Political parties are defined as teams of politicians, activists, and voters whose goal is to win control of government. They do so by recruiting and nominating candidates to run for office; by accumulating the resources needed to run political campaigns, especially manpower and money; and by pursuing a policy agenda that can appeal to large numbers of voters and secure electoral majorities. As we saw in Chapter 6, once in office, parties organize the legislature and attempt to put their stamp on the laws passed by Congress and the president. Their potential political power is immense.

The prospect of "party rule" has long made Americans suspicious of these organizations. Indeed, the separation of powers into different branches was meant to blunt any attempts by a "faction" or party to gain control of government, as might more readily occur in a parliament.\(^1\) Divided government, in which one party controls the presidency and the other has a majority in at least one chamber of the legislature, has been the norm in American national and state politics, especially over the past 50 years. In some elections, as in 1980, one party wins a landslide victory for the presidency but still fails to capture control of Congress. And, in some midterm elections, as in 1994, 2006, 2010, and 2014, the public decides to give control of Congress to the party opposing the president in order to rein in the executive. Our political system intentionally makes it difficult for any party or organized interest to gain complete control of American government, and when one does, unified government is often short-lived. Separation of powers and divided government have not, however, put the parties out of business. Quite the contrary.

The Democratic and Republican parties remain essential to the day-to-day operation of the legislature and the conduct of elections. It is difficult to imagine how candidates would emerge and how individuals would vote without

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political parties to organize the electoral system. Our inability to conceive of democracy without parties is not a failure of our imaginations or an accident of American history. Rather, it reflects a law of democratic politics. Parties form to solve key problems of rationality and collective action in a democracy. They are not unlike businesses providing a service that consumers need. Parties offer clear choices to voters, lowering the costs of collecting information about the candidates and making it easier for voters to hold government accountable. Parties also ease the transition from elections to government. They bear the costs of bringing together representatives of disparate constituencies into coherent coalitions that can act collectively in government. Thus, parties link elections to governing. Throughout this chapter we highlight some of the general functions of parties in any democracy, but we are especially attentive to party politics in the United States.

The simplest observation about American parties is also perhaps the most important: the United States has just two major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. The American two-party system is impressive in its durability and

**CORE OF THE ANALYSIS**

- Political parties are teams of politicians, activists, and interest groups organized to win control of government.

- The United States has a two-party system in which Democrats and Republicans compete for most offices. This two-party system is a consequence of the form of government (presidential-congressional as opposed to parliamentary) and election laws, especially the use of single-member legislative districts.

- Parties offer distinctive views about how government ought to operate and what laws ought to be enacted. They often serve distinct interests and communities.

- Parties help solve an important informational problem for voters. By offering distinctive "brands," the parties simplify the choices that voters must make and reduce the costs of gathering information about how to vote.

- The legislative and executive branches of the U.S. government are organized by the parties, with the party that won a majority of seats controlling most of the key positions and levers of power, especially congressional committees, the congressional agenda, and the appointment of agency heads.
flexibility. Sustained third parties have not been able to compete with the Democrats and Republicans since the 1850s. The Democratic and Republican parties have, for the past 150 years, elected every president and nearly every member of Congress and governor and state legislator in the United States. Occasionally, a governor or legislator decides to run as a third-party candidate, but those independent candidacies usually fail unless the person eventually attaches him or herself to one of the parties. When a faction breaks from one of the parties, as occurred with the Progressive Republicans in the 1920s and the Southern Democrats in 1948 and again in 1968, those factions eventually return to the fold or move into the other party. The parties have not remained static, however. For instance, the parties have shifted their regional bases of support, with Democrats moving from a southern base to a northern one and the Republicans’ base moving increasingly from the Northeast and Midwest to the South. And the two major parties have adapted to radical changes in the ideologies and social structure of American society.

The institutions of a two-party system, combined with majority rule, mean that the choice between the parties translates into the choice of government. Whichever party wins a majority of seats in House or Senate elections wins control of that chamber. Whichever party wins a majority of electoral votes wins the presidency. At election time, we choose between those who are in power and those who would like to be; those who are on the side of the president or the ruling coalition in the legislature, and those who oppose them. Choosing to change the government means voting against the party that currently holds the presidency and Congress.

In contrast, most parliamentary systems, especially those that allocate seats to parties based on the proportion of votes won nationwide, have more than two parties. In such systems, no party regularly wins a majority, and governments consist of coalitions of several parties. It is difficult to anticipate which coalitions might form, and it is hard to assign blame to any one party in a coalition government. There is a great simplicity in having a two-party system.

