

Unit 12

Political Parties: Mobilizing Agents

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

- Understand the nature of American political parties.
- Describe how political parties connect citizens to political decision making.
- Describe the major functions of political parties.
- Illustrate the differences between the parties.

Topic Overview

This unit explores the nature and roles of political parties in American politics. Despite a widespread belief that parties are irrelevant, the unit demonstrates that they are major contributors to the democratic process. The unit will illustrate the activities that parties engage in—activities that, if not performed by parties, would still need to be performed by some organization. Unit 12 also demonstrates that in terms of policy, parties matter.

Political parties are loose coalitions of citizens sharing political goals and organizing to achieve those goals by electing candidates to public office. The primary function of political parties is to enable fellow partisans to win political office. By examining three dimensions of political parties—parties in the electorate, party organizations, and parties in the government—we can gain a better understanding of the unique role of political parties in the American republic.

All citizens who identify with a particular party and label themselves as party members make up the **party in the electorate**. Approximately two-thirds of the U.S. electorate identify with the two major parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. But the number of strong party identifiers has diminished since the 1960s and more people consider themselves independents or identify with a minor political party—such as the Libertarian Party, the Green Party, or the Reform Party—than ever before.

Party organizations at the national, state, and local levels recruit candidates for partisan elective offices and provide a variety of services including training and financial support. Party organizations elect national, state, and local chairmen and chairwomen, and hold elections among the party faithful for various other paid and volunteer positions. Parties also support their candidates and issues by recruiting armies of volunteers to help their candidates reach out to potential voters, to register new voters, and to encourage their party members to vote on election day. Major and minor party organizations also develop **party platforms** that outline the policy positions and general governing philosophy of each party.

Topic Overview, cont'd.

Office-holders at the national, state, and local levels who run under the banner of a political party make up the **party in the government**. The president is considered the head of his party in government, while legislatures at the national and state level elect their own leaders and organize themselves into party caucuses that attempt to enact the party's agenda. Typically, the party that holds a majority in national and state legislatures gets to choose the legislature's committee and subcommittee chairs, and often gets a greater share of legislative offices and staff budgets.

In developing policy positions, parties attempt to build large coalitions of people of widely diverse views by controlling and moderating conflict among and between different groups in society. As such, parties can be a force for stability in a fragmented political system that is subject to great cleavages between economic classes, geographical regions, and groups with widely divergent ethnic, religious, and ideological identities. Because the Constitution's framers designed a complex political system that purposefully divides power and ensures regular conflict among national and state political institutions, parties have tried to provide incentives for politicians and institutions to coordinate their efforts to enact policies of mutual interest.

Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- What was George Washington's view of political parties? Why?
- What was it that made Tocqueville consider some parties to be great?
- What would political life be without political parties? Would it be more democratic or less democratic?
- Are the major American political parties alike or do they represent different views?

Watch the Video (30 minutes) and Discuss (30 minutes)

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and then pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. Cindy Montañez, Democrat

A major purpose of political parties is to recruit potential candidates who share their political agendas and can promote those agendas in elective office. Cindy Montañez, a former City Council member and mayor of San Fernando who won election to the California Assembly in November 2002, is widely considered a "rising star" in the California Democratic party. This story profiles the rise of Cindy Montañez from her humble roots in a Mexican American immigrant family to her successful run for the California State Assembly.

Discussion Questions

- What role did the political party have in enabling Ms. Montañez to run for office?
- How does Ms. Montañez's career demonstrate an opportunity ladder provided by the political party?

2. Significant Difference Wins the Race: Dinkins Versus Giuliani

Critics of America's two-party system often contend there are no tangible differences between Republicans and Democrats. But what seem like small differences between the two parties' platforms can become significant when the candidates square off in an election. The 1993 race for mayor of New York quickly became this type of election when Democrat incumbent David Dinkins faced the same Republican challenger he had narrowly defeated four years earlier, Rudolph Giuliani.

Watch the Video and Discuss, cont'd.

Discussion Questions

- Does the New York City election demonstrate that parties matter?
- Were the differences between the candidates merely personal differences or were the candidates representing long-standing differences between the two major parties?
- Were the differences between the parties in the mayor's race atypical of the partisan clashes in other elections?

3. Political Party Earthquake: Jeffords's Switch

Americans often criticize the political parties for their contentious and often confrontational behavior. But political parties provide the essential structure for organizing the executive and legislative branches of government. This can be clearly seen when there is a dramatic shift in party control, particularly at the national level.

