WHAT FUNCTIONS DO PARTIES PERFORM?

Parties are mainly involved in nominations and elections—recruiting the candidates for office, getting out the vote, and facilitating mass electoral choice. That is, they help solve the problems of collective action and ambition that we described earlier. They also influence the institutions of government—providing leadership as well as organization of the various congressional committees and activities on the floor in each chamber. That is, they help solve problems of collective choice concerning institutional arrangements and policy formulation.

Recruiting Candidates

One of the most important but least noticed party activities is the recruitment of candidates for local, state, and national office. Each election year, candidates must be found for thousands of state and local offices as well as for congressional seats. Where an incumbent is not running for re-election or where an incumbent in the opposing party appears vulnerable, party leaders attempt to identify strong candidates and interest them in entering the campaign. The recruiting season begins early, because the dates by which candidates must file for office come as early as January in some states. Candidate recruitment in the spring shapes the parties’ message and fortunes in the November general election. In 2006 and 2008, Democrats recruited a number of Iraq War veterans, who became the spokespersons for opposition to the war and helped the party capitalize on public frustration with the conduct of the war after 2005. In 2010 and 2012, Republicans capitalized on public anger and opposition to President Obama’s health care law, which contributed to the emergence of the Tea Party movement, and managed to recruit a very strong class of candidates. The biggest challenge for parties is when they fail to recruit anyone to run for a seat. You can’t beat somebody with nobody. In 2014, a weak economy and low popularity ratings for the president made it difficult for Democrats to recruit candidates for congressional races.

An ideal candidate will be charismatic, organized, knowledgeable, an excellent debater; have an unblemished record; and possess the ability and wherewithal to raise enough money to mount a serious campaign. Party leaders are usually not willing to provide financial backing to candidates who are unable to raise substantial funds on their own. For a House seat, this can mean between $500,000 and $1 million; for a Senate seat, a serious candidate must be able to raise several million dollars. Often party leaders have difficulty finding attractive candidates and persuading them to run. In recent years, party leaders in several states have reported that many potential congressional candidates declined the

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opportunity to run for office, saying they were reluctant to leave their homes and families for the hectic life of a member of Congress. Candidate recruitment has become particularly difficult in an era when political campaigns often involve mudslinging and candidates must assume that their personal lives will be intensely scrutinized in the press.\(^6\)

**Nominating Candidates**

Article I, Section 4, of the Constitution makes only a few provisions for elections. It delegates to the states the power to set the “Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections,” even those for U.S. senators and representatives. It does, however, reserve to Congress the power to make such laws if it chooses to do so. The Constitution has been amended from time to time to expand the right to participate in elections. Congress has also occasionally passed laws regulating elections, congressional districting, and campaign practices. But the Constitution and the laws are almost completely silent on nominations, setting only citizenship and age requirements for candidates. The president must be at least 35 years of age, a natural-born citizen, and a resident of the United States for 14 years. A senator must be at least age 30, a U.S. citizen for at least nine years, and a resident of the state he or she represents. A member of the House must be at least age 25, a U.S. citizen for seven years, and a resident of the state he or she represents.

**Nomination** is the process by which a party selects a single candidate to run for each elective office. Nomination is the parties’ most serious and difficult business. The nominating process can precede the election by many months (Figure 12.1), as it does when the many candidates for the presidency are eliminated from consideration through a grueling series of debates and state primaries until there is only one survivor in each party—that party’s nominee.

**Nomination by Convention.** A nominating convention is a formal caucus bound by a number of rules that govern participation and nominating procedures. Conventions are meetings of delegates elected by party members from the relevant county (a county convention) or state (a state convention). Delegates to each party’s national convention (which nominates the party’s presidential candidate) are chosen by party members on a state-by-state basis; there is no single national delegate selection process.

**Nomination by Primary Election.** In primary elections, party members select the party’s nominees directly rather than selecting convention delegates who then select the nominees. Primaries are far from perfect replacements for conventions because it is rare that more than 25 percent of the enrolled voters

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Figure 12.1
TYPES OF NOMINATION PROCESSES

Results are reported to the county board of elections and the secretary of state.

Convention or caucus: delegates vote for candidates or party.