The Democratic and Republican parties have proved remarkably adept at accommodating diverse sets of interests and ideas while still presenting distinctive visions for governing. They each capture a range of ideological views while keeping successful third parties at bay. This situation arises in large measure because of the electoral and governmental institutions of the United States and the strategic skills of the party leaders. The opportunity for a third party to enter races and win large numbers of congressional seats or the presidency is very limited.

The French political scientist Maurice Duverger laid out the reason for this state of affairs in his classic book *Political Parties*. Duverger relied on both the institution principle and the rationality principle. As we discussed briefly in Chapter 11, any third-party movement that attempts to enter the American party system would likely fail to win, or worse, would improve the electoral fortunes of the party it most opposes. Also, any voter would not want to waste a vote on a losing cause. Hence, the number of successful parties is two.

U.S. government institutions and electoral rules create strong pressures to maintain just two parties, distinctive in their plans for governing but expansive
in the interests and ideas that they encompass. This simplifies politics inside governing institutions, because one party will have a majority and control that institution (the presidency or one or both chambers of Congress). It also simplifies vote choice, because voters can readily sort into one of the two major party camps or use the party labels to figure out the most effective way to vote.

Parties, however, are not benevolent. They don’t solve the rationality and collective action problem simply to make democracy work. Those in the party recognize that these problems represent opportunities to secure elected office, to influence public policy, even to make a profit. For the politicians inside these organizations, the parties provide a clear path to office through the nominating system and to power through the party organization. For its activists, the party is a potential way to pull the policies of government in a direction more favorable to the party’s views. For interest groups that sustain the parties, the parties offer the potential benefits of being closer to power and influencing what government does. At times, the influence of activists, party leaders, organized interests, and local bosses becomes too great. Regulations on campaign contributions and government contracting, sunshine laws and federal advisory rules, even civil-service reforms, have all come about through efforts to prevent party bosses and interest groups from taking advantage of their power. Party organizations have been weakened by these reforms, but they have invariably found new resources to draw on. As a result of these actions and reactions, American history has witnessed eras of very strong party organization and periods of relative party weakness.

Today, American politics is characterized by relatively strong party organizations and disciplined legislative parties. They offer the American voter meaningful electoral choices and a simple strategy for changing the direction of government.

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**WHY DO POLITICAL PARTIES FORM?**

Political parties, like interest groups, are organizations seeking influence over government. Ordinarily, they can be distinguished from interest groups on the basis of their orientation. A party seeks to control the entire government by electing its members to office, thereby controlling the government’s personnel. Interest groups, through campaign contributions and other forms of electoral assistance, are also concerned with electing politicians—in particular, those who are inclined in their policy direction. But interest groups ordinarily do not sponsor candidates directly, and between elections they usually accept government and its personnel as givens and try to influence government policies through them. They are benefit seekers, whereas parties are composed mainly of office seekers.²

Political parties form to solve three problems with which politicians and other political activists must cope. The first is the problem of collective action. This is chiefly an outgrowth of elections in which a candidate for office must attract campaign funds, assemble a group of activists and workers, mobilize prospective voters, and persuade them to vote for her. The second problem is the collective choice of policy. The give-and-take within a legislature and between the legislature and the executive can make or break policy success and subsequent electoral success. The third problem is power sharing and competition among politicians. Politicians, like members of any organization, seek success simultaneously for the organization and for themselves. In seeking to further their own ambitions, politicians can act in ways that serve their own interests but that can undermine the collective aspirations of fellow partisans unless astutely managed. We briefly examine each of these problems below.

Ultimately, each is a problem faced by politicians, especially those already in office. This fact reveals an important reason that parties form—to serve the interests of politicians. The political parties in the United States were, ultimately, formed by politicians to serve their aims. Politicians do not need to form or join political parties, and some don’t. But parties make easier the basic tasks of political life—running for office, organizing one’s supporters, and forming a government.

To Facilitate Collective Action in the Electoral Process

Political parties as we know them today developed along with the expansion of suffrage and can be understood only in the context of elections. Parties and elections are so intertwined that American parties actually take their structure from the electoral process. The shape of party organization in the United States has followed a simple rule: for every district where an election is held, there should be some kind of party unit. These units provide the brand name, the resources (both human and financial), the “buzz,” and the link to the larger national organization, which all help the party’s candidates arouse interest in their candidacy and stimulate commitment by voters. All of these activities facilitate collective action as they make it easier for voters to understand the choice of candidates and ultimately overcome the free riding that diminishes turnout in general elections.

