
Political Parties

Session 6

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17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

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The Origins and Functions of Parties

Defining Political Parties

- ▶ A *political party* is a **coalition** of citizens who cooperate in order to **nominate** candidates, **win** elections, and **control** government offices.
 - ▶ **Interest groups** differ from parties in that they tend not to nominate candidates for office or aim to control the government as a whole.
- ▶ Three classic aspects of parties:
 - ▶ Parties in **government** (PIG)
 - ▶ Parties as **organizations** (PAO)
 - ▶ Parties in the **electorate** (PIE)
- ▶ Though parties operate in all three realms, it is important not to conflate parties with the **partisans** who support or identify with them.

The Origins of American Parties

- ▶ Parties did not really exist when the USA was founded, but most considered “**factions**” selfish and dangerous (Madison, *Fed. #10*).
- ▶ Despite these suspicions, politicians (chief among them Madison!) soon found it advantageous to form parties.
- ▶ The constitutional convention of 1787 was itself the work of an elite “**Federalist**” coalition of Southern planters and Northern mercantilists who favored a stronger national government.
- ▶ Federalists were dominant during the Washington and Adams administrations, but the early 1790s saw the formation of “**Democratic-Republican**” clubs who opposed Federalist policies and began nominating candidates to challenge Federalist officials.
- ▶ The Democratic-Republicans took power in 1800, a transition that helped legitimize the idea of a “**loyal opposition.**”
- ▶ However, only after the founding of the Democratic and Whig parties in the 1820s–30s did a stable **system of two mass parties** emerge.

Whose Interests Do Parties Serve?

This early history highlights two kinds of actors central to parties:

- ▶ **Office seekers** (politicians)
- ▶ **Benefit seekers** (“policy demanders”)

Theories of parties differ over which set of actors to emphasize:

- ▶ **Politician-centered:** Parties are institutions created by office-seekers into order to help them cooperate and coordinate.
 - ▶ Benefit seekers provide useful resources but are not the party's core.
- ▶ **Group-centered:** Parties are institutionalized “long coalitions” among social groups with strong policy demands.
 - ▶ Office seekers are vehicles for benefit seekers' policy goals.

Probably both views have a great deal of truth, in part because parties are complex, contested institutions that serve multiple purposes.

The Political Functions of Parties

In addition to serving the particular interests of those who create and run them, parties (and competitive party systems) also serve certain broad functions for the polity as a whole, including:

- ▶ Ensuring regular **opposition** to incumbent officials
- ▶ Mobilizing and channeling popular **participation** in politics
- ▶ Aggregating interests and **structuring** issue competition
- ▶ Creating and sustaining stable **governing** coalitions
- ▶ Providing voters with **low-cost information** about responsibility for current policies and the policy positions of candidates.

Many political scientists believe that without political parties, large-scale democracy is “unthinkable,” or at least “unworkable.”

Parties in Elections

The Information Conveyed by Parties

Parties provide two main types political information:

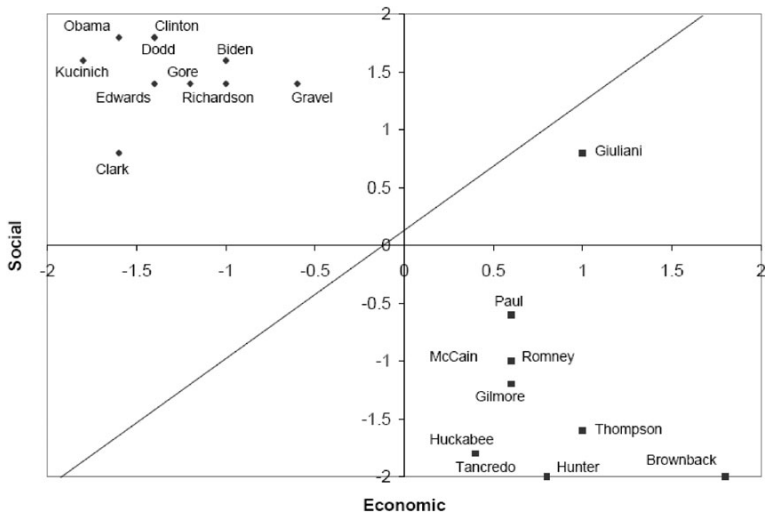
1. Who is in charge?

- ▶ This may sound obvious, but imagine trying to figure out if your representative is one of the “ins” or the “outs” without party labels.
- ▶ This is hard enough if a parliamentary system where power is concentrated in one government body, but it is much more complicated in the USA, where power is separated across branches as well as divided between city, state, and national governments.

