10.0 | Political Participation

One of the most important, and difficult, political questions is why governments have authority over individuals. Why can the government (or the community or the majority)
tell people what to do and what not to do? This is the power problem stated in its simplest terms. In theory, democracy addresses this aspect of the power problem through self-government. Self-government requires the participation of an active and engaged citizenry. This chapter examines how voting, elections, and campaigns organize participation in politics and government in order to solve the problems that people expect government to solve. Political participation is not limited to voting. Good citizenship, full citizenship, is active and engaged citizenship. Efforts to increase political participation have resulted in a movement to increase civic engagement. The term civic engagement refers to a broad range of individual or collective actions that are intended to address issues of public concern. Civic engagement includes volunteerism, working with organizations, and participation in the electoral process. The latter part of this chapter provides examples of how to “do” civic engagement. The chapter begins with voting.

10.1 | Voting

Voting is one of the ways that citizens participate in a democracy. Voting is just one form of political participation. There are many other ways to participate in politics: writing a letter to a newspaper; posting to a Web site; making a campaign contribution; contacting a legislator; running for office; campaigning for a candidate; or lobbying government. But voting is the form of political participation that is most closely associated with meeting the responsibilities of citizenship because voting is an act of self-government. Voters select government officials to represent them and cast votes for or against issues that are on the ballot. There are many other forms of political participation: running for office, making campaign contributions, working for a party or candidate or issue, lobbying, or contacting government officials about an issue or problem which interests you. Even non-voting—the intentional refusal to participate in an election as a protest against the political system or the candidate or party choices that are available—can be a form of political participation. All these forms of participation are components of political science measures of how democratic a political system is.

10.11 | Expanding the right to vote

One of the most important developments in the American system of government has been the expansion of the right to vote. Over time, politics has become much more democratic. The Founders provided for a rather limited right to vote because they were skeptical of direct democracy and the ability of the masses to make good decisions about public policy or government leaders. In fact, the Founders were divided on how much political participation, including voting, was desirable. The Federalists generally advocated limited participation where only white male property owners could vote. A leading Federalist, Alexander Hamilton, advocated a system of representative government that resembled “a natural aristocracy” that was run by “gentlemen of fortune and ability.”

The Anti-federalists advocated broader participation. The Anti-federalist author writing under the name The Federal Farmer defined democratic participation as full and equal representation: “full and equal
Chapter 10: Political Participation

representation is that in which the interests, feelings, opinions, and views of the people are collected, in such a manner as they would be were all the people assembled.” The Anti-federalist Republicus advocated an American democracy that provided for “fair and equal representation,” which he defined as a condition where “every member of the union have a freedom of suffrage and that every equal number of people have an equal number of representatives.”

Over time the right to vote was greatly expanded and the political system became much more democratic. Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is a memorable political speech because of what it said about democracy and equality. Lincoln famously defined democracy as government of the people, government by the people, and government for the people. He also brought equality back into American political rhetoric by emphasizing the political importance of equality that was first stated so memorably in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence asserted that all men were created equal and endowed with unalienable rights. The Constitution did not include equality as a political value. It provided for slavery and allowed the states to limit the right to vote. The right to vote was expanded by constitutional amendments and by legislation. The constitutional changes included the following amendments:

- The 14th Amendment (1868) prohibited states from denying to any person with their jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.
- The 15th Amendment (1870) prohibited states from denying the right to vote on the basis of race.
- The 17th Amendment (1913) provided for direct election of Senators.
- The 19th Amendment (1920) gave women the right to vote.
- The 24th Amendment (1964) eliminated the Poll Tax.
- The 26th Amendment (1971) lowered voting age to 18.
One of the most important statutory expansions of the right to vote is the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. It made racial discrimination in voting a violation of federal law; specifically, outlawing the use of literacy tests to qualify to register to vote, and providing for federal registration of voters in areas that had less than 50% of eligible minority voters registered. The Act also provided for Department of Justice oversight of registration, and required the Department to approve any change in voting law in districts that had used a “device” to limit voting and in which less than 50% of the population was registered to vote in 1964. The **Civil Rights Act of 1964** is a landmark civil rights statute that also expanded the right to vote by limiting racial discrimination in voting.

