Chapter 7
Political Parties: Winning the Right to Govern

Focus Questions

Q1  How has the role of political parties in American politics changed during the past two centuries?

A1  A political party is a group of people joined together on the basis of broad principles for the purpose of gaining political power by winning elections. The American party system provides an opportunity for the public to choose candidates who offer differing visions concerning the scope and size of government. Subsequently, the balance of power between parties has changed every thirty-five years. Party dominance may be seen as cyclical with one party controlling government for ten years followed by a period of dealignment where the dominant coalition fractures resulting in a realigning election (aka a critical election). Beginning in the late 1820s, the party system began to integrate principles of popular democracy allowing the common man to participate in politics. Consequently, partisanship or voters identifying with one political organization augmented the power political parties have on the mechanisms of elections. The Progressives sought to lessen the power of political parties through reform movements in the early twentieth century. Reforms such as secret ballots, initiatives, recalls, referendums, and party primaries have allowed greater individual influence and decreased the hegemony of political parties. However, the Great Depression increased the need for government intervention in economic and social issues and political parties provided a conduit between citizens and policy-makers. While partisanship decreased over the following decades, divisions within the American electorate were fueled by the 2000 presidential election. Yet, with all these changes, the role of political parties remains the same: recruit, select, and sponsor candidates to win political elections.

Q2  How did the progressive reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affect political parties in the United States?

A2  The progressive reforms of the early twentieth century sought to eradicate the spoils system by limiting the corruption connected with urban political machines and national political parties. In turn, the Progressives sought to place more control in the hands of individual voters by implementing mechanisms such as split ticket voting, referendum, recall, initiative, party primaries, and the secret ballot.

Q3  Are American political parties in decline, and, if so, should we be worried about it?

A3  Political parties may be seen as in a state of decline. However, political scientists suggest the role of political parties may be changing to accommodate the modern candidate-centered campaigns. More people consider themselves Independents today than in the past. Also, more
people have self-identified as “weak” partisans than ever before. Nevertheless, party strength appears to be recouping its losses from the 1960s and 1970s given the contentious outcome of the 2000 election. Party organization has concentrated on national races and raising money given the close presidential races and slim majorities in Congress. Consequently, political parties still provide voting cues and are the best predictor of voting.

Q4 What role have minor parties, often called third parties, played in American history?

A4 Minor parties, also called third parties, have not played a significant role in the outcome of elections. Yet, throughout our country’s history, there have always been third parties. Third parties are formed around a critical issue that the major parties are ignoring. In addition, successful third parties have a charismatic leader who can appeal to a mass audience and gain support for the issue. However, the likelihood of a third party having a significant effect on an election has been limited by institutional arrangements enacted by the two major American parties to secure their continued political hegemony. These include single-member districts (winner takes all), strong state parties who have been instrumental in designing election laws including the number of signatures needed to be placed on the ballot, who will be included in political debates, money for party conventions, Electoral College delegates, control over patronage, and approval of government contracts to reward the party faithful. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln, under the third party, the Northern (Whigs) Republicans, was elected president. Teddy Roosevelt, George Wallace, Ross Perot, and Ralph Nader had some success in winning a percentage of the popular vote but were far from winning the 270 Electoral College votes necessary to become president.

Q5 Are interest groups or political parties the best vehicle for representing citizen opinion to government?

A5 It really depends on the issue and size of the group involved as to whether interest groups or political parties are the best vehicle to facilitate society-to-state interactions. For instance, if it is a single issue or a small group of them then interest groups better represent adherents’ views. But, in the case of a wide diffusion of interests then political parties serve as an umbrella device to contain them all and then as a channeling force to move ideas to action. Regarding the population sizes involved, interest groups fundamentally represent a small group with a uniform agenda that is shaped by particularistic motives. Meanwhile, political parties represent a wide variety of groups with a set of like-minded but not necessarily cohesive agendas shaped by national broad-based motivations.
Chapter Outline

I. Political Parties in the United States

While political parties are not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, there is every indication that the Founders recognized that people will form associations to advance a particular cause, issue, or belief. As we read in the last chapter, competing interests were considered healthy for a democracy to prevent tyranny (faction) and spark deliberation concerning policy issues. Yet, unlike interest groups, political parties recruit, select, and sponsor political candidates to run for elected office under a given label. In turn, a political party unites a group of people joined together on the basis of shared principles for the purpose of gaining political power by winning elections. Political parties organize, structure, and facilitate democratic politics by making it easier for citizens to participate in the political process. However, political parties are not static. As we shall see, political parties change and attract different constituencies. Moreover, the dominant party in power is temporary given the cyclical nature of politics illustrated by party dominance, dealignment and realignment. Furthermore, scholars have three views of American parties: “big tents,” or parties attracting a wide-range of support among differing ideologies; “responsible parties model” or parties that are issue-oriented, or as “teams” whereby political parties are comprised of aspiring officeholders.