Primary election: enrolled voters choose by secret ballot among two or more designated candidates.

Petition is filed, with a minimum number of signatures, as provided by law.

Declaration for party's support: informal designation is the result of a following among committee members and delegates.

Formal designation: petition is filed, with a minimum number of signatures, as provided by law.

Self-declaration or support by small "independent" party.

TRADITIONAL ROUTE PRIMARY ROUTE INDEPENDENT ROUTE

participate. Nevertheless, they have replaced conventions as the dominant method of nomination.8

Primary elections fall mainly into two categories—closed and open. In a closed primary, participation is limited to individuals who have previously declared their affiliation by registering with the party. In an open primary, individuals declare their party affiliation on the day of the primary election. To do so, they simply go to the polling place and ask for the ballot of a particular party. The open primary allows each voter to consider candidates and issues before deciding whether to participate and in which party's contest to participate. Open primaries, therefore, are less conducive to strong political parties. But in either case, primaries are more open than conventions or caucuses to new issues and new types of candidates.

Most states adopted primary elections for Congress and state offices at the beginning of the twentieth century, and from the 1950s through the 1970s states


8 At the present time, only a small number of states, including Connecticut, Delaware, and Utah, provide for state conventions to nominate candidates for statewide offices, and even those states also use primaries whenever a substantial minority of delegates has voted for one of the defeated aspirants.
gradually adopted primaries as a means of nominating presidential candidates. The shift from party conventions to primary elections creates an additional screen that selects candidates who are particularly good at campaigning. Candidates must now win not one election, but two—the primary and the general election—in order to hold office. As a result the introduction of primary elections are thought to have contributed to the rise of candidate-centered politics by creating advantages to politicians who are particularly strong campaigners, but who may be less effective at governing. Thus there is a “selection” effect that results from the particular institutional arrangement a state employs. Institutions matter in this case because they encourage or discourage particular types of candidates, as the institution principle suggests.

**Getting Out the Vote**

The election period begins immediately after the nominations. Historically, this has been a time of glory for the political parties, whose popular base of support is fully displayed. All the paraphernalia of party committees and all the committee members are activated in the form of local party workforces.

The first step in the electoral process involves voter registration. This aspect of the process takes place all year round. There was a time when party workers were responsible for virtually all of this kind of electoral activity, but they have been supplemented (and in many states virtually displaced) by civic groups such as the League of Women Voters, unions, and chambers of commerce. Those who have registered have to decide on Election Day whether to go to the polling place, stand in line, and vote for the various candidates and referenda on the ballot. Political parties, candidates, and campaigning can make a big difference in persuading eligible voters to vote. Because it is costly for voters to participate in elections and because many of the benefits that winning parties bestow are public goods (that is, parties cannot exclude any individual from enjoying them), people will often free ride by enjoying the benefits without incurring the costs of electing the party that provided the benefits. This is the free-rider problem (see Chapter 1), and parties are important because they help overcome it by mobilizing the voters to support the candidates.

In recent years, the parties themselves and not-for-profit groups have registered and mobilized large numbers of people to vote and raised millions of dollars to devote to election organizing and advertising. Legions of workers, often volunteers, have proved especially effective at using new technologies to build networks of supporters and communicate through those networks. They are the “netroots” organizations of politics. To comply with federal election and tax law, groups must maintain their independence from the political parties, although they have the same objectives as the parties and work very hard to elect politicians from a particular party. Such organizations act as shadow appendages

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of the two parties, with some groups mobilizing Democratic supporters and others mobilizing Republicans. The netroots have become integral to campaign organizations, and with the advent of these new forms of direct campaigning, there has been a noticeable uptick in turnout in the United States.

**Facilitating Electoral Choice**

Parties make the electoral choice much easier for voters. It is often argued that we should vote for the best person regardless of party affiliation. But on any general-election ballot, there are likely to be only a handful of candidates who are well known to the voters, namely, some of the candidates for president, U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and governor. As one moves down the ballot, voters’ familiarity with the candidates declines. Without party labels, voters would be constantly confronted by a bewildering array of new names and new choices and might have considerable difficulty making informed decisions. Without a doubt, candidates’ party affiliations help voters make reasonable choices.