In addition to these government actions, the political system also developed in ways that expanded the right to vote and made the system more democratic. The emergence of political parties fundamentally changed the American political system. Political parties changed the way the president is chosen by effectively making the popular vote, not the Electoral College, determine who wins the presidency. There have been notable exceptions to the rule that the candidate who receives the most popular votes wins the election (the presidential elections of 1824, 1876, 1888 and 2000), but modern political culture includes the expectation that the people select the president.

### 10.12 | How democratic is the United States political system?

Democracy is a widely accepted value in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. As more nations adopt democratic political systems, political scientists are paying attention to whether a country’s political system is democratic as well as how democratic the political system is. Democracy is not an either/or value. There are degrees of democracy: a political system can be more or less democratic. Non-governmental organizations such as Freedom House and publications such as *The Economist* have developed comparative measures of how democratic a country’s political system is. *The Economist* ranks the U.S. as 17th in the world. This is a surprisingly low ranking for a nation that extols the value of democracy and promotes it worldwide. The low ranking on democracy is due to several factors:

- **Voter Turnout.** The U.S. has comparatively low rates of voter turn-out. European countries, for example, have much higher rates of voting.
- **A Presidential System.** The U.S. has developed into a system of presidential governance system where executive power is dominant rather than the more democratic legislative or parliamentary systems.
- **National Security.** The U.S. has developed extensive provisions for secrecy and national security and emergency powers which are hard to reconcile with democratic values.

### 10.13 | Voter Turnout

**Voter turnout** is the proportion of the voting-age public that participates in an election. Voter turnout is a function of a number of individual factors and institutional factors. Voter turnout is low in the United States. What does low mean? In many elections, less than half of the eligible voters participate in the election. The graph below shows the turnout rate for presidential elections from 1960 to 2008.
Voter turnout is also low compared to other western industrial democracies. Why is U.S. voter turnout low in absolute numbers (less than half) and comparatively? Some of the explanations focus on the individual while others focus on the electoral system.

10.14 | Individual Explanations

The individual explanations focus on an individual’s motivations. The two main models of individual explanations for voting behavior are the rational choice model and the civic duty model.

The **rational choice** model of voting was developed by Anthony Downs, who argued that individuals are self-interested actors who use a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether it is in their self-interest to vote. According to the rational choice model, a person’s decision whether to vote is based on an individual’s assessment of whether the vote will affect the outcome of the election, the expected benefit of voting and not voting, and the sense of civic duty (the personal gratification or satisfaction from voting. The rational choice model is based on the assumptions in economic models of human behavior.

The **civic duty** model describes non-material, non-rational incentives for voting. According to the civic duty model, a person votes out of a sense of responsibility to the political unit, or a commitment to democratic government and the obligations and duties as well as the rights of citizens to maintain self-government. Patriotic values and the commitment to the community or society are familiar expressions of civic duty.

In order to vote, the probability of voting, times the benefit of vote, plus the sense of duty to vote must outweigh the cost (in time, effort, and money) of voting. As the probability of a vote mattering in a federal election almost always approaches zero (because more than 100,000,000 votes are cast), duty becomes the most important element in motivating people to vote. According to the rational choice model, a person will vote if they think it is worth it; a person will not vote if they think it is not worth it.
According to this cost-benefit ratio, it may be rational not to vote. An individual with a greater commitment to civic duty or responsibility will weigh the relative costs differently and may conclude that voting is worth it.

The concept of political efficacy is central to understanding voting behavior. **Political efficacy** is the belief that one’s participation matters, that one’s decision to vote really makes a difference. What is the likelihood that one vote will matter in a presidential election where more than 100,000,000 votes are cast? The rational choice model suggests that voter turnout in the United States is low because individuals have thought about whether or not to vote and simply concluded that it is not worth their time and effort and money to vote.

Demographic factors affect whether or not someone turns out to vote. Demographic factors that are related to voter turn-out include income, education, race and ethnicity, gender, and age. Wealthy citizens have higher rates of voter turnout than poor citizens. *Income* has an effect on voter turnout. Wealthy citizens have higher levels of political efficacy and believe that the political works and their votes will count. On the other hand, people that make less money and have less wealth are less likely to believe that the political system will respond to their demands as expressed in elections. *Race* is also related to voter turnout. Whites vote at higher rates than minorities. *Gender* is also related to voter turnout. Women voted at lower levels than men for many years after gaining suffrage with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, but today women vote at much higher levels than men do. *Age* is also important. There is a strong relationship between age and voter turnout. Older people vote at higher levels than younger people do, which helps explain why candidates for office and government officials are so sensitive to issues that affect seniors (such as reducing spending on Social Security or Medicare).