A. Party Eras in American Politics

Political parties compete with one another to win elections. Parties offer competing visions of how government should be run.

1. The Pre-party Period (1787–1799)
   a. Prior to the American two-party system, two factions dominated the political landscape:
      1) Federalists
      2) Anti-Federalists.
   b. Support:
      1) Federalists: Commercial interests, proponents of the Constitution;
      2) Anti-Federalists: Agrarian interests, proponents of state sovereignty.
   c. Characteristics:
      1) Design a stable representative democracy.
      2) Representative of elite democracy:
         a) an educated, land-holding elite dominated politics;
         b) government should protect property rights and provide stable communities to promote commerce; thus inequalities are inevitable;
         c) political representatives should filter the views of the people through their superior expertise, intelligence, and temperament;
         d) elected representatives should act as trustees.
      3) Political parties are weak; instead, they may be described as “teams of aspiring officeholders.”

2. Federalists versus Jeffersonian Republicans (1800–1824)
   a. The two aforementioned factions continued to dominate politics.
      1) However, the Anti-Federalists were united under the name Jeffersonian Republicans beginning with the election of Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 election. Jeffersonian Republicans were later called Democrats (actually a politically insulting term when used by the Federalists because it was a reference to the revolutionaries in France who were unprincipled...
and were largely seen as lacking the necessary skills, education and virtue to participate and maintain a just government).

2) The Federalists were losing national support and remained competitive only in New England after 1815.
3) After 1815, national politics was dominated by the Democrats and termed the “Era of Good Feeling.”

b. Support:
1) Federalists: Northern, urban and commercial interests.
2) Jeffersonian Republicans: agrarian interests in the South and West (90 percent of the country).

c. Characteristics:
1) An ascending approach to principles of popular democracy:
   (a) The common people are capable of participating in government.
   (b) Representatives should “mirror” the concerns and interests of their constituents.
   (c) Elected representatives act as delegates.
2) James Monroe wins a landslide victory in the 1820 presidential election.
3) “War Hawks” led by Speaker of the House, Henry Clay, support presidential candidate John Quincy Adams over Andrew Jackson when the 1824 election is thrown into the House of Representatives (per Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804).
4) Intra-party competition within the Democratic Party.

   a. Beginning in 1830, the American two-party system emerges:
      1) Democrats.
      2) Whigs—formed from the Clay, Webster, Adams “War Hawk” wing of the Democratic Party.
   b. Martin Van Buren asserts political parties are a “vehicle” enabling the common citizen to advance his political views and participate in the political process.
   c. Support:
      1) Jacksonian Democrats: continued support from those in the agrarian South and expanding West who favored states’ rights, individualism, and lower taxes.
      2) Whigs: Continued support from New England and the industrial Northeast while gaining support in newly established Midwestern states and the abolitionist minded Mid-Atlantic states.
   d. Characteristics:
      1) The Whigs revived the Federalists’ beliefs in supporting high tariffs, improvements in infrastructure, a National Bank, and other pro-business, pro-industrial policies.
      2) Moreover, Whigs attracted those advocating an end to slavery (Conscience Whigs), the need for cheap farmland (Free Soil Party) and the anti-immigrant American Party also known as the Know Nothings.
      4) The 1857 Dred Scott case whereby the Supreme Court, led by Jackson appointee and states’ rights supporter Roger Taney, ruled blacks were property and not citizens.
      3) Dual Federalism.