In May of 2001, Vermont Senator Jim Jeffords caused a seismic shift in American politics by leaving the Republican Party. Although Jeffords declared himself an Independent and not a Democrat, his decision tipped the balance of power in the Senate to the Democrats, who after six years in the minority regained the power to choose committee chairs, set agendas, and claim a greater share of congressional staff and operating budgets.

Agenda changes in the Senate soon followed. For example, while the Governmental Affairs Committee under Republican Chairman Thompson in 1997 investigated the financing of Bill Clinton's second presidential campaign, the same committee under new Democratic Chairman Lieberman in 2002 turned its attention to possible ties between the Bush White House and the failed energy giant, Enron. Over the next year, the Governmental Affairs Committee investigated any possible policy influence between Enron, a heavy donor to political campaigns, including George W. Bush's presidential campaign, and subsequent decisions from the Bush White House or other executive branch regulators that were favorable to Enron. Similar agenda shifts took place on various committees dealing with judicial nominations, budgets, and the environment. The Senate's staffers, both Democratic and Republican, also experienced vast changes as a result of Jeffords's switch, including the size of their offices and office staff, and various other perks including choice parking spaces.

Discussion Questions

- How did Senator Jeffords's switch from Republican to Independent impact the U.S. Senate?
- Who benefited from his shift and why?
- What were some of the consequences of Senator Jeffords's switch?

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Party Platforms: How Useful Are They for Voters and Politicians? (10 minutes)

Most organized political parties develop extensive party platforms that explain the party's principles about governing and specific positions on key issues. The Democrats and Republicans, for example, as well as most third parties including the Green Party and the Libertarian Party, revise their national party platforms every four years at their party's presidential nominating conventions. While much time and effort is spent on formulating and revising the party platforms, just how influential the platforms are in attracting members of the party in the electorate and guiding party members in government is open to debate. Political scientist Gerald Pomper studied the parties' platforms from 1944 to 1976 and found that, on the whole, the parties maintained consistently different positions on key issues. For example, about 69 percent of the positions taken by one major party were not taken by the other. A more recent study by L. Sandy Maisel found that since the 1990s the parties' platforms have generally taken non-controversial stances on issues that are designed to appeal to broad coalitions of voters, not to provide specific policy direction for the party in the government. Can you see differences between the parties?

The following quotes, which are organized around specific issue areas known as "planks," are taken directly from the 2000 platforms of the two major parties (Republicans and Democrats), and from two of the many minor parties that are active today (Greens and Libertarians). Consider the similarities and differences between the parties on these issues. Are these position statements helpful guides for voters in selecting candidates, and for elected officials to follow through on their promises once they are elected?

Party Platforms				
	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Green Party	Libertarian Party
Overview	The Democratic Party generally favors national government involvement in regulating economic and business activity and addressing social problems like racial discrimination and poverty. Democrats support strong national defense, but think defense spending should be balanced with equally strong governmental support for social programs. In areas involving personal morality, such as abortion or recreational drug use, many Democrats favor fewer or no governmental controls.	On economic matters, the Republican Party generally favors individual liberty and free markets over national governmental regulation. Republicans support a strong national defense, but prefer local control over most other public-policy decisions. On social issues such as a woman's choice to have an abortion or regulation of the public airwaves, many Republicans favor governmental restrictions to promote fundamental moral standards.	The Greens are a reform-oriented party that is guided by several fundamental principles including "grassroots democracy," "social justice and equal opportunity," and "ecological wisdom." Generally placed on the ideological left of centrist Democrats, the Green Party promotes individual and collective social responsibility that is usually at odds with entrenched government and corporate interests.	The Libertarian Party believes that government activities should be limited to protecting national defense, individual security, and basic rights. Libertarians assert that people have the right to live as they choose as long as they don't interfere with the life choices or rights of others, including the rights to life, absolute free speech, and private property in a totally unregulated economic marketplace.

