged the historic party control over messaging. With direct primaries bypassing party bosses, candidates now choose to broadcast their unique messages through new technologies. As information technology changes so too does our politics, often at the expense of certain institutions like political parties.

Campaign finance laws, as well, help explain the weakening of our political parties. When parties were machine-like, unrestricted money flowed generously. Money is the mother's milk of politics. Candidates once were dependent upon political party resources. New campaign finance reforms, however, have turned candidates into independent operators. Donors now face significant limits when giving money to political parties. It is easier for candidate-centered campaigns to access money outside of political party channels. Independent expenditures face far fewer restraints than those faced by political parties. This change in campaign finance also helps to explain why our political parties have grown weaker.

As parties weaken, our attachment to them as well is weakened. More and more of us claim no party. We have grown more independent. Parties have become less relevant. Political parties, therefore, have had to adapt to these new political realities. Their influence over the nomination process has changed. Their structure has changed. They reflect more and more popular influence. Even so, American democracy is unthinkable without political parties. Political parties still endorse and nominate candidates. This legitimizes candidates. Political parties can raise vast sums of money to support candidates. Political parties can mobilize campaign volunteers from state to state. Party messaging educates us. But perhaps most importantly, partisan identification still provides the single greatest clue as to who will get our vote. Political parties may have grown weaker, but they will always play a critical role both in our government and in our politics.