4. The Civil War System (1860–1892)
a. Beginning with the election of 1860, the Republican Party dominated national politics.
   1) The issues of slavery, federalism, and the economy (tariffs, currency reserves, banking) spawned the American Civil War.
   2) The Whig Party and other lesser parties were brought into the Northern Republican Party; in turn, winning the 1860 presidential election with its nominee, Abraham Lincoln.
   3) The 1860 election is widely seen as a critical election because of high voter turnout, a realignment of a majority of the public identifying with the pro-Union, Republican Party and its dominance in holding majorities in the House, Senate, and presidency until the Democrats won a majority of the seats in the House in 1874.
      (a) Republicans dominant party in all regions but the South.
      (b) Southern states solidly Democratic.
   b. Support:
      1) Republicans: Northern, Midwestern, and Western states, suffragists, abolitionists, and industrialists.
      2) Democrats: Southern states, proponents of states’ rights and slavery, agrarian interests, Confederate sympathizers in border states.
   c. Characteristics:
      1) Regional divisions both socially and economically.
      2) Reconstruction: (1864–1876)
         (a) The Union army and military governments in the Southern states.
         (b) Patronage and the spoils system dominates local politics.
      3) Increased economic development in the North; economic depression in the South.
      4) Open immigration and geographical expansion westward.
      5) It could be argued that the Republican Party during this era was most representative of a responsible party given their commitment to pro-Union, abolitionist causes. Republicans dominated national politics until 1876 when the Democratic Party reemerged as national political party.
      6) High levels of voter turnout.

   a. The 1896 presidential contest between Republican William McKinley and Populist, Democrat William Jennings Bryan signifies another critical election whereby Republicans gained control of the presidency and Congress until the Democrats won a majority in the House during the 1910 election.
   b. The election consummated the relationship between the Republican Party and big business given the large campaign donations to McKinley from Northern industrialists.
   c. Support:
      1) Republicans: Commercial interests, suffragists, Progressives, Northern and Midwestern states, proponents of high tariffs and the gold standard.
      2) Democrats: Agrarian interests, segregationists, Southern and Western states, supporters of low tariffs and silver backers.
   d. Characteristics:
      1) World War I and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.
      2) Progressives called for the end of patronage and sponsored reforms that lessened the power of political parties over elections and voters.
(a) **Initiative:** Legal or constitutional process common in the states that allows citizens to place questions on the ballot to be decided directly by the voters.
(b) **Referendum:** A legal or constitutional device that allows state and local governments to put propositions directly to voters for determination.
(c) **Recall:** A legal or constitutional device that allows voters to remove an offensive officeholder before the normal end of his or her term.
(d) **Party Primary:** An election in which voters identified with a political party select the candidates who will stand for election under the party label in a subsequent general election.
(e) **Voter registration to battle corruption.**
(f) **Australian-style (secret) ballot**

3) This era represents the influx of both governmental reform and large campaign contributions in politics.

   a. As a response to President Hoover’s ineffective response to the Stock Market Crash in 1929 and the subsequent depression that followed, voters elected Franklin Roosevelt president in 1932.
      1) This election signifies another critical election given Democratic control of the presidency until the election of Eisenhower in 1952.
      2) Roosevelt initiated an unprecedented level of federal spending and government programs to combat high unemployment and poverty while intervening in economic and banking matters within the New Deal legislation.
         (a) **National Recovery Act (1933–1935).**
         (b) Created the Securities and Exchange Commission (1935), Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (1935) and Banking Act of 1935.
      3) These federal programs were extended in the subsequent Democratic presidential administrations:
         (a) **Harry Truman’s Fair Deal.**
         (b) **John Kennedy’s New Frontier.**
         (c) **Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.**
   b. **Support:**
      1) Democrats: New Deal Coalition—Southern and Western states, ethnic minorities, African Americans and Southern whites, Northeastern Irish, women and Northern industrialists.
      2) Republicans: Midwestern states and laissez-faire big business.
   c. **Characteristics:**
      1) The 1932 election signified the beginning of the New Deal Coalition which illustrates a “big tent” party including such diametrically opposed interests as African American, urban workers, and rural, white males living in the South.
      3) Cooperative Federalism.

   a. This era is defined by weakening party allegiances and divided government.
      1) Increase in independent voters and weak-leaning partisans.
4) Democrats controlled the House until 1994 when the Republican Revolution, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, won a majority in the House and Senate (first time since the 1952 election).
5) In 1992, the Democrats won the presidency and controlled Congress.
   (a) Yet, in 1995 the federal government became divided (Republicans controlled Congress) and highly partisan.
   (b) This pattern continued until the 2000 elections.
6) The 2000 presidential election illustrated the partisan divide within the country, as the Supreme Court decides the election:
   (a) Democrat Gore wins popular vote.
   (b) Republican Bush wins Electoral College.
   (c) Congress:
      i. Senate: 50/50 split (Republican VP breaks tie);
      ii. House: Republicans have slim majority.
7) The 2004 election:
   (a) Bush wins second term.
   (b) Congress continues to be controlled by Republicans.
8) The 2006 mid-term election:
   (a) Bush approval ratings are very low at 29 percent due to the Iraq War.
   (b) Congressional scandals hurt Republicans.
   (c) Democrats gain control of Congress in 2007.

