9 Political Parties and Interest Groups

Associated Press/Stephen Savoia

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

- Describe the functions and purposes of political parties in the United States.
- Analyze the historical evolution of the American party system and the forces that have served as catalysts for their transformations.
- Distinguish between two-party and multiple-party systems and analyze the political implications of each.
- Describe the role of interest groups in American politics.
- Evaluate the challenge of interest groups within the context of constitutional representation.

As you may recall from the discussion in Chapter 1, when Congress overhauled the health care system in March 2010, it did not pass a single-payer system similar to the one in Canada, which is funded entirely by public money. Rather, it passed a host of regulations along with a requirement that uninsured individuals purchase insurance from private companies, which is often referred to as the individual mandate. Additionally, it provided for subsidies for those too poor to pay for insurance on their own. Achieving the Affordable Care Act, which some call "Obamacare" because it was championed by President Obama, required compromise among various constituencies and interests. On the one hand, that the Affordable Care Act was passed was a major accomplishment for the Democrats, the political party that has attempted to secure accessible health care since the 1930s. But on the other hand, the inability to achieve it for so many years speaks to the large number of interest groups arrayed against it and their tremendous influence in the American political system.

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton attempted to introduce health care reform, only to be opposed by numerous interest groups, including the American Medical Association (AMA), the insurance industry, various union groups, and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The reasons that these groups opposed reform were as varied as the groups themselves. The AMA objected because it was concerned that its members (primarily doctors) would earn less money. AARP opposed reform because it was concerned that reform would mean health care inferior to that provided by Medicare, the federally funded medical insurance program available to senior citizens. Insurance companies worried that their profits would be diminished, and unions were concerned that any public health insurance would be less comprehensive than the premium packages they already had won through collective bargaining. These interest groups each played a role in defeating Clinton's efforts to reform the American health care system.

Thus, it was no surprise that when the issue came up again during the 2008 presidential campaign, the same interest groups expressed the same concerns. Initially, the House of Representatives passed a health care bill that included a "public option," a government-sponsored plan for those who did not have or could not get private insurance. These interest groups opposed the public option for the same reasons they had opposed the concept of "universal" health care in the past. Insurance companies were also joined by pharmaceutical companies similarly concerned about their profits.

This time, though, the White House made a series of deals with these interest groups to gain their support for the Senate version of the bill, which left out the public option. The AMA supported the deal because it was promised higher reimbursements. AARP supported it because the organization was promised no Medicare cuts. The insurance industry supported it because the individual mandate promised that more customers would be buying policies. Unions began to support it because their premium insurance packages would be exempt from taxation. Understandably, the casual observer might think that the law was written to serve the interest groups, not the public. At the same time, the new law was considered a victory for the Democratic Party.

As this case study on the Affordable Care Act suggests, political parties and interest groups are very much part of the American political landscape, and these entities direct much of the nature of current American politics. In this chapter, we examine the roles of both interest groups and political parties in American politics, and their implications for American democracy.

9.1 What Is a Political Party and What Is Its Purpose?

Political parties are organizations that seek to influence government policy by taking positions on current and public issues, nominating candidates, and trying to get them elected to office. The Framers of the Constitution took a dim view of political parties. They considered them to be factions of self-interest that placed the welfare of one group above that of the general public. Worse, the founders feared that such groups might ride roughshod over individual rights and liberties. The Framers also understood that party formation would be an inevitable byproduct of liberty. Free association, after all, meant that like-minded individuals could interact with one another and that formal organizations would develop around those associations.

Initially, there were two relatively small political parties (the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, both of which no longer exist, at least in their original form), and they tended to operate primarily in Congress. But as more people were granted **franchise**—the right to vote—political parties emerged as vehicles to get them to the polls.

Political parties in modern democratic societies perform five essential functions: (1) they get people out to vote, (2) they seek to win elections, (3) they organize the government, (4) they generate symbols of identification and loyalty, and (5) they implement policy objectives. The primary purpose of the American party system is to win political office, which means that getting out the vote is secondary to that primary purpose. In the United States, winning political office would certainly be more difficult if there were not parties in place to mobilize voters behind specific candidates and their policy positions. But this also means that party platforms—the political positions of the party—are secondary to the primary purpose of winning political office.

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A campaign poster from 1888. American political parties have been in place since shortly after the nation was founded. Their main function has been to have their candidates elected to office.

Parties take on three roles in American politics: *party-in-the-organization*, *party-in-the-government*, and *party-in-the-electorate*. The **party-in-the-organization** consists of activists who seek to define the issues on which the party will campaign and who will, at times, run for office. These activists may also work the phones or go door to door just prior to elections to remind voters that an election is coming up and try to attract voters to their particular candidates. Party activists may serve as delegates to national nominating conventions.

The **party-in-the-government** consists of party members who hold public office and whose members get to organize government and work to pass the agenda on which they campaigned. The **party-in-the-electorate** consists of those voters who are registered with the political party, as well as persons who identify with that party.

Get Out the Vote

Overall voter turnout is relatively low in the United States, such that turnout in presidential elections has not exceeded 60% since 1992. Thus, getting people out to vote usually consists of party activists attempting to register voters. Those least likely to vote are poor people in poor communities (the reason for this is discussed in Chapter 10), so political party activists often hold voter registration drives in poor communities and knock on doors to get people to register. In a tight race, registering new voters can be the difference between victory and defeat for a party and its candidates. This then leads to the next critical function of parties, which is winning elections.

Win Elections

The positions taken by American political parties change over time as the preferences of the electorate change. As an example, the Democratic Party was considered to be the party of racial segregation until 1965, when a Democratic Congress passed the Voting Rights Act and a Democratic president signed it. The segregationists, largely concentrated in the South, abandoned the Democrats, and the party became one of racial inclusion. As it sought new voters, it appealed to more people on the left of the political spectrum. As this happened, many others grew uncomfortable in the Democratic Party and began to switch over to the Republicans. In an attempt to appeal to disaffected Democrats, the Republican Party became the states' rights party. In many respects, American parties follow the competitive market model. In an effort to attract new customers, a business will introduce new products. So too will political parties.

Both political parties have large national party committees: the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC). These are essentially umbrella organizations that are responsible for governing political parties on a day-to-day basis. The most essential national party functions are fundraising and recruiting candidates to run in various congressional contests. The two national party committees also engage in public relations efforts on behalf of their parties' political platforms and support the presidential and vice-presidential nominee once they are nominated.