### 10.15 | System Explanations

The system explanations focus on aspects of the political system that affect voter turnout. These system factors include voter registration laws, the fact that elections are usually held on one day during the week, the large number of elections in our federal system, and the two-party system.

**Eligibility.** A person’s eligibility for voting is provided for in the U.S. Constitution, state constitutions, and state and federal statutes. The Constitution states that suffrage cannot be denied on grounds of race or color (Fifteenth Amendment), sex (Nineteenth Amendment) or age for citizens eighteen years or older (Twenty-sixth Amendment). Beyond these basic qualifications, the states have a great deal of authority to determine eligibility and to run elections. Some states bar convicted criminals, especially felons, from voting for a fixed period of time or indefinitely. The **National Conference of State Legislatures** reports on felon voting rights in the states. The **Sentencing Project reports** that 5.8 million Americans are disenfranchised, denied the right to vote, because of a felony conviction. State felon voting laws have a disproportionate impact on African-Americans: one out of 13 African-Americans are ineligible to vote because of a felony conviction.
**Voter Registration.** Voter registration is the requirement that a person check in with some central registry in order to be allowed to vote in an election. In the U.S., the individual is responsible for registering to vote—sometimes well before the actual election. Furthermore, each state has different voter registration laws and moving from one state to another state requires reregistering to vote. These registration laws reduce voter turnout. In some countries, the government registers eligible voters and actually fines eligible voters who do not perform their civic duty to vote in an election.

**Voter Fatigue.** Voter fatigue is the term for the apathy that the electorate can experience when they are required to vote too often in too many elections. The U.S. has a large number of government units (around 90,000) and Americans elect a large number of government officials—around one for every 442 citizens. Having a large number of elections—in the U.S. there is always an election somewhere—can reduce voter turnout.

**The Two-party System.** Finally, the two-party system can contribute to low voter turnout by increasing the sense that an individual’s vote does not matter very much. In two-party systems, the parties tend to be primarily interested in winning elections. In order to win elections, the parties tend to compete for moderate voters with middle-of-the-road appeals because most of the voters are by definition centrists rather than extremists. This can be a winning electoral strategy, but it sometimes leaves voters thinking there isn’t much real difference between the two major parties which compete by “muddling in the middle.” Why vote if there is no real choice between the two candidates or parties? The two major American political parties tend to be interested primarily in winning elections, and only secondarily in advocating ideologies or issues. In contrast, countries with multiple party systems are more likely to have rational political parties. As used here, a rational party is one whose primary goal is advancing ideas, issues, or ideology; winning an election is secondary.

Listen to Southern Democrat Huey Long’s critique of the Democratic and Republican Parties in the 1940 presidential election. George C. Wallace, the former Governor of Alabama and 1968 presidential candidate of the American Independent Party, famously said of the Democratic and Republican candidates for president: there is “not a dime’s worth of difference between them.” Does it matter whether one votes for a Republican or Democrat when there really isn’t much choice in a two-party system where the major parties don’t differ much on the issues?

**Election Tuesday?** Why does the U.S. have elections on a Tuesday? The reason for Tuesday elections goes back to the days of horses and buggies when Monday elections would require traveling on the Sabbath and Wednesday was market day. So in 1845 Congress provided for Tuesday elections. Would changing from one-weekday elections to two-day weekend elections increase voter turnout by making it easier for people to fit voting into busy family and work schedules? It has in some countries. The U.S. has comparatively low rates of voter turnout but bills to change to weekend voting die in
committee in Congress. Some states now allow early voting and a significant percentage of votes are now cast before prior to the day of the election. Should technology such as electronic voting be used to increase voter turnout?

10.2 | Elections

Elections are one way for people to participate in the selection of government officials. Elections also provide a means of holding government officials accountable for the way they use their power. Participation and accountability are two of the main reasons why elections are a measure of whether a political system is democratic and how democratic it is. In most cases, it is not as useful to describe a political system as democratic or non-democratic as it is to determine how democratic it is. Many countries of the world have political systems that are more or less democratic. Some countries are more democratic than others. The existence of free, open, and competitive elections is one measure of whether a country’s political system is democratic.

10.21 | Three Main Purposes

Elections serve three main purposes in representative democracies (or republics, like the U.S.):

- **Selecting government officials.** The most basic purpose of an election in a democratic system is to select government officials. Elections provide an opportunity for the people to choose their government officials. The fact that voters choose their representatives is one of the ways that democratic or republican systems of government solve the power problem. Voting is part of self-government.