b. Support:
1) Republicans: Southern, Midwestern, Southwestern (red) states.
2) Democrats: Upper Midwestern, Northeastern, Pacific Northwestern (blue) states.

c. Characteristics:
1) Vietnam, Watergate, Oil Crisis, Iranian Hostage Crisis, Gulf War, Iraq War.
2) Transition from Cooperative to Coercive to Dual Federalism.
3) Highly partisan and competitive party system: Divided government.
4) More voters self-identifying as politically Independent.
5) In 2007, Democrats may be described as a big tent party.

II. The State of Political Parties in the United States
The roles of political parties may be studied in three ways: party in electorate, party organization, and party in government.
A. Party in the Electorate
   1. Basically, this measures the allegiances or psychological attachment of voters to a particular party, producing:
      a. voter participation;
      b. voter intensity.
   2. Party Identification: The Ties Loosen
      a. Campaign contributions and media exposure have replaced party activity in local, state and national elections.
      b. Elections are no longer party-centered but are instead candidate-centered.
c. Yet, party identification or the emotional and intellectual commitment of a voter to his or her preferred party is still the best predictor of voting behavior.

d. Since 1964, the data collected by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan has indicated an increase in voters who identify as Independents (39 percent) (albeit only 10 percent did not identify with either political party in 2004).

e. Those voter who identify as strong Democrats have declined since Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition formed in 1932.

3. Party Identification: The Scales Rebalance

   a. To accurately understand party identification scholars have looked more closely at the category—Independent.
      
      1) Individuals who self-identify as Independents are largely connected to one political party. These individuals may be classified as Independents leaning to (more apt to support) either the Republican or Democratic Party.
      
      2) Independent “leaners” tend to behave as weak partisan identifiers.
         
         (a) Loyal to one party.
         
         (b) Turnout at the same rates as those who are weak partisans.

   b. Party loyalty may have weakened as individuals change from strong partisans to weak partisans.
      
      1) Strong partisans turn out at high rates and solidly support the nominee of their party; whereas, weak partisans turn out in lower numbers and are less loyal to the nominee of their party.
      
      2) Republicans are 5 or 6 percentage points more likely to turn out and 5 to 10 points more likely to support the candidate of their party than are Democrats.

4. Democrats and Republicans

   a. Who are the Democrats and Republicans?
      
      1) Democrats tend to be from the middle to lower classes, minorities, women, union members, live in urban areas, liberal, less religious, less educated.
      
      2) Republicans tend to be white, men, suburbanites, conservative, more religious, more educated, and belong to the middle to upper classes.

B. Party Organizations

   Party organization has traditionally resembled a pyramid structure: the more numerous local party organizations including wards, precincts, city, and county organizations at the bottom; state organizations including the Democratic and Republican Central Committees in the middle; and the national party organizations (DNCC, RNC, House and Senate Campaign Committees) at the top. Local organizations are vital to get out the vote. National organizations raise and allocate funds in those districts where candidates stand a good chance of winning.

   1. Local Party Organizations
      
      a. Local party organizations called political “machines” operate based upon patronage and reward party supporters with jobs, city and county contracts and provide goods and services to those who continue to support the party.
      
      b. The political machine in Chicago and Cook County are prime examples of Democratic machines, currently under the reign of Richard M. Daley, who has never faced a serious challenger within his party or by the Republican Party. Daley and his supporters on the Chicago City Council control 37,000 patronage jobs. As mayor of Chicago, Daley has formed a coalition of African Americans,
Latinos, and Old World immigrants (Irish, Polish, German) to further consolidate
table power. The Daley administration is currently under federal
investigation as 21 city workers, including former Chicago City Clerk,
James Laski, have been found guilty of receiving financial “kick backs” to the
amount of $48,000.

2. Fifty State Organizations
   a. State committees are responsible for organizing state party caucuses and
      conventions, writing the state party platforms, allocating campaign revenues, and
      selecting the state party’s national convention and national committee delegates.
   b. State party organizations have moved from concentrating on electoral
      mobilization; instead providing technical assistance (media, mailers, events) to
      political candidates.