Parties lower the information costs of participating in elections by providing a recognizable “brand name.” Without knowing a great deal about a candidate for office, voters can infer from party labels how the candidate will likely behave once elected. Individuals know about the parties through their past experience with those parties in state and federal office and from the actions of prominent political leaders from both parties. In the United States, the Democratic Party is associated with a commitment to more extensive government regulation of the economy and a larger public sector; the Republican Party favors a limited government role in the economy and reduced government spending paired with tax reductions. The Democrats favor aggressive protection of civil rights and a secular approach to religion in public life. The Republicans want to ban abortion and favor government participation in expanding the role of religious organizations in civil society. The parties’ positions on the economy were cemented in the 1930s, and their division over civil society emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. The Democratic positions are loosely labeled liberal and those of the Republicans conservative.

Most Americans personally identify with one of the two parties. When asked in surveys whether they think of themselves as Democrats, as Republicans, or neither, large majorities pick one of the two major parties. When voting, those who identify with a party are extremely likely to vote with that party (usually about 90 percent of the time). For these individuals, party simplifies the electoral decision. Except in rare circumstances, they vote with their team.

Even those who do not identify with one of the major parties derive value from the party labels. Nonpartisan voters are more conflicted about which party or candidate best represents their interests and ideals. But it would be the height of folly to try to learn about every politician running for every office. A voter would spend an enormous amount of time tracking down the information about dozens of different people. And if the entire electorate behaved this way, the advertising costs to politicians would be tremendous. So party labels simplify the decision making of nonpartisan voters by reducing the choice to an evaluation of two competing policy positions or to the evaluation of the

What Functions Do Parties Perform? 523
performance of those in office. The independent voter may ask, “Which of the two parties will better represent my ideals and interests?” The voter will choose the party that offers the best option today. Or the voter may ask, “Am I better off now than four years ago?” If not, she will vote against the president’s party up and down the ballot. If yes, she will vote to keep the president and his party in power. Whichever strategy the independent voter uses, parties are essential for simplifying what is otherwise a bewildering choice.

For all voters, partisans and independents alike, the parties make it easier to hold government accountable. People can vote against the party in power in bad times and for the party in power in good times. They can vote against the party in power if that party enacts very unpopular or irresponsible legislation. Thus political parties solve one of the most important collective action problems facing American democracy, the problem of collective responsibility. If every politician ran on her own, without regard to other candidates or districts or what was happening in the nation at large, each race for legislator or executive would become an isolated event. In such a setting it would be exceedingly difficult for voters to send a message to the government that they want government to go in a different direction. Parties, then, lend coherence to government and meaning to elections.  

Party labels also benefit the politicians. By having simple, recognizable labels, candidates running in most districts and states are spared the great expense of educating voters about what they stand for. The labels Democrat and Republican are usually sufficient. The content of the labels is sustained because like-minded people sort themselves into the respective organizations. People who broadly share the principles espoused by a party and who wish to participate on a high level in politics will attend party meetings, run for leadership positions in local and state party organizations, attend state and national conventions, and even run for elected office. Each party, then, draws on a distinct pool for activists and candidates. Each successive election reinforces the existing division between the parties.

**Influencing National Government**

One of the most familiar observations about American politics is that the two major parties are “big tents.” They position themselves to bring in as many groups and ideas as possible. The parties make such broad coalitions as a matter of strategy, much as businesses purchase other companies to expand their market share. Positioning themselves as broad coalitions prevents effective national

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third parties from emerging and guarantees that the Democrats and Republicans vie for control of Congress.

The coalitions that come together in the Democratic and Republican parties shape the parties’ platforms on public policy. The political coalitions that party leaders assemble determine what interests and social groups align with the parties and also what sorts of issues can emerge. The Democratic Party today embraces a philosophy of active government intervention in the economy, based on the premise that regulation is necessary to ensure orderly economic growth, to prevent the emergence of monopolies, and to address certain costs of economic activity, such as pollution, poverty, and unemployment. In addition, the Democratic Party pushes for aggressive expansion and protection of civil rights, especially for women and racial minorities. The Republican Party espouses a philosophy of laissez-faire economics and a minimal government role in the economy. The coalition that Ronald Reagan built in the late 1970s paired this vision of limited government intervention in the economy with an expanded role for religion in society and strong opposition to immigration, affirmative action, and abortion.