As part of their efforts to win elections, the DNC and RNC raise large sums of money. In the 2014 campaign cycle, the DNC raised $168 million, while the RNC raised $195 million. These monies were then used to assist both Democrats and Republicans in House and Senate races.

Organize Government

Political parties, especially what we refer to as the party-in-the-government, organize the legislative branch. The party that wins the most seats in a house of Congress gets to control the leadership of that house. Because the Republican Party won the most seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2014, it continued to control that house of Congress, including having the power to select the speaker of the House. Senate Republicans gained control of the Senate from the Democrats, who had held the majority since 2007. The winning party also takes control of committee chair leadership so that all House committees continued under Republican control when the new Congress was sworn in in January of 2015 and the Republican Senate could select committee chairs. The benefit of holding all standing committee

chairs is that the winning party then gets to set the legislative agenda, at least until the next election. At the same time, because the president works with party leaders in each house of Congress, such as the House speaker, party control in Congress affects each party's relationship with the president.

Associated Press/Andrew Harnik

John Boehner gives up his position as speaker of the House to Republican Paul Ryan in October 2015. Boehner announced his intention to resign as speaker of the House in September 2015.

Although all members of Congress represent their own respective districts or states, both parties have **party caucuses** within each chamber of Congress. The caucuses often shape policy agendas, political strategies, and leadership positions. The House Republican caucus, for example, determines the majority party leadership, the Republican policy agenda, and the political strategy for achieving it. Meanwhile, in the House Democratic caucus, decisions are made about who will serve as minority leaders and **ranking members**, who are chosen from among members of the minority party and serve as vice chairs of committees in Congress. The Democratic Party caucus also shapes its strategy for opposing the majority party strategy.

Party-in-the-government also plays a role in the executive and judicial branches. When presidents make appointments to the Cabinet and other departments and agencies, they usually choose members of their party. This reinforces continuity with previous administrations of that party. As an example, when President Obama was looking for experienced Washington Democrats to staff his administration following his 2008 election, he found that he was selecting from among those who had served in the previous Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton. Lawrence Summers, who was selected by President Obama to direct the National Economic Council, had been Clinton's secretary of the treasury, while Eric Holder, who was selected to be Obama's first attorney general, had been an assistant attorney general for civil rights in Bill Clinton's administration.

Similarly, presidents look to appoint members of their party to positions in the judiciary. This helps to ensure that their appointments will share the same values, particularly because federal and Supreme Court judges serve life terms with "good behavior."

Generate Symbols of Identification and Loyalty

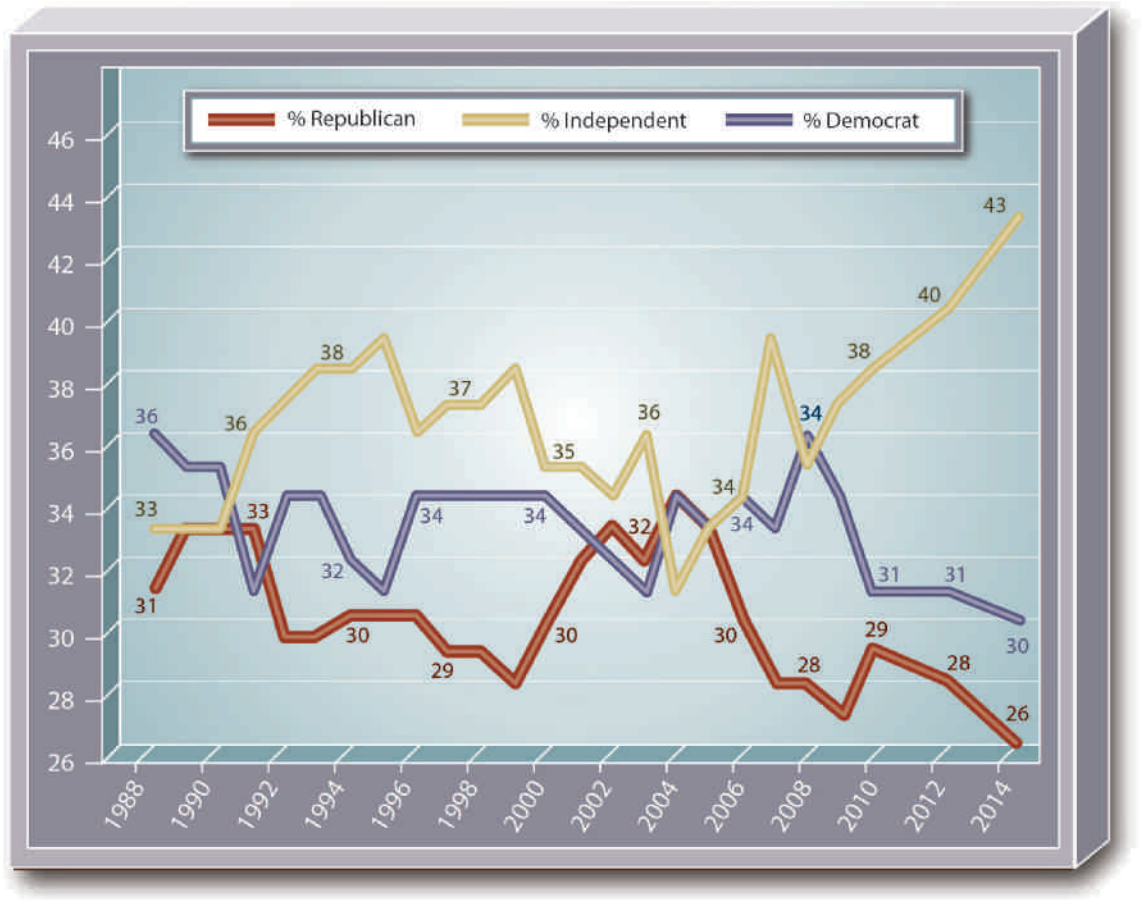
Political parties are generally a source of both identification and registration. Voters are often identified by their party registration, while persons holding state and federal legislative and executive offices, and some local legislative and executive officials, run with party labels. Federal judges are usually identified by the party of the president who appointed them.