- **Informing government officials.** Elections also provide government officials with information about what the people want, what they expect, and what they think about government. Elections provide an opportunity for the voice of the people to be expressed and heard. Elections thus serve as one of the ways to regularly measure public opinion about issues, political parties, candidates, and the way that government officials are doing their jobs.

- **Holding government accountable.** Elections provide regular or periodic mechanisms for holding elected representatives, other government officials, and even political parties accountable for their actions while in power. The Founders of the U.S. system of republican government provided for elections as part of the system of checks and balances.

The political scientists who study voting and elections describe two theories of elections. One theory is the elections are **forward looking** in the sense that an election provides government officials with information about which direction the public wants the government to go on major issues. The second theory is that elections are **backward looking** in the sense that an election provides government officials with feedback about what has been done—in effect, an election is a referendum on government officials or the political party in power.
In the U.S., voters go to the polls to elect national government officials at all levels of government: national, state, and local. Voters indirectly elect the President (through selection by the Electoral College). Voters directly elect the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Voters directly elect state government officials such as governors, legislators, the heads of various executive departments, and in many states judges. And voters elect local government officials such as county commissioners, school board members, mayors and city council members, and members of special governing districts such as airport authorities. In addition, most states provide for referendums, elections where voters decide ballot issues. With more than 90,000 total government units in the U.S., elections are being held somewhere for some office or for some ballot measure almost all the time. Across the whole country, more than one million elected offices are filled in every electoral cycle.

Elections are not limited to those that involve the selection of government officials. In the U.S., many state and local governments provide for ballot initiatives and referendum. A ballot initiative is an election where the voters decide whether to support or reject a proposed law. A referendum is an election where the voters go to the polls to approve or reject a law that has been passed by the state legislature or a local government body. The people vote for or against issues such as state constitutional amendments, county charters, or city charter provisions and amendments. The increased use of initiatives and referenda in states such as California has raised questions about whether direct democracy is preferable to indirect or representative democracy. In a representative democracy, the elected representatives of the people make the laws; in a direct democracy, the people make the laws. The recent trend toward initiatives and referendum has attracted the attention of people who study American politics. One organization that monitors and reports on what is happening in the states is the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center. This Center acts as a “nerve center” for “progressive” or liberal ballot initiatives in the states. The Initiative and Referendum Institute (IRI) at the University of Southern California studies ballot initiatives and referendums in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. Technology has made it possible to use this form of direct democracy to make the political system more democratic by allowing the public more opportunities to participate in the adoption of the laws that government them.

Elections are regulated by both federal and state law. The U.S. Constitution provides some basic provisions for the conduct of elections in Articles I and II. Article I, Section Four provides that “[t]he Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Place of Chusing Senators.” The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments also regulate elections by
prohibiting states from discriminating on the basis of race or gender. The 15th Amendment states that the “right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

However, most aspects of electoral law are regulated by the states. State laws provide for the conduct of primary elections (which are party elections to determine who the party’s nominee will be in the general election); the eligibility of voters (beyond the basic requirements established in the U.S. Constitution); the running of each state’s Electoral College; and the running of state and local elections.

### 10.25 Primary and General Elections

**Election campaigns** are organized efforts to persuade voters to choose one candidate over the other candidates who are competing for the same office. Effective campaigns harness resources such as volunteers; money (campaign contributions); the support of other candidates; and endorsements of other government officials, interest groups and party organizations. Effective campaigns use these resources to communicate messages to voters.

Political parties have played a central role in election campaigns for most of the nation’s history. However, during the last 30 years there has been an increase in candidate-centered campaigns and, more recently, independent organizations (such as super-PACS). Candidates who used to rely on political parties for information about voter preferences and attitudes now conduct their own public opinion polls and communicate directly with the public.

Before candidates can seek election to a partisan political office, they must get the nomination of their party in the **primary election**. A campaign for a non-partisan office (one where the candidates run without a party designation on the ballot), does not require getting the party nomination. A primary election is an election to determine who will be the party’s nominee for office. A general election is the election to actually determine who wins the office. A primary election is typically an intra-party election: the members of a party vote to determine who gets to run with the party label in the general election. A general election is typically an inter-party election: candidates from different parties compete to determine who wins the office. Most state and local political parties in the United States use primary elections (abet with widely varying rules and regulations) to determine the slate of candidates a party will offer in the general election. More than forty states use only primary elections to determine the nomination of candidates, and primaries play a prominent role in all the other states.