3. The National Party Organizations
   a. The Democratic and Republican campaign committees provide funding
      recruit candidates and their staff, sponsor media advertisements, conduct polling
      and fundraisers that greatly assist political campaigns.
   b. The national political organizations (DNC and RNC) are vital to the success or
      failure of any national political in the highly competitive political environment.

C. Party in Government
1. Elections offer an opportunity for political parties to appeal directly to voters by
   offering policy alternatives that distinguish one party from another and provide clear
   policy positions that will be enacted once elected to office.
2. These issues are then associated with a specific party and voters will evaluate the
   performance of a party (and candidates) based upon the success or failure of the
   policies. An example is the 1994 Republican candidates publicly signing a pledge to
   support the tenets of the reform minded policy issues in the “Contract With America.”
3. Promoting the President’s Program
   a. Beginning in the twentieth century, the president has publicly stated his positions
      on a variety of issues. In turn, the president has become more instrumental in
      suggesting, offering (but not sponsoring) and advocating legislation (remember
      that only members of Congress can sponsor legislation).
   b. As a result, if the same political party as the president controls Congress,
      his programs have a greater chance of success than if he presides over divided
      government:
      1) Unified government: 80 percent success rate.
      2) Presidency and one house of Congress are controlled by the same party: 75 percent success rate.
      3) Both houses of Congress are controlled by a different party than the
         president: 60 percent success rate.
   c. Each year, Congressional Quarterly publishes the proportion of votes in which
      the president’s programs were supported by Congress. This is known as
      Presidential Success.
   d. As a result of the 2006 mid-term elections and the unpopularity of the Iraq War,
      President Bush had an uphill battle to get his legislation passed.

D. Loyal Opposition
1. Each year, Congressional Quarterly reports the proportion of votes in the House and
   Senate on which a majority of one party lines up against a majority of the other party.
   This is known as party unity.
2. It follows:
a. If the president’s party does not hold a majority in both houses of Congress, the opposition party is more likely to sponsor its own legislation.
b. If the president’s party controls Congress the minority party can simply dissent and attempt to block legislation through procedural rules (especially in the Senate) but is hamstrung to sponsor legislation.
c. However, when incumbent presidents are unpopular and considered a “lame duck,” such as Harry Truman, LBJ, and George W. Bush, members of the same party may decide to defect to advance their popularity and separate themselves from an unpopular leader resulting in party disunity.

III. The Impacts of Minor Parties on American Politics

The United States is described as a two-party system but also includes minor parties. Minor parties are organizations that sponsor candidates who advance issues that are largely ignored by the major parties. Minor parties have little chance of winning but can occasionally change the outcome of elections. Some political scientists, campaign managers, and established third parties point to the advent of the Internet as an avenue for third parties to become viable forces in local, state, and national elections.

A. The Historical Role of Minor Parties

1. It is surprising to casual observers of politics that national elections attract several minor parties. In the 2004 presidential election, fifteen candidates ran for office.
2. However, third parties have not been very successful but may serve an important role to promote issues that the major political parties ignore.
3. Nevertheless, a minor party (aka a third party) rises to national attention by:
   a. addressing an issue (economic, moral, or social) that gains a loyal following;
   b. advancing the issue via a charismatic leader who can increase support for the party.
4. Successes are few:
   a. Under the third party, the Northern (Whigs) Republicans, Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860.
   b. Teddy Roosevelt, George Wallace, Ross Perot, and Ralph Nader had some success in gaining substantial percentages of the popular vote but were far from winning the presidency.
   c. In fact, Teddy Roosevelt took votes away from Republican William Howard Taft in the 1912 election allowing Woodrow Wilson to win the presidency. Also, Ralph Nader’s strong showing may have cost Al Gore the presidency in the highly contested 2000 election.

B. The Obstacles to Minor Party Success

1. Election laws and rules were written by Democrats and Republicans to favor two-party dominance. In turn major parties have institutional advantages over emerging third parties.
2. Political scientist, Maurice Duverger, noted that electoral rules influence party systems. Duverger’s Law states majoritarian systems produce two-party systems, while proportional representation systems produce multi-party systems. As is the case in the United States, we have incorporated a single member district in which a given geographical district elects a single individual to office limiting viable third parties. This is known as first-past-the-post given one winner will represent a district whether elected by a plurality or a majority vote.
3. Moreover, state parties have been instrumental in designing election laws including the number of signatures needed to be placed on the ballot, who will be
included in political debates, money for party conventions and Electoral College delegates.