Until the 1960s, voters tended to vote on the basis of party loyalty. Most people joined the party of their parents and grandparents. From the 1930s, the Democratic Party was viewed as the party of the middle class, whose members were primarily blue-collar working-class, low-income groups. The party was also built as a broad coalition of ethnic groups and labor unions, at least in urban areas. The Republican Party tended to be more patrician and composed of more educated, affluent individuals. For many years, even Democrats who became educated and financially successful tended to continue identifying with the party of their parents because of party loyalty.

Because of this tradition, elections were relatively predictable: Democrats would vote for Democratic candidates, and Republicans would vote for Republican candidates. In recent years, however, fewer people identify with either party, and increasingly more voters consider themselves **independents**, or political moderates who swing back and forth between the parties. The number of independents has increased since the 1970s (see Figure 9.1). The trend actually began during the late 1960s because of a **dealignment**, where long-term Democrats chose not to be identified with the party for a variety of reasons.

Figure 9.1: Rise of independents since the 1980s

Though the percentage of Americans who identify as independents has varied within a range since 1990, it has risen substantially since the 1980s.



From the 1930s until the late 1960s, the Democratic Party was the majority party in terms of voter affiliation. Following protests over the Vietnam War and the perception that the Democratic Party was moving to the left on critical issues including race relations, blue-collar Democrats, primarily in the South and in ethnic enclaves in the Northeast and industrial Midwest, began to vote for Republicans. While Southern Democratic voters dropped their Democratic Party affiliation, they did not identify as Republicans. Data from the National Election Studies (NES) show that between 1952 and 1992, identification with the Democratic Party decreased from 59% to 47.5%, while identification with the Republican Party increased from 31.6% to 39.4%. Meanwhile, the percentage of the population that identified themselves as independents tripled, from 6.5% to 19.6% (Levin-Waldman, 1997).

Today, both political parties have their own respective "bases." The base of the modern Republican Party is considered to be very conservative, while the base of the Democratic Party is considered to be very liberal. Both adhere more strictly to ideology than more centrist members of their parties do. Modern conservative voters tend to favor smaller government, states' rights, lower taxes, restrictions on privacy and abortion rights, school prayer, and traditional family values. Modern liberals tend to favor more government programs and regulation to achieve a more fair society, higher taxes on wealthier individuals and families, strict separation of church and state, rights to privacy and freedom of choice, and strong civil rights for groups such as gays and lesbians.

Because political parties seek to mobilize voters to support a particular candidate and win an election, they often strive to be an open tent with a wide variety of views. But if moderates drop out to be independents, both parties may be left with ideological extremists.

Associated Press/John Bazemore

The Tea Party movement, which emerged after President Obama's 2008 election, has a conservative Republican focus. It espouses less government spending and protests government-mandated health insurance.

It is not uncommon to identify the typical Democrat, both the voter and the politician, as being liberal. Similarly, the typical Republican is viewed as conservative. The Democratic Party still has a base of low-income and blue-collar groups with a high school education. But the Democratic Party also has many highly educated professionals, academics, and business people who are more liberal on social issues. A member of the Democratic base, for example, may believe that abortion should be legal in all circumstances, including during the third trimester, past the point of viability. The very liberal Democrat might contend that an individual's right to privacy, and to control her body and reproduction, supersedes the government's right to protect a fetus.

Modern Republicans tend to be White, evangelical Protestant, conservative, and in favor of states' rights. The Republican Party today is still home to the

very wealthy and the old patrician classes, but it is also home to more working-class people, including Catholics who are conservative on social issues, especially regarding the family. The position of a member of the Republican base on abortion would likely be the opposite of that of the liberal Democrat. The very conservative Republican might assert that abortion should be prohibited under all circumstances, even in cases where it is necessary to save the life of the mother, if, for example, his or her religious beliefs encourage this position.

The Republican Party, of late, has been influenced by the Tea Party movement, which emerged following Barack Obama's 2008 election. Tea Party members represent a conservative faction of the party focusing on reducing government spending with the goal of reducing the national debt and the federal budget deficit. The Tea Party has taken an active role in shaping Republican Party politics, particularly in its efforts protesting health care reform and in its support of strongly conservative candidates.

Implement Policy Objectives

To the extent that parties represent specific policy agendas, they also identify the objectives for policy implementation. Policy is technically implemented by the bureaucracy, but policy objectives are established by political actors. These objectives often reflect the values of the parties with which they are identified. By extension, then, parties implement policy objectives. Consider for a moment that, if it is an official Democratic Party position to support abortion rights and the Democratic preference would be for the new health care law to pay for abortions, then the Democratic Party would seek to meet that objective by crafting or amending the new health care legislation so that it covers abortions. Meanwhile, as a traditional position of the Republican Party is to oppose abortion, Republican members of Congress will seek to block funding for abortions from the language of the new health care law so that when the law is fully implemented, individuals with publicly funded insurance will not have coverage for abortion services.

Implementation of policy objectives ultimately requires that parties mobilize support. In this vein, political parties organize dissent and opposition and institutionalize, channel, and socialize conflict. When they are able to mobilize bias in favor of something, thereby making it easier to implement, they effectively legitimize the decisions of government.

9.2 Evolution of the American Political Parties

Today's Democrats and Republicans were not the first parties in the United States. In fact, political parties have evolved throughout the nation's history. Historians have found it helpful to divide the history of American parties into "party systems." The "first" party system lasted from the beginning of the republic until about 1824. The "second" party system, sometimes called the Jacksonian party system, lasted from 1824 until the eve of the Civil War. The period of Reconstruction following the Civil War ushered in Democratic Party rule in the South and Republican Party dominance at the national level. Beginning in the early 20th century, the party system changed again due to an era of political reform. Then, from the mid-1960s into the early 1970s, both political parties introduced reforms in their attempts

to attract more voters, but these also weakened party loyalty and increased the number of political independents.

The First Party System (1770s–1824)

At the time of the nation's founding, those supporting strong centralized authority were known as the Federalists. Notably, Alexander Hamilton supported developing a strong commercial and industrial economy. Thomas Jefferson, by contrast, favored small agricultural economies.

The first party system emerged out of this dispute. Jefferson's followers formed the nation's first political party, the **Democratic-Republicans** (the precursor to the modern Democratic Party), in an effort to recapture the republican spirit (discussed in Chapter 1) that had animated the American Revolution. Meanwhile, Hamilton's supporters maintained the Federalist label. The intent of the new Democratic-Republicans was to paint Hamilton and his supporters as secret monarchists—people who wanted to reestablish the king in America—and the intent of the Federalists was to paint Jefferson and his supporters as Anti-Federalists and enemies of the Constitution. By the 1820s, the Democratic-Republicans had become so successful that the Federalists had ceased to exist.