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

Party Platforms, cont'd.				
	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Green Party	Libertarian Party
Taxes	"[We] want to give middle-class families tax cuts they can use ... tax cuts that are specifically targeted to help those who need them the most."	"When the average American family has to work more than four months out of every year to fund all levels of government, it's time to change the tax system, to make it simpler, flatter, and fairer for everyone."	"Subsidies, export incentives, tax loopholes, and tax shelters that benefit large corporations now amount to hundreds of billions of dollars each year and must be cut to the bone."	"We oppose all personal and corporate income taxation, including capital gains taxes."
Education	"By the end of the next presidential term, parents across the nation ought to be able to choose the best public school for their children."	"[We want to] expand parental choice and encourage competition by providing parents with information on their child's school, increasing the number of charter schools, and expanding education savings accounts for use from kindergarten through college."	"Education starts with choice and within public education we believe in broad choices. 'Magnet schools,' 'Site-Based Management,' 'Schools Within Schools,' alternative models, and parental involvement are ways in which elementary education can be changed to make a real difference in the lives of our children."	"Government ownership, operation, regulation, and subsidy of schools and colleges should be ended."
International Affairs	"We must also form partnerships to help solve global problems and take advantage of new global opportunities. That means we must deepen our key alliances, develop more constructive relationships with former enemies, and bring together diverse coalitions of nations to deal with new problems."	"International organizations can serve the cause of peace, but they can never serve as a substitute for, or exercise a veto over, principled American leadership."	"We must look to domestic and international regulation to protect the global ecology, utilizing the United Nations and related agencies as well as regional associations to advance our mutual interests."	"We support withdrawal of the United States government from, and an end to its financial support for, the United Nations.... We oppose U.S. government participation in any world or international government."
Social Security	"We owe it to America's children and their children to make the strength and solvency of Social Security a major national priority."	"Personal savings accounts must be the cornerstone of restructuring [Social Security]. Each of today's workers should be free to direct a portion of their payroll taxes to personal investments for their retirement future."	"[We oppose] the 'privatization' of Social Security. The Social Security trust fund, contrary to claims being made by [other] candidates, is not about to 'go broke' and does not need to be 'fixed' by Wall Street."	"We favor replacing the current fraudulent, virtually bankrupt, government-sponsored Social Security system with a private voluntary system. Pending that replacement, participation in Social Security should be made voluntary."

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

Party Platforms, cont'd.				
	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Green Party	Libertarian Party
Environment	<p>“Environmental standards should be raised throughout the world in order to preserve the Earth and to prevent a destructive race to the bottom wherein countries compete for production and jobs based on who can do the least to protect the environment.”</p>	<p>“We believe the government’s main role should be to provide market-based incentives to innovate and develop the new technologies for Americans to meet — and exceed — environmental standards.”</p>	<p>“Ultimately, environmentally destructive technologies, processes, and products should be replaced with alternatives that are environmentally benign.... Legislation that will assist this transition (including bans, taxation, recycled content standards and economic incentives/disincentives such as taxation, special fees, and/or deposits) will be required in a concerted move toward system-wide sustainability.”</p>	<p>“Pollution of other people’s property is a violation of individual rights. Present legal principles, particularly the unjust and false concept of ‘public property,’ block privatization of the use of the environment and hence block resolution of controversies over resource use.”</p>
Immigration	<p>“[We] believe in an effective immigration system that balances a strong enforcement of our laws with fair and evenhanded treatment of immigrants and their families. We also recognize that the current system fails to effectively control illegal immigration, has serious adverse impacts on state and local services, and on many communities and workers, and has led to an alarming number of deaths of migrants on the border.”</p>	<p>“As a nation of immigrants, we welcome all new Americans who have entered lawfully and are prepared to follow our laws and provide for themselves and their families. To ensure fairness for those wishing to reside in this country, and to meet the manpower needs of our expanding economy, a total overhaul of the immigration system is sorely needed.”</p>	<p>“Preferential quotas based on race, class, and ideology should be abandoned for immigration policies that promote fairness, non-discrimination, and family reunification.”</p>	<p>“We look forward to an era in which American citizens and foreigners can travel anywhere in the world without a passport. We aim to restore a world in which there are no passports, visas, or other papers required to cross borders.”</p>

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

2. Founding Your Own Third Party (20 minutes)

Using basic information from this unit, and research materials found at Web sites such as the one below, create your own third party based on issues and positions that are most important to you. What is the name of the party? What are the party's main goals or purposes? What are the party's main positions? What kinds of voters would the party try to attract?

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 13 to prepare for next week's session.

- Introduction—Elections: The Maintenance of Democracy
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: "How the Principle of Equality Naturally Divides Americans Into a Multitude of Small Private Circles"
- Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*

Review:

- Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* from Unit 5's Readings

Read next week's Topic Overview.

Critical Thinking Activity: Go to the course Web site and try the Critical Thinking Activity for Unit 12. This is a good activity to use with your students, too.

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Classroom Applications

You may want to have your students do the post-viewing activities: Party Platforms: How Useful Are They for Voters and Politicians? and Founding Your Own Third Party. They are provided for you as blackline masters in the Appendix.

Web-Based Resources

www.politics1.com/parties.htm—Learn more about the current and past political parties through **Politics1.Com**. Web site materials include descriptions and links to the two major political parties, and to many third or minor parties.