4. Patronage also impedes third parties from gaining a political foothold.

C. The Future of Minor Parties in America
   1. If history is a guide, the chances of a third-party gaining national following and running a viable campaign is slim.
   2. Institutional structures and a dominant two-party system assure this to be the case.
   3. However, the 2006 election indicates fissures in the Republican Party between social conservatives and libertarians.
   4. The Green and Libertarian Parties have sponsored numerous candidates in state and national elections with some success.
   5. So, could a middle party form to attract weak leaning Republican and Democrats and appeal to the growing number of Independents? Only time can tell. However, realigning election will continue changing the composition of the major American political parties.

LECTURE SUGGESTIONS

Current Events/Behavioral Focus: Who are the Democrats, Republicans, and Independents?

I. Party Identification
   A. The number of people self-identifying as Democrats has decreased over time.
   B. However, Democrats still outnumber Republicans and Independents.
   C. Registered Republicans and Democrats have decreased over time while individuals self-identifying as Independents have risen.
   D. According to the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center, this is the distribution of Party Identification in America:
     1. Democrats: 37 percent
     2. Republicans: 27 percent
     3. Independents: 36 percent.
   E. Party ID by Social Group: Income
     1. Individuals with an income level under $25,000 annually are more likely to ID as Democrats (38 percent).
     2. Individuals making over $60,000 a year are more likely to be Republicans (39 percent).
   F. Party Identification by Group: Education
     1. No high school: Democrat (40 percent)
     2. High School Degree: Slightly Democrat
     3. College Degree: Republican (37 percent)
     4. Advanced Degree: Democrat (38 percent).
   G. Party Identification by Group: Religion
     1. Jewish: 55 percent D, 12 percent R
     2. Protestant: 32 percent D, 32 percent R
     3. Catholic: 30 percent D, 30 percent R
     4. None (No Affiliation): Lean D 30 percent, Lean R 20 percent.
   H. Party Identification by Group: Gender
     1. Female:
        a. Democrat: 38 percent
        b. Republican: 28 percent.
2. Male:
   a. Democrat: 24 percent
   b. Republican: 30 percent.

I. Party Identification by Group: Ethnicity
1. Black: 62 percent D, 2 percent R
2. White: 37 percent D, 38 percent R
3. Hispanic: 42 percent D, 15 percent R
4. Other: 36 percent D, 25 percent R.

J. Party Identification by Region of United States
1. South: 38 percent D, 31 percent R
2. Midwest: 30 percent D, 35 percent R
3. Northeast: 28 percent D, 22 percent R
4. West: 30 percent D, 28 percent R.

K. Party Identification by Group: Age
1. 18–29 yrs: 38 percent D, 20 percent R
2. 30–41: 31 percent D, 35 percent R
3. 42–53: 27 percent D, 35 percent R
4. 54–65: 37 percent D, 36 percent R
5. 65+: 38 percent D, 28 percent R.

American Political Development (APD)/Historical Focus: Critical Elections

I. Critical Elections in American Politics
A. Political scientists, Walter Dean Burnham, V.O. Key, and David Brady have added to the literature exploring electoral realignment and the effect changes in party loyalty have on elections. These distinct changes in party loyalty among voters resulting in a lasting electoral realignment are termed critical elections.

B. The literature has identified three periods of sharp electoral change in which a complete realignment occurs characterized by a unified and dominant political party controlling the Senate, House, and presidency for at least a decade:
   1. The Civil War Realignment of 1860
   2. The 1890s realignment
   3. The New Deal realignment.

C. Each critical election is characterized by political parties offering clear and distinct policy platforms and is evaluated by the electorate base upon these differences. In Critical Elections and Congressional Policy-Making, William Brady identifies five tenets of the aforementioned electoral realignments.
   1. Dominance of local issues is momentarily softened by "national cross-cutting issues."
   2. The “nationalization of issues during critical election periods creates majority parties that are relatively united on major policy issues” (p. 15).
   3. The government is controlled by a single party, for a relatively lengthy period of time, in order for policy changes to be implemented (p. 15).
   4. A large number of freshman congressman are elected; in turn, the committee system is "inundated with new members replacing old ones" in leadership positions (p. 15).
   5. Critical elections stipulate that the majority party actually acts upon national issues (p. 16).

II. The Civil War Realignment
A. The first period of critical elections, the Civil War Realignment, occurred between 1854 and 1860.