Everett Collection/SuperStock

Political cartoon titled "Pilgrims' Progress" that shows Andrew Jackson leading the Democratic Party donkey carrying James K. Polk and George Dallas to the 1844 presidential election. In the Jacksonian party system, congressional caucuses were replaced by party conventions, where some ordinary citizens were involved in nominating presidential candidates.

The Second Party System (1824–1860)

The second party system began in 1824 with Andrew Jackson's first run for the presidency. In part, it was a response to political participation being opened to the masses, as property requirements for voting were abolished and more White men were enfranchised.

"Jacksonian" democracy was a grassroots movement intended to mobilize the newly eligible **electorate**, or those who are eligible to vote. In the first party system, presidential candidates were nominated by caucuses made up of members of Congress, in order for Congress to have some control over who might be president. These caucuses were not popular among the presidential candidates. In the Jacksonian system, caucuses were replaced by conventions, where party delegates, who could be ordinary citizens, gathered to nominate a candidate.

In 1831, the newly formed anti-Jackson **National Republican Party** nominated Henry Clay in the first major party convention. The National Republican Party would eventually die out and be replaced by the Whig Party, which was then replaced by the Republican Party that remains in place today. The Democratic Party (which had dropped *Republican* from its name) held a convention in 1832 that nominated Jackson for reelection and Martin Van Buren for vice president. Van Buren would later be nominated for president by a Democratic convention in 1836. Jackson supporters voted Democratic, while the National Republicans then formed the Whig Party.

Between 1836 and 1852, both the Whig and Democratic parties attempted to avoid the issues of slavery and sectionalism, but by the middle of the 19th century, these matters became unavoidable. The slavery issue shattered the old parties and caused new ones to emerge. The modern **Republicans**, founded in 1854 by anti-slavery activists, became a major force that began to dominate national politics in the years leading up to the Civil War.

The Third Party System (1860s–early 1900s)

With the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, the Republican Party became established as a major party. Those who supported the Union side in the Civil War became loyal Republicans for generations, and, likewise, those who supported the Confederacy became loyal Democrats. With few exceptions, Northern states tended to be solidly Republican, while Southern states tended to be solidly Democratic.

The Republican Party was further strengthened in 1896. Running for the Democrats, William Jennings Bryan campaigned with strong populist rhetoric that alienated many voters in Northeastern states while attracting voters in the South and the Midwest. This only reinforced the split between North and South that had been created by the Civil War. One consequence of this split was that most states were, in effect, **one-party states**. The party that controlled each state controlled who was nominated, which limited voters' choices. State-level electoral competition occurred within a single dominant party. Within each party, especially the Republicans, there emerged two factions. The first faction, which could be said to reflect the party-in-the-organization, consisted of party regulars, professional politicians, those who were preoccupied with building the party machinery, developing party loyalty, and obtaining patronage jobs for themselves and loyal followers. The second faction sought to do away with patronage and weaken the power of what are known as the "political machines."

Parties Under Reform (1900s–1960s)

Beginning in the early 20th century, Progressive reformers sought to weaken the influence of political parties and in some cases to abolish them altogether. The first major issue was to confront party control of the nomination process by *machine bosses*. **Political machines** were disciplined organizations in which a single boss or small group could command the support of individual voters and businesses (who were often campaign workers), who in turn could expect to be rewarded for their efforts. The power of the machine lay in the ability of the workers to get out the vote on Election Day. **Machine bosses**, especially in large cities, owned construction companies and would ge tcontracts to build public works. Following the model

of the old spoils system, these bosses selected nominees who would serve the interests of the machine. Naturally, this lent itself to corruption..

The machines provided pathways of upward socioeconomic mobility for ethnic minorities, such as Irish and Italian immigrants. They also offered a social welfare framework when economic transformations were causing dislocations and massive poverty while the government did not provide welfare services. For example, machine bosses commonly appeared at wakes to offer assistance to widows and children of the deceased. At a minimum, this assistance might pay for funeral expenses, but it could also cover the rent and pay for food for a short time. Progressive reformers who were part of the educated social elite were effectively excluded from the machine party system.

Irving Underhill, 1914

In New York City, machine bosses used to meet and divide up public contracts in the Tammany Hall clubhouse, which over time came to symbolize the corruption of machine party politics.

For the educated elite to regain leadership, the rules of the game had to change. Progressives supported primary elections to weaken the stranglehold of the machine bosses, as voters could choose their own party nominees rather than having party bosses choose for them. Reformers also sought local-level nonpartisan elections and strict voter registration requirements to reduce voter fraud. Finally, they sought to establish civil service systems to eliminate the patronage system altogether.

These reforms, however, were slow in coming. Some states, such as California and Wisconsin, were more successful than others. Over the years, more states adopted primary elections. As late as 1960, only eight states held presidential primaries. This meant that presidential candidates, even as late as 1968, could bypass primary election states altogether and secure the party nomination by negotiating with state party chairs.

The Decline of Parties (1970s–present)

The decline of the political parties really has more to do with the party-in-the-electorate than within the party-in-the-organization and in government. Ironically, party decline has its roots in the late-1960s and early-1970s reform efforts to increase party bases. Several events converged to foster the need for reform. First, growing opposition to the Vietnam War led Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota to challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic Party nomination in 1968. Shortly after McCarthy entered the race, Senator Robert Kennedy of New York, the brother of slain President John F. Kennedy, did too. Both McCarthy and Kennedy sought to win the Democratic nomination through the states that had instituted primaries. After Kennedy declared his candidacy, Johnson announced on March 31, 1968 that he

would not seek reelection. Johnson's withdrawal paved the way for Vice President Hubert Humphrey to enter the race, but Humphrey had no intention of entering any primary contests, in part because he had a late start. So while McCarthy and Kennedy battled it out in primaries, Humphrey negotiated with state party chairs and secured delegates.

Kennedy won the California primary in early June and looked likely to win the party nomination, but on the night of that primary victory he was assassinated. Humphrey, having never entered a primary, had the nomination wrapped up going into the Democratic convention in Chicago, but there was a pall cast over the gathering by protestors and violence in the streets outside. In the general election, Kennedy and McCarthy supporters refused to support Humphrey, in part because he would not disavow his earlier support for the Vietnam War and, more significantly, because they believed that he had stolen the nomination. The result was a split Democratic Party, which contributed to Republican Richard Nixon's election in what was otherwise a close race.