2. What will candidates do if elected?

- ▶ Parties winnow down the myriad possible combinations of issue positions into just a handful (possibly as few as two).
- ▶ One of the functions of **ideology** is to provide a concise summary of and justification for why certain issue positions (e.g., support for legal abortion) should go with others (e.g., support for higher taxes).
- ▶ In general, however, ideology is as much a consequence of the parties' positions as a cause of them.

Candidate Positions in Two Dimensions



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Party as a Cognitive Shortcut

- ▶ Party labels thus serve as an easily discerned but highly informative signal of who is responsible for current policies and what competing candidates will do if elected.
- ▶ Using party to make political decisions such as whom to vote for can therefore be an effective **heuristic**, or cognitive shortcut.
- ▶ At least in principle, partisanship can enable poorly informed voters to approximate the decision-making of fully informed ones (“**low-information rationality**”).

Partisanship as a Social Identity

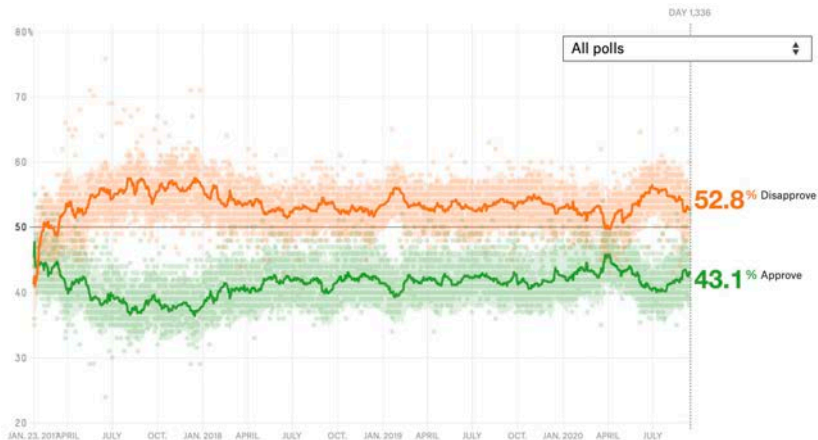
There are, however, important limitations of this low-information rationality view of partisanship.

- ▶ Partisanship is strongly shaped by childhood socialization and is rooted in social identities that are often loosely related to specific issue positions.
- ▶ Moreover, partisanship is itself an important identity for many partisans—a central part of their self-concept that shapes their very perception of the political world (think Republicans and COVID).
- ▶ As White et al. argue, partisan identity is also reinforced by social networks and (for some) by implicit social sanctions.
- ▶ Even many partisans who do not feel close to their party are motivated by intense dislike of the other side (**negative partisanship**).
- ▶ In sum, partisan identity is not something that can easily be altered in light of new information or changing conditions.

Partisanship as a Source of Rigidity—and Stability

- ▶ Partisanship is thus a strong force for rigidity (to use a negative word) and stability (to use a more positive one).
- ▶ Partisanship inhibits citizens from updating in response to new information, and thus undermines their willingness and capacity to hold their party accountable (or reward the opposing one).
- ▶ On the other hand, the stability of partisanship arguably helps maintain, despite short-term electoral shocks, long-term equilibrium in American politics.
- ▶ For this reason, some view partisan loyalties—and parties' incentives to oppose whatever the other side does—as a check against the misuse or over-concentration of power (maybe. . .).

Trump Approval



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Elections without Parties

Nonpartisan Elections

- ▶ Perhaps half or more of US elections (esp. local) are nonpartisan.
- ▶ Legacy of Progressive Era “good government, anti-party” reformers
- ▶ Prominent examples:
 - ▶ Municipalities (mayors, city councilors/commissioners)
 - ▶ States (often judges but sometimes legislators)
 - ▶ Primaries (in one-party constituencies, \approx nonpartisan elections)
- ▶ “Natural experiment” provides evidence of the effect that parties have where they do exist.

Negative Consequences of Nonpartisanship

Many empirical studies of nonpartisan elections have emphasized its **negative consequences**:

- ▶ Less electoral competition
- ▶ Lower turnout
- ▶ Greater advantages for incumbents
- ▶ Diminished accountability
- ▶ A bias towards the wealthy and organized
- ▶ A general lack of responsiveness to voters

Caveats

- ▶ Where low-cost information is available through other means (salient policy conflict, “spillover” from partisan contexts), nonpartisan elections can induce as much responsiveness as partisan ones.

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