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1. As Brady asserts, between 1848 and 1874 House elections were highly sectional in nature due to the dominating national issues of slavery, Western expansion, nationalistic economic growth, immigration, and protective tariffs (pp. 21, 29).
   a. The Democratic Party opposed protective tariffs, the expansion of homestead legislation; and supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.
   b. The Whigs, soon to become the Republican Party, favored Western expansion, tariffs to protect American manufacturing, and the admission of Kansas as a slave-free territory.
   c. During the critical period of 1856, the Republican Party emerged as a national party opposing slavery and directly challenging the Democratic Party's platform calling for the non-interference by Congress with slavery in states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

2. As a result of the political parties taking distinct stands on national issues, the Democratic Party began to lose House seats in the Northeast and Midwest.
   a. Brady cites an across the board change of -5.26 in the critical period away from the Democratic Party in the North suggesting that “national electoral factors were benefiting the Republican Party” (p. 35).
   b. In the Midwest, the votes for Democratic congressman were even lower. The Republicans gained 35 House seats and averaged 66 percent of the vote over Democratic candidates (p. 29).

3. Moreover, the Republicans became the majority party in 1856 and attained unified control of the government in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln defeated the Northern Democratic nominee, Stephen Douglas, and Southern Democrat, John Breckenridge.

4. The Republicans controlled Congress and the Executive Branch from 1860 to 1874. As a result of the 1860 electoral realignment, a new two-party system emerged, whereby the Republican Party was "united on the basic realignment issues of slavery, secession, civil rights, and expansionist banking policies and tariffs" (p. 49).

5. In turn, the new majority party enacted significant policy changes: slavery was abolished, blacks were enfranchised and were elected to public offices in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states. Also, the Homestead Acts granted blacks the opportunity to settle within the Western territories.

III. The 1898 Realignment
   A. The second critical election period, 1894–1896, pitted agrarian matters against industrial interests.
   1. During the 1890s realignment, the Republican leadership supported pro-industrial legislation such as increased railroad construction, high immigration quotas, protective tariffs, and the maintenance of the gold standard to determine the value of U.S. currency.
   2. The Democrats managed to eradicate the Gold-Democrats, led by President Grover Cleveland, from the party and coalesced in supporting the exchange of silver for gold, tariffs favoring free trade to assist cotton producers, and an isolationist foreign policy advocated by the Populist candidate, William Jennings Bryan.

   B. Between 1884 and 1894, excluding the heavily Democratic South, the regions of the United States were very competitive.
   C. However, in 1894 the Republican Party gained 6 percent of the vote in the Northeast, West, and North-Central States with the assistance of the Populist Party splitting the Democratic vote (Brady, 1988, p. 58). Furthermore, in the critical period of 1894–1896, the Republican Party gained votes in every region except the South (p. 61).
1. To support this claim, Brady cites the Republican acquisition of 5.5 percent of the swing vote compared to the Democratic loss of -7.6 percent in the East, Midwest, West, and North-Atlantic regions (p. 63).

2. The votes-to-seats ratio in the House indicates a 5 percent change in both the 1894 and 1896 elections and an astonishing 80 percent committee membership turnover between 1892 and 1896 (pp. 69–71).

D. The 1890s realignment led to thirty-four years of Republican dominance in national affairs. As a result, the pro-industrial policies (the Dingley Tariff of 1896, the gold standard, international military intervention resulting in the Spanish-American War, increased subsidies for railroads, and increased immigration quotas) favored by the Republicans were implemented.

IV. The New Deal Realignment

A. The third era of realignment occurred due to the Great Depression.

1. The critical election of 1932 provided the voters with a stark choice between the Democrats, who nominated Franklin Roosevelt as their presidential candidate and called upon the federal government to take an active role in assisting the states with debt relief and social programs, and the Republican incumbent, Herbert Hoover, who believed that any relief should come from state governments.

2. Despite the fact that seventy-two House Democrats resigned or chose not to run for re-election between 1931 and 1933, the Democrats captured 8.95 percent of the swing vote in virtually all House districts and in traditional Republican regions such as the Northeast and Midwest (Brady, 1988, pp. 89–91).

a. The Democratic gain was around 10 percent nationally as a result of the “solid South” increasing its Democratic support from 86.7 percent to 90 percent (p. 95).

b. Furthermore, during the New Deal realignment there was an unprecedented turnover of House committee members. As Brady’s research indicates, all thirteen standing committees “found themselves with a majority of new members … and 90% were FDR Democrats” (p. 105).

B. The voting patterns suggest that the public overwhelmingly supported government intervention in the economy. In fact, the number of people voting was twice as high in 1932 than in the 1928 presidential election.