Associated Press

Riots outside the 1968 Democratic Convention were indicative of the Democratic Party split over the Vietnam War. Vice President and presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey backed the war.

The 1968 election appeared to be a watershed event for several reasons. Some believed that it was the beginning of an emerging Republican Party majority. Democrats believed they had lost the election because the party had been split during the primary season. Close election results implied that had the party not been fractured, it might have won the election.

The 1968 election also saw the independent candidacy of George Wallace, the Democratic segregationist governor of Alabama, who was able to capitalize on White anger in the South over civil rights. The effect of Wallace's candidacy was to peel Democratic voters away from Humphrey. Nixon also took away Democratic voters, but for different reasons. Nixon ran on a platform of law and order and ending the Vietnam War. For many blue-collar workers and social conservatives, the violence of the 1968 convention, which was broadcast on national television, fueled a perception that the Democrats no longer represented their interests. In this vein, the 1968 election marked a major turning point in the nation's cultural wars.

Democratic Party activists convened multiple commissions in their attempt to unify the party on the assumption that the fracture was due largely to the nominating process. The first commission, the McGovern-Fraser Commission, chaired by Senator George McGovern of South Dakota and Representative Donald Fraser of Minnesota, recommended that all states adopt

either primary elections or party caucuses. They argued that this approach would democratize the nominating process and remove it from the influence of state party chairs. They also recommended making the party more inclusive by selecting more women and minorities as convention delegates.

In many cases, state legislatures had to pass new laws to hold primaries. As states adopted these reforms, the result was that anybody could enter primaries without necessarily representing the parties' traditional bases. Another result was that the nominating conventions were to become little more than pep rallies.

Between 1968 and 1992, with the exception of Jimmy Carter's election in 1976, the country did not elect a Democratic president. Part of the reason may have been a perception that the party had moved too far to the left, which was one consequence of its losing control of the nominating process.

9.3 Two-Party System Versus Multi-Party System

The American political system is characterized by a two-party system, while the typical parliamentary system includes multiple parties represented in the legislature. There have been two main parties in the United States since they emerged in the late 18th century. Several attempts over time to form third parties have never really succeeded. Why has this been the case?

Why the United States Has a Two-Party System

The principal reason the United States has a two-party system is that it has single-member congressional districts—each voter gets one vote for a given office. Getting elected requires a plurality of votes. In the 1950s, French sociologist Maurice Duverger (1964) noted, in what has come to be known as **Duverger's law**, that a plurality election system tends to favor two-party systems. In other words, the candidate who wins the office is the one who receives the most votes. In practical terms, this means that if in District 2 Joan, George, and Danielle run for office and Danielle gets 49% of the vote, George gets 35%, and Joan gets 16%, Danielle is the winner.

This is very different from a parliamentary system, where there is **proportional representation**, which means that voters can vote for several candidates to represent the province in which they live. As an example, if Province A will be represented by 10 people out of 20 people running, each party understands that the number of seats it takes in Parliament for this province will be in proportion to the percentage of votes that it receives. If the Liberal Party receives 30% of the vote, the Conservative Party receives 20% of the vote, the Labor Party receives 40% of the vote, the Consumer Party receives 7% of the vote, and the Green Party receives 3% of the vote, the results will look as shown in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1: Example of proportional representation

Party	Percentage of the vote	Number of seats in Parliament
Liberal	30	3
Conservative	20	2
Labor	40	4
Consumer	7	1
Green	3	0
Total	**100**	**10**

Because more than one person can represent the district, there is room for more than the two strongest parties. The weakest parties can survive by achieving a minimum threshold, such as receiving at least 10% of the vote, to secure at least one seat. A party receiving 10% in a single-member district system like the United States would not secure representation in office, and in the long term that party could not survive.

Broker Party Model

Two-party systems tend to be examples of *broker party* models because their primary purpose is to win elections. The issues on which the party campaigns are based on what will attract the most votes. As the preferences of the voters change, so too do "planks" in the party platform. The **party platform** outlines the official positions of the political party, and the term *planks* refers to the components of that platform. Because Americans tend to vote for personality more than platform, the candidate who runs for office shapes the position of the party platform. Whoever appeals most to the voters in a primary election gets to represent the party in the general election. In the broker party model, the party acts as a medium for voters to express their preferences for particular candidates. While the party is non-ideological in the broker party model, this is not to say that ideology does not play a role in the selection of candidates, especially during primary campaigns. Rather, ideology is a tool that can be used to rally support among voters to help secure a nomination.

Responsible Party Model

The *responsible party* model functions in both parliamentary systems, such as Great Britain, and in single-member winner-take-all systems, such as the United States, although it is more common in parliamentary systems, where issues and candidates are secondary to parties. Platform planks tend not to change according to changing voter preferences; rather, voter preference affects whether the party gains or loses votes. This means that parties are more ideological in the responsible party model compared with the broker party model.

In the responsible party model, when people contribute money, they contribute to parties. The candidates who run on behalf of the party are chosen by party leaders, not primary elections. A candidate is merely a spokesperson for the party. Usually the person who would, for example, be prime minister, is the leader of the party, and the only way that person became

party leader was by working the way up the ranks and demonstrating loyalty to the party and its policy positions. Officeholders who challenge the party leadership or buck party ideology are generally displaced from the ballot in the next election. In the responsible party model, then, party discipline tends to be tight. Political parties can be more ideological because there are more of them. Parties would rather lose an election than compromise on principles. But even a strongly ideological party is still likely to have seats, even if there are fewer of them.

9.4 Interest Groups

As with political parties, the Framers assumed that **interest groups**, or organizations focused on a single issue, would naturally form because people had the liberty to freely associate; however, as with political parties, the Framers did not have a positive view of interest groups because they were primarily factions of self-interest. In *Federalist No. 10*, James Madison defined factions as

> a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. (1787, para. 3)

Insofar as interest groups would be factions, they would seek to pursue the interests of the group first, even if they were contrary to the larger public interest.