There are four basic types of primary elections: **closed primaries**, **open primaries**, **modified closed primaries**, and **modified open primaries**. Closed primaries are primary elections where voters are required to register with a specific party before the election and are only able to vote in the party’s election for which they are registered. Open primary elections allow anyone who is eligible to vote in the primary election to vote for a party’s selection. In modified closed primaries, the state party decides who is allowed to vote in its primary. In modified open primaries, independent voters and registered party members are allowed to vote in the nomination contest.

### 10.3 National Elections
The United States has a presidential system of government. In presidential systems, the executive and the legislature are elected separately. Article I of the U.S. Constitution requires that the presidential election occur on the same day throughout the country every four years. Elections for the House of Representatives and the Senate can be held at different times. Congressional elections take place every two years. The years when there are congressional and presidential elections are called presidential election years. The congressional election years when a president is not elected are called midterm elections.

The Constitution states that members of the United States House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, a citizen of the United States for at least seven years, and be a (legal) inhabitant of the state they represent. Senators must be at least 30 years old, a citizen of the United States for at least nine years, and be a (legal) inhabitant of the state they represent. The president must be at least 35 years old, a natural born citizen of the United States and a resident in the United States for at least fourteen years. It is the responsibility of state legislatures to regulate the qualifications for a candidate appearing on a ballot paper. “Getting on the ballot” is based on candidate's performances in previous elections.
Chapter 10: Political Participation

10.31 | Presidential Elections

The president and vice-president run as a team or ticket. The team typically tries for balance. A balanced ticket is one where the president and the vice-president are chosen to achieve a politically desirable balance. The political balance can be:

- Geographical. Geographical balance is when the President and Vice-president are selected from different regions of the country—balancing north and south, or east and west—in order to appeal to voters in those regions of the country.
- Ideological. Ideological balance is when the President and Vice-president come from different ideological wings of the party. The two major parties have liberal and conservative wings, and the ideological balance broadens the appeal of the ticket.
- Experience. A ticket with balanced political experience is one that includes one candidate with extensive experience in federal government and the other a political newcomer. Sometimes political experience (being a Washington insider, for instance) is considered an advantage; sometimes it is considered a handicap. Incumbency can be a plus or a minus. Balance can try to have it both ways.

- Demographics. Demographic balance refers to having a ticket with candidates who have different age, race, gender, or religion. Once again, demographic balance is intended to broaden the ticket’s appeal.

The presidential candidate for each party is selected through a presidential primary. Incumbent presidents can be challenged in their party’s primary elections, but this is rare. The last incumbent President to not seek a second term was Lyndon B. Johnson. President Johnson was mired in the Vietnam War at a time when that war was very unpopular. The presidential primary is actually a series of staggered electoral contests in which members of a party choose delegates to attend the party’s national convention which officially nominates the party’s presidential candidate. Primary elections were first used to choose delegates in 1912. Prior to this, the delegates were chosen by a variety of methods, including selection by party elites. The use of primaries increased in the early decades of the 20th Century then they fell out of favor until anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Police attacking protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, IL

Currently, more than eighty percent of states use a primary election to determine delegates to the national convention. These elections do not occur on one day: the primary election process takes many months. The primary election process is long, drawn-out, complex, and has no parallel in any other nation in the world. The presidential
candidates begin fundraising efforts, start campaigning, and announce their candidacy months in advance of the first primary election.

It is purely historical accident that New Hampshire and Iowa have the first primary elections and are thus the focus on candidate attention for months prior to their January elections. New Hampshire had an early primary election in 1972 and has held the place of the first primary since that time. Iowa’s primary is before New Hampshire, although the state uses a caucus to select delegates. Generally, the Iowa caucus narrows the field of candidates by demonstrating a candidate’s appeal among party supporters, while New Hampshire tests the appeal of the front-runners from each party with the general public.

![2008 Presidential Primaries and Caucuses](image)

Dates of primary elections in 2008.

10.32 | The Electoral College

The president is not directly elected by the people. The popular vote does not actually determine who wins the presidency. When the voters in a state go to the polls to cast their votes for president (and vice president), they are actually voting for members of the Electoral College. The winner of a presidential election is the candidate who receives a majority vote of the members of the Electoral College.