Party organization also enables and encourages electoral competition by groups. The Republican Party has long been the party of business interests (among other groups), especially small business and peak associations

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3 A slight variation on this theme is emphasized by Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins in Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). They suggest that parties in the legislature are electoral machines whose purpose is to preserve and enhance party reputation, thereby giving meaning to the party labels when elections are contested. By keeping order within their ranks, parties make certain that individual actions by members do not discredit the party label. This is an especially challenging task for party leaders when there is diversity within each party, as has often been the case in American political history.
(organizations of organizations) such as the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. The Democratic Party has been aligned with labor unions and reformers that want to regulate the economy since the 1930s. Often, groups with significant numbers but lacking substantial economic and institutional resources find their voice in the party system. Women’s organizations worked closely with the Progressive faction inside the Republican Party in the 1900s and 1910s in the struggle to gain the right to vote for women. By the 1970s, changing social issues and changed strategies by the parties led many newer women’s groups, such as the National Organization for Women, to align with the Democratic Party. Throughout American history, immigrant groups have also aligned themselves with the parties. Irish immigrants attached themselves to the Democrats, whose urban political organizations helped those immigrants find jobs and negotiate the immigration system; Italian immigrants tended toward Republicans; most Hispanic groups have gravitated to the Democrats because of the party’s immigration policies; and Cubans aligned with the Republicans because that party took a harder line against the Castro regime. In the 1970s, disaffection with liberal policies concerning school prayer, funding of religious schools, abortion, and other social issues led fundamentalist church leaders to align with the Republican Party. Fundamentalist and born-again Christians became an essential and enduring part of the Republican electoral coalition that Ronald Reagan constructed leading up to the 1980 election.

The relationship between collective action by groups and party electoral strategy is clearly a two-way street. Groups that align with a party provide that party with essential electoral resources, including a reliable voting bloc, money, personnel, and even candidates. When the party they support wins, these interests gain influence over public policy. Of course, there are risks as well: an organized interest may suffer if the party it supports loses the election.

**To Resolve Problems of Collective Choice in Government**

Political parties are also essential elements in the process of making policy. Within the government, parties are coalitions of individuals with shared or overlapping interests who, as a rule, will support one another’s programs and initiatives. Even though there may be areas of disagreement within each party, a common party label in and of itself gives party members a reason to cooperate. Because they are permanent coalitions, parties greatly facilitate the policymaking process. If alliances had to be formed from scratch for each legislative proposal, the business of government would slow to a crawl or halt altogether. Parties create a basis for coalition and thus sharply reduce the time, energy, and effort needed to advance a legislative proposal. Every president works closely with his party’s leadership in the House and Senate, even if the party is in the minority, in order to make sure that the executive’s agenda will be introduced into Congress and supported. Without the support of a party, the president would be compelled to undertake the daunting and probably impossible task of forming a completely new coalition for every policy proposal.
Party cohesion is not a given, however, and sometimes breaks down because of fundamental conflict between the public philosophy of the party and the need for action on a crucial issue. For instance, in September 2008, facing a collapse of the financial industry, President George W. Bush proposed a $700 billion intervention to unlock frozen credit markets. The government needed to act quickly. Democratic leaders in the House twisted enough arms to produce a sizable majority of Democratic votes in favor of the Republican president’s plan. The competing presidential nominees, Barack Obama and John McCain, both called for colleagues in their respective parties to back the bill. But Republican leadership in the House failed to produce enough Republican votes to pass the measure. Those voting against the bill argued that the plan would increase the size of government, that it rewarded irresponsible investors, and that it violated the free-market principles that lie at the heart of the Republican policy agenda. The failure of the president and his party to come to agreement on this plan in advance doomed the president’s proposal. The following day the Dow Jones Industrial Index dropped 777 points, losing almost one-tenth of its value.4

To Deal with the Problem of Ambition

Parties are important vehicles that enable individual politicians to achieve their ambitions. The very “brand names” they provide are often a significant electoral asset. Moreover, once their candidates are elected, parties provide these politicians, who share principles, causes, and constituencies, with a basis for coordination, common cause, cooperation, and joint enterprise. But individual ambition, sometimes in the background but often in the foreground, constantly threatens to undermine any bases for cooperation. Political parties, by regulating career advancement, providing for the orderly resolution of ambitious competition, and attending to the post-career care of elected and appointed party officials, do much to rescue coordination and cooperation and permit fellow partisans to pursue common causes where feasible. Simple devices such as primaries, for example, provide a context in which clashing electoral ambitions can be resolved. Representative partisan bodies, like the Democratic Committee on Committees in the House (with comparable bodies for the Republicans and for both parties in the Senate), resolve competing claims for power positions. In short, politics consists not of foot soldiers walking in lockstep but, rather, of ambitious and autonomous individuals seeking power. The unchecked and unregulated burnishing of individual careers is a formula for chaos and destructive competition in which the dividends of cooperation are rarely reaped. Political parties constitute organizations of relatively kindred spirits who try to capture some of those dividends by providing a structure in which ambition is not suppressed altogether but is not so destructive either.