Today, there are two dominant views of interest groups. One holds that interest groups reflect a dynamic democratic process built on **pluralism**. Of the multitude of interests within society, some work together while others work against one another. Classical pluralism argues that interest groups use their resources to exert influence in government, while an alternative view suggests that interest groups distort the democratic process because they succeed in having their interests trump those of the public.

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Interest groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) have proliferated as political parties have weakened. The same individualism that brought about the demise of political parties appears to strengthen interest groups.

The Role of Interest Groups

Many interest groups focus on single issues. People who join interest groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the Sierra Club do so because of their concern over a specific policy area. The NRA is concerned with the rights of people to bear arms, while the Sierra Club focuses on matters that affect the environment.

Interest groups pursue their goals by making policy-related appeals to government. They seek to influence elections through **political action committees (PACs)**, interest groups' financial arms. PACs raise money and contribute to campaigns. Donations are most often directed at incumbents, regardless of party, because incumbents have a high reelection rate. Interest groups act strategically when they give money to incumbents who will likely be reelected. The NRA, for instance, will contribute to whoever has a record of voting against gun control.

Interest groups also seek to influence public policy through lobbying. **Lobbyists**, who represent interest groups in their efforts to shape public policy, meet with elected representatives and attempt to influence their votes on particular issues. Lobbyists explain why supporting their position is important to the interest group's members whom the elected officials represent. One tactic that lobbyists use is to impress upon legislators that they represent large numbers of people who vote.

Associated Press/Chris Miller

Lobbyists from different interest groups wait to see members of Congress on Capitol Hill. The job of a lobbyist is to present information and arguments to legislators for the purposes of securing their support on specific issues.

Difference Between Interest Groups and Political Parties

The principal difference between interest groups and political parties is that interest groups tend to be single issue while political parties address a wide array of issues. Additionally, a political party tends to be a more heterogeneous group, with activists who often take the same position on core party issues but may have different opinions on others. A political party seeks to win elections for its candidates. An interest group seeks to gain support for its cause. Anyone can be a party member by registering with that party for the purposes of voting. But interest group members pay membership dues in order to join the group. Political parties often act like big tents that seek to attract many people with different points of view, while interest groups seek to attract only those who agree with their cause.

Madison's Dilemma

James Madison argued against factions because they sought to place their own interests over the public interest. But factions were also the inevitable byproduct of liberty. The ultimate cure for factions would, of course, be to eliminate them by legal means, but the cure would be worse than the disease. The only solution to this dilemma, then, would be to allow for so many factions that the relative power of each would be diluted. The more interest groups there are, the less influence each one has.

Interest groups represent the diversity of American society and speak to the issue of pluralism whereby different people get involved with different issues at different times. The U.S.

Constitution and the Bill of Rights were designed to protect individualism. Pluralism is individualism in its collective form. Because the United States is a large and diverse nation, interest groups have become an essential tool for individuals to express themselves and have their voices heard by governmental officials.

Associated Press/The Green Bay Press-Gazette/H. Marc Larson

Interest groups can be viewed as reflecting healthy democratic expression. They represent the diversity of views in American society.

Madison's dilemma also suggested that one interest group might have too much power. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1993) argued that interest groups would ultimately be checked by what he termed **countervailing forces**. In the face of one powerful interest group, several smaller ones would come together in a coalition, and they would balance out the power of the larger group. Consistent with Madison's notion that the effects of factions can be controlled by having more factions, the more interest groups there are operating in the system, the more countervailing forces will exist. This is an instance of the marketplace working to curb the excesses of interest groups.

Rationality and Logic of Collective Action

An interest group is a voluntary organization, and many people who sympathize with it may derive benefits without having to bear the costs of membership. For example, an environmental interest group may petition the federal government to pass regulations that will reduce automobile emissions. The environmental group's PAC may donate money to the congressional campaigns of incumbents who have voted for pro-environmental regulations in the past, while the environmental group's lobbyists may lobby both Democratic and Republican members of Congress to support legislation to reduce automobile emissions. If Congress passes the legislation and the president signs it, one result will be cleaner air that all people will benefit from, including persons who never joined the interest group along with those who may have opposed the regulation out of concern that it would cause an increase in the cost of automobiles. When individuals do not bear the costs of interest group membership, yet derive the benefits of that group's work, it is called the **free rider** problem. Logic would suggest that individuals have little incentive to join interest groups because they can be free riders. However, if everybody were to assume that they could be free riders, then interest groups would be challenged in recruiting members. As a consequence, individuals acting rationally by being free riders can cause collective irrationality because the consequence of their inaction is the absence of a strong and large interest group to advocate for their interests.

If its benefits are so readily available to free riders, why would anybody join the environmental interest group? One key reason that individuals would continue to join is because of **asymmetric information**, in that individuals will not know what everyone else is doing. Those supporting auto emission reductions do not know for certain that they will fare just as well if

they opt to be free riders. And collective action achieves greater results than acting alone does. This, after all, is the purpose of joining an interest group: to demonstrate that there is a constituency supporting a particular issue.

Interest groups have also found practical ways around the free rider barrier by offering benefits to members. As an example, AARP offers its members discounts on a variety of items, including insurance policies and travel packages. The NRA offers gun safety courses, as well as discounts on hotels and insurance policies. As a result, individuals may see some practical benefit to joining. People may also join interest groups for the opportunity to socialize with others on matters of common interest.

Associated Press/Robert Durell

The purpose of joining an interest group is to demonstrate that there is a constituency supporting a particular issue and acting collectively to achieve greater results than acting alone would.

Impact of Interest Groups on Democracy

Political scientist Theodore Lowi (2009) argued that, as government took on more responsibilities, Congress would delegate authority for policy implementation to the executive branch. The inevitable result would be a significant increase in interest groups. Indeed, not only have interest groups emerged to lobby Congress for specific programs as the nature and number of government responsibilities have increased, but they have also lobbied the executive for contracts to deliver services.

Lowi also concluded that a government founded on liberal principles, such as the United States, cannot prioritize values. Lowi's conclusion is based on the notion that, on a philosophical level, each person's conception of the good is just as valid as any other. To treat everyone equally means that someone arguing for food for the hungry will not get preference over someone arguing for corporate subsidies. The old constitutional system, as Lowi referred to it, would not extend beyond its limited function. Once government found itself responding to new crises, delegating authority, and dealing with multitudes of interest groups, it would give priority to the cause with the largest and most powerful interest group behind it. If corporate subsidies are backed by a powerful interest group, they have a higher order of importance than feeding the hungry does, even if it turns out that most citizens disagree with these priorities. The end result is that interest groups distort democracy because they do not represent the people equally. Rather, government is more responsive to larger and more active interest groups. Not everyone agrees with this position. Political scientist Robert Dahl (1961) has suggested that even if interest groups represent different groups on different issues, the effect is pluralism in action.