To many European observers, the American parties appear as odd amalgams of contradictory ideas. Liberalism, as it developed as a political philosophy in Europe, naturally pairs laissez-faire economics with liberal views on civil rights. Conservatism, which maintains a respect for social and political order, would speak for a stronger role for social organizations in society, especially religions; a greater respect for existing social hierarchies, most notably social classes and higher-educated elites; and government power in the economy. The American parties, partly because of their histories, have scrambled these traditional views and developed their own political philosophies. In the Republican Party today, laissez-faire economics goes hand in hand with conservative views on civil rights and religion in society. In the Democratic Party today, liberal views on civil rights are tied to an expansive view of government in the economy. The American parties have mixed and matched different ideas as new issues have emerged and as leaders within the parties have seized opportunities. The New Deal coalition that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt assembled consisted of Progressive Republicans, who favored greater economic regulation; old-line Democrats, especially in the South; and urban political machines in northern and midwestern cities. This peculiar coalition gave rise to the political philosophy and public policies pursued under the New Deal. It also constrained what Roosevelt could do on some issues. Most important, he could not push for expanding civil rights for blacks without losing the support of southerners. The meaning of Democratic liberalism in the United States, then, was very much a function of the history of the parties.

Even though American liberalism and conservatism do not coincide neatly with their European counterparts, they still represent distinct views about how government ought to act, and they appeal to distinctly different core constituencies. The Democratic Party at the national level seeks to unite organized labor, the poor, members of racial minorities, and liberal upper-middle-class professionals. The Republicans, by contrast, appeal to business, upper-middle-class and upper-class groups in the private sector, and social conservatives. Often party leaders will seek to develop issues that they hope will add new groups to
their party’s constituent base. During the 1980s, for example, under the leadership of President Reagan, the Republicans devised a series of “social issues,” including support for school prayer, opposition to abortion, and opposition to affirmative action, designed to cultivate the support of white southerners. This effort was extremely successful in increasing Republican strength in the once solidly Democratic South. In the 1990s, under the leadership of President Clinton, who called himself a “new Democrat,” the Democratic Party sought to develop social programs designed to solidify the party’s base among working-class and poor voters and somewhat conservative economic programs aimed at attracting the votes of middle-class and upper-middle-class voters.

As these examples suggest, parties do not always support policies because they are favored by their constituents. Instead, party leaders can play the role of policy entrepreneurs, seeking ideas and programs that will expand their party’s base of support while eroding that of the opposition. In recent years, for example, leaders of both major political parties have sought to develop ideas and programs they hoped would appeal to America’s most rapidly growing electoral bloc: Latino voters. President George W. Bush recommended a number of proposals designed to help Latinos secure U.S. residence and employment. Democrats, for their part, have proposed education, social service programs, and immigration reform designed to appeal to the needs of Latino families. Latino votes split nearly evenly between the parties in the 2004 presidential election. But, since 2005, many Republican leaders at the local, state, and federal levels began to take a hard line on immigration, especially from Latin America. Those policies were very popular among the Republican party base and worked well in Republican primaries, but they alienated many Latino voters in general elections. Exit polls revealed that Obama won 66 percent of the Latino vote in 2008, a huge swing from 2004, and he added to that margin in 2012, winning 70 percent of Latino votes.

Both parties translate their general goals into concrete policies through the members they elect to office. Republicans, for example, implemented tax cuts, increased defense spending, cut social spending, and enacted restrictions on abortion during the 1980s and 1990s. Democrats were able to defend consumer and environmental programs against Republican attacks and sought to expand domestic social programs in the late 1990s. In 2009, President Obama and a Democratic-controlled Congress created a national health insurance system that guarantees all people access to health care, a key item on the Democratic Party’s platform since the 1940s.

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PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT

Parties operate in three spheres: elections, political institutions, and government. The ultimate test of a political party is its influence on the institutions of government and the policy-making process. We begin there.

Most parties originate inside the government. Political parties form as those who support the actions of the government and those who do not; in