With the possible exception of the Federal Reserve Board, the Electoral College may be the least-understood government body in the U.S. system of government. Each member of the Electoral College cast her or his vote for a presidential and vice-presidential candidate. Each state’s members of the Electoral College are chosen by the state political party at that states party convention. The state parties choose party loyalists to be the party’s members of the Electoral College if that party wins the popular
vote in the state. This is why the members of the Electoral College almost always vote for the presidential candidate who wins the popular vote in that state. On rare occasion, a “faithless” Elector will not vote for the candidate who won the popular vote in their state. When voters in a state go to the polls to vote for a president, they actually each cast their votes for a slate of electors that is chosen by a party or a candidate. The presidential and vice-presidential candidate names usually appear on the ballot rather than the names of the Electors. Until the passage of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804, the runner-up in a presidential election (the person receiving the second most number of Electoral College votes) became the vice-president.

The winner of the presidential election is the candidate who receives at least 270 Electoral College votes. The fact that it is possible for a candidate to receive the most popular votes but lose the election by receiving fewer Electoral College votes than another candidate is hard to reconcile with democratic principles. It also does not seem fair in modern American political culture which includes an expectation that voters chose government officials. Abolishing the Electoral College and replacing it with a national direct system would also prevent a candidate from receiving fewer votes nationwide than their opponent, but still winning more electoral votes, which last occurred in the 2000 Presidential election.

State law regulates how the state’s Electoral College votes are cast. In all states except Maine and Nebraska, the candidate that wins the most votes in the state receives all its Electoral College votes (a “winner takes all” system). From 1969 in Maine, and from 1991 in Nebraska, two electoral votes are awarded based on the winner of the statewide election, and the rest (two in Maine, three in Nebraska) go to the highest vote-winner in each of the state’s congressional districts.

The Electoral College is criticized for a variety of reasons:

- It is undemocratic. The people do not actually elect a president; the president is selected by the Electoral College.
- It is unequal. The number of a state’s Electors is equal to the state’s congressional delegation. This system gives less populous states a disproportionate vote in the Electoral College because each state has two senators regardless of population (and therefore two members of the Electoral College). The minimum number of state Electors is three. Wyoming and California have the same number of senators. Wyoming has a population of 493,782 and 3 EC votes, 164,594 people per EC vote. California has a population of 33,871,648 and 55 EC votes, 615,848 people per EC vote.
• It spotlights swing states. The Electoral College system distorts campaigning because the voters in swing states determine the outcome of the election. As a result, voters who live in states that are not competitive are ignored by the political campaigns. Abolishing the Electoral College and treating the entire country as one district for presidential elections eliminate the campaign focus on swing states.

• It is biased against national candidates. The Electoral College also works against candidates whose base of support is spread around the country rather than in a state or region of the country which would enable them to win the popular vote in one or more states. This is what happened to Ross Perot. In 1992, Perot won 18.9% of the national vote, but received no Electoral College votes because his broad appeal across the country did not include strength in one or a few state.

Despite these long-standing criticisms of the Electoral College, abolishing it is unlikely because doing so would require a constitutional amendment—and ratification of a constitutional amendment requires three-quarters of the state legislature to support it. The less populous states are not likely to support an amendment to abolish the Electoral College in favor of direct popular election of the president because doing so would decrease the voting power of the less populous states. Small states such as Wyoming and North Dakota would lose power and more populous states such as California and New York would gain power.

10.33 | Congressional Elections

Congressional elections take place every two years. Each member of the House of Representatives is
220 | Chapter 10: Political Participation

Each Senator is elected for a six-year term. About one-third of the Senate is elected in each congressional election. Until the Seventeenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1913, Senators were elected by state legislatures, not the electorate of states.

10.34 | House Elections

Elections to the United States House of Representatives occur every two years on the first Tuesday after November 1 in even years. If a member dies in office or resigns before the term has been completed, a special House election is held to fill the seat. House elections are first-past-the-post elections—meaning the candidate who gets the most votes wins the election regardless of whether that person receives a majority of the votes cast in the election. The winner is the one who receives a plurality of the votes. Plurality means the most votes. It is not necessary for the winner to receive a majority (50% plus one) of the votes.

Every two years congressional elections coincide with presidential elections. Congressional elections that do not coincide with presidential elections are called mid-term elections—because they occur in the middle of a President’s four-year term of office. When congressional elections occur in the same year as a presidential election, the party whose