9.5 The Challenge of Interest Groups to Constitutional Representation

Madison's dilemma and the corresponding concept of countervailing forces assume that competition among interests produces balance and compromise. Yet it is not clear that interest groups represent the broader public. As an example, the NRA might claim to speak for millions of Americans when it opposes gun control. But we do not really know that these millions of Americans, who might believe they have the right to own guns for hunting, target practice, and personal protection, would oppose laws making it more difficult for criminals or the mentally ill to acquire one.

Legislators might believe that an interest group speaks for more than its actual membership suggests because of its perceived power. Further, interest groups may not be representative because their membership may have a decidedly upper-class bias. For instance, many environmental interest group members come from more educated and affluent backgrounds and claim that they speak for millions more across education and income groups who are not dues-paying members.

Money in Politics

Many argue that the greatest challenge that interest groups pose to democracy is that they often enable those with the most money to enjoy the loudest voice. The PACs that collect money for interest groups channel those donations into specific campaigns. Table 9.2 outlines the maximum amounts that individuals and groups can contribute to PACs. There are different limits based on the type of donor and recipient. Because members of Congress have to raise huge sums of money to be elected and reelected, they tend to be beholden to those who contribute money to their campaigns compared with those who do not contribute. This circumstance has led to the charge that, through their contributions, PACs effectively direct policymaking.

Congressional incumbents and candidates understand that an interest group with a well-funded PAC may direct resources into efforts to defeat someone who opposes their interests. In response, interest groups may decide to run **advocacy ads** in an attempt to cause their opponents to be defeated by candidates who are more sympathetic to their cause. An advocacy ad might run independently of a candidate's official campaign. Interest groups may spend as much as they want on independent expenditures, which are monies spent without coordinating with any candidate.

Typical citizens who are not interest group members who otherwise support a cause may believe that members of Congress are not really representing their interests because of the role of money in politics. Some argue money in politics poses a challenge to constitutional representation because those contributing more money to congressional campaigns may buy more influence. (Table 9.3 highlights the top 20 financial contributors in the 2013–2014 election cycle.) In a constitutional democracy, members of Congress should represent all the people and not just those with money.

Table 9.2: Contribution limits 2015–2016

RECIPIENTS				
DONORS	**Candidate committee**	**PAC[1]**	**State/district/ local party committee**	**National party committee**
Individual	$2,700* per election	$5,000 per year	$10,000 per year (combined)	$33,400* per year
Candidate committee	$2,000 per election	$5,000 per year	Unlimited transfers	Unlimited transfers
PAC: Multicandidate	$5,000 per election	$5,000 per year	$5,000 per year (combined)	$15,000 per year
PAC: Nonmulticandidate	$2,700 per election	$5,000 per year	$10,000 per year (combined)	$33,400* per year
State/district/local party committee	$5,000 per election	$5,000 per year	Unlimited transfers	
National party committee	$5,000 per election	$5,000 per year		

**Indexed for inflation in odd-numbered years.*
[1]"PAC" here refers to a committee that makes contributions to other federal political committees and not "super PACs."
Adapted from "Contribution Limits for 2015–2016 Federal Elections by Federal Election Commission," by Federal Election Commission, 2015 (http://www.fec.gov/info/contriblimitschart1516.pdf).

Interest Groups and Free Speech

The first law limiting the role of corporations in political campaigns was enacted in 1907. The Tillman Act prohibited national corporations from contributing to national political campaigns. It was not until the 1970s that Congress enacted additional campaign finance regulations. The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) was enacted in 1971 and amended in 1974. Among other regulations, FECA limited the amount of money that candidates could contribute to their own campaigns on the grounds that contributions from individuals should be limited even if those individuals contributing were the candidates themselves. Yet, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1976 case of *Buckley v. Valeo* that limiting the amount of money that candidates could contribute to their own campaigns violated First Amendment free speech protections.

Congress attempted again to regulate campaign money with the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (or "McCain-Feingold," the names of the two Senate co-sponsors), which restricted the amount of money that organizations such as corporations, labor unions, and other interest groups could contribute to federal campaigns. But in 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that these restrictions violated free speech guarantees because organizations have the right, under the First Amendment, to express themselves in the political arena. On one level, if interest groups can spend unlimited sums of money on behalf of particular candidates, then bigger and richer interest groups would appear to have more power and influence. But on another level, in terms of countervailing forces, the Supreme Court

Table 9.3: Top 20 contributors in 2013–2014 election cycle

Rank	Organization	Total contributions	To Democrats and Liberals	To Republicans and Conservatives	Percent to Democrats and Liberals	Percent to Republicans and Conservatives
1	Fahr LLC	$75,279, 259	$75,279,259	$0	100%	0%
2	ActBlue	$68,026,527	$67,956,039	$33,675	100%	0%
3	National Education Assn	$29,908,739	$29,072,307	$209,975	99%	1%
4	Bloomberg LP	$28,708,538	$10,692,165	$524,900	95%	5%
5	NextGen Climate Action	$24,574,615	$24,574,615	$0	100%	0%
6	Service Employees International Union	$23,629,082	$23,489,082	$0	100%	0%
7	American Federation of Teachers	$19,689,548	$19,633,548	$51,000	100%	0%
8	Carpenters & Joiners Union	$17,308,189	$16,590,939	$717,250	96%	4%
9	National Assn of Realtors	$14,976,234	$2,355,029	$2,549,050	48%	52%
10	Elliott Management	$14,199,672	$7,450	$14,192,222	0%	100%
11	Senate Majority PAC	$12,035,679	$12,035,679	$0	100%	0%
12	American Fedn of St/Cnty/Munic Employees	$11,329,129	$11,172,879	$12,250	100%	0%
13	Renaissance Technologies	$11,002,149	$1,276,500	$9,723,049	12%	88%
14	Koch Industries	$10,800,085	$49,500	$10,831,085	1%	100%
15	Plumbers/ Pipefitters Union	$10,330,522	$9,029,767	$426,300	96%	5%
16	United Food & Commercial Workers Union	$10,274,606	$10,206,006	$23,600	100%	0%
17	Laborers Union	$9,873,158	$8,159,703	$523,455	94%	6%
18	Democratic Governors Assn	$9,690,362	$8,926,362	$0	100%	0%
19	Newsweb Corp	$9,659,350	$9,259,350	$250,000	97%	3%
20	Intl Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	$9,633,438	$9,454,098	$96,340	99%	1%

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implied in the *Citizens United* decision that individuals are free to join interest groups, which can in turn attempt to raise as much money as they choose and contribute as much as they want to the candidate who supports their cause. This would appear to be democracy in action.