C. The New Deal coalition of Southerners, urban workers, minorities, the unemployed, Northern industrialists, and farmers accomplished an across-the-board realignment that would enable the Democratic Party to control the Senate, House, and presidency for fourteen years.

D. As a result, the new majority utilized government management to pass: agricultural assistance bills, the McNary-Haugenism Act promoting domestic price supports, infrastructure projects (Tennessee Valley Authority, the Public Utilities Act), reciprocal trade agreements, the Fair Labor Act, and the extension of unemployment benefits.

V. The 2006 Mid-term Elections

A. The results of the 2006 mid-term election suggests the possibility of significant defections from the Republican Party.

1. Only one Republican incumbent in the New England states, Chris Shays, won re-election; while five Republican incumbents were defeated in the Senate. As a result, the Democrats regained control over both houses of Congress.
2. Public discontent with the Bush administration’s handling of the Iraq War led to anti-war Democrats gaining the support of weak-leaning Republicans and Independents.

3. Some senior Republicans in Congress, namely Chuck Hagel and Arlen Specter in the Senate, and Jim Flake and Ron Paul in the House, broke with the president over increased spending, further U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, and a variety of scandals attributed to the Bush administration and Republicans in Congress.

4. The Southwestern and upper Plains states became increasingly more Democratic.

B. However, under the leadership of the first female Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and an unpopular leader of the Senate, Harry Reid, the Democrats have yet to find a national leader or salient issue, other than the Iraq War, on which to attract swing voters to the Democratic Party.

C. The 2008 presidential election was the first election since 1952 to have neither an incumbent president nor former vice-president as a candidate. Subsequently, this scenario provided political excitement, established a new record for campaign spending, and redefined the modern presidential campaign.
Projects, Exercises, and Activities

1. Access the political party websites (listed below) and compare and contrast the party platforms. Identify the ideological and policy similarities and differences. Who are the parties’ audiences? Do you think the policy positions are appealing to voters? Why or why not? This exercise provides an opportunity for class discussion and group presentations.

2. Require the students to work for a political party and keep a journal of their experiences. As the semester nears its end, have the students present their findings either through a written paper or class presentation.

3. Assist students in creating questions for semi-structured interviews. Your students will be asking members of their community to tell them which political, social, and economic issues are most important to them. Only at the end of the interview, the student should ask the interviewees to identify which political party has the greatest appeal to them. After the students have collected several responses, they should compare the issues of importance gathered by the community to the political platforms of all the political parties (including any smaller state parties). Ask your students to discuss or write about their findings. Which parties do best in addressing the issues citizens are concerned about? What meaning do students make from the results of their investigation? What does this tell them about political party platforms and the public? What are the limits and problems with the informal study that they have conducted? How does this impact their findings?

4. Party loyalty is notoriously low in the United States. Ask students to identify candidates in an upcoming election or sitting representatives who express views that break significantly with the norms of their party. Once these individuals have been identified, challenge students to think of ways that a political party could enforce great discipline among their members in our current political system. Ask students to remain aware of the potential unintended consequences of their proposals for party discipline.
Additional Resources

Supplemental Readings


Websites

Democrats
This is the official website of the Democratic Party. It is an excellent source for background regarding history, platforms, key leaders, issue positions on contemporary topics, etc. The site is well developed with a plethora of interactive features that include access to video clips showcasing relevant news topics, election coverage, and key leaders’ addresses. The site also has a donor feature.

Green Party
The official Web page of the Green Party. It is an excellent comparative source because it provides links to other affiliated green parties from around the world. It also showcases the party’s stances on environmental issues, promotes grassroots democracy initiatives, social justice, and peace activities in foreign affairs.

Libertarian Party
This is the official website of the Libertarian Party. It provides the history, positions on current
controversies, overall platform and organizational presence information for the party around the country. The site contains a blog, YouTube channel access point, and articles promoting the Libertarian ethos as well as a donor site.

**Reform Party National Committee**
This website provides information on the Reform Party. It shows its positions on current controversies, overall platform, and leadership structure for the party. The site also has a donor feature.

**Republicans**
The official website of the Republican National Committee. It also serves as the general site for the party organization and provides videos and other sources projecting the general themes of the party as a whole. The site is well developed with numerous interactive features and access to video clips through its own YouTube channel. It portrays the major positions of the party across the full spectrum of policies including economics, social, and foreign affairs. The site also has a donor feature.