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"Ready for Hillary," which sports its own bus, is one example of a super PAC. Like individuals, super PACs have the right to exercise free speech. This means that super PACs may fund campaign ads that support or oppose candidates.

One key consequence of the *Citizens United* decision is the emergence of "super PACs." Super PACs are registered federal political committees that may not contribute to candidates or parties but may make unlimited independent expenditures. Super PACs are exempt from the restrictions imposed on other organizations such as corporations and labor unions. The role of super PACs in presidential elections has been significant. For example, in 2012, more than 1,300 groups organized as super PACs, which together reported total receipts of almost $830 million. The best-funded super PAC in 2012 was "Restore Our Future," which supported Republican nominee Mitt Romney. Restore Our Future raised $154 million in the 2011–2012 presidential election cycle, of which $142 million was spent on independent expenditures.

Summary and Resources

Chapter Summary

Political parties and interest groups are key features in American politics. Both form as a byproduct of individuals exercising First Amendment liberties, which include speech, press, peaceable assembly, and petitioning the government. The Framers took a dim view of interest groups and political parties because they considered them to be factions that would pursue their self-interest at the expense of the public interest.

Political parties differ from interest groups in that political parties focus on multiple issues while interest groups often represent single issues. Political parties exist to win elections and get out the vote as well as to operate the government. Interest groups attempt to influence elections and shape public policy.

The principal reason that the U.S. government functions using a broker party model is that the United States is organized around a two-party system, which is the result of single-member district-based elections. In the broker party model, candidates who win a plurality (less than a majority but more than any other candidate) of votes win the election. Parties in the United States have evolved through different periods, usually in response to changes in the electorate. Parties have experienced decline in large part because of the individualism that underpins American values.

Interest groups give individuals voice and opportunities to participate in politics. As Madison observed, the more interest groups there are, the more self-regulating they will be through the effects of countervailing forces. Still, interest groups may be problematic because of the role of money in politics and the relationship between PACs and members of Congress.

Key Ideas to Remember

- The founders knew that both political parties and interest groups were likely to form as a result of individuals having the liberty to associate with like-minded people; however, they disapproved of both because they believed they would operate as factions focused on their self-interest over the public good.
- Political parties in the United States perform a variety of functions, but their primary function is to mobilize voters so that their candidates will win political office.
- The United States is primarily a broker party model, whereby the goal for parties is to win elections. The broker party model is in contrast to the responsible party model, whereby the primary goal is implementing policy proposals. Elections are secondary to that goal.
- The American party system has evolved throughout history. The first party system emerged as factions in Congress. The second party system was a mass movement in response to growing numbers of voters. Subsequent party systems have sought to appeal to increasingly more voters in efforts to be competitive in a two-party system.
- Interest groups differ from political parties in that they are single-issue organizations while political parties focus on multiple issues.
- Interest groups seek to influence who is elected and the policies that are adopted.
- Although interest groups may be viewed as narrow-minded factions, their presence in American politics speaks to the pluralism of American society, which contributes to a vibrant democratic system.
- Interest groups might distort democracy in that those who contribute more money through their financial arms—PACs and super PACs—have greater influence than individuals and less well-funded PACs do. The presence of interest groups is viewed as a legitimate form of free speech.

Questions to Consider

1. What are the functions of political parties in the United States?
2. Why is 1968 considered a watershed year for American political parties?
3. What are the primary differences between the American two-party system and the multi-party systems found in many European countries?
4. How do interest groups differ from political parties?
5. How does Madison's dilemma help us to understand interest groups as a system of countervailing forces?
6. Why might one join an interest group?
7. What is the role of money in politics?
8. Do interest groups distort the democratic process? Why or why not?

Key Terms

advocacy ads Advertisements run by interest groups for or against candidates, independent of a candidate's official campaign.

asymmetric information Imperfect and uneven information.

countervailing forces When smaller interest groups form coalitions to balance out the power of bigger and more powerful interest groups.

dealignment When individuals abandon their party memberships and seek to be unaffiliated with political parties.

Democratic-Republicans A political party founded in 1796 by followers of Thomas Jefferson in opposition to the Federalist followers of John Adams; the precursor of today's Democratic Party.

Duverger's Law The idea that single-member districts will tend toward two-party political systems.

electorate Those who are eligible to vote.

franchise The right to vote.

free rider Someone who derives the benefits of an organization without bearing the costs associated with joining it.

independents Voters who are not affiliated with any political party.

interest groups Organizations focused on a single issue.

lobbyist Someone seeking to influence a politician or public official on an issue.

machine bosses Leaders of political organizations who were able to deliver votes in exchange for services.

National Republican Party A political party founded in 1831 in opposition to Andrew Jackson; replaced by the Whig party and, later, the Republican Party.

one-party states States in which there is, in effect, only one party operating.

party caucuses Party-affiliated subgroups in Congress that pursue their interests through the legislative process.

party-in-the-electorate Political party made up of voters who affiliate with the party.

party-in-the-government Public officials in either Congress or the executive branch who are identified with a particular political party.

party-in-the-organization Activists in a party who get people out to vote, set the party platform, or nominate candidates.

party platform The official positions of the political party on which a candidate runs for office.

pluralism The presence of many types of individuals, groups, and interests.

political action committees (PACs) The financial arms of interest groups.

political machines Disciplined political organizations in which a single boss or small group commands the support of individuals and businesses.

political parties Organizations of like-minded members that seek to influence public policy and provide a venue to oppose other policy positions.

proportional representation The concept that voters can vote for several candidates and the makeup of the representative body will reflect the proportions in which they voted.

ranking member A person from the minority party who is effectively vice chair of a committee in Congress.

Republicans A political party founded in 1854 by anti-slavery activists and still functional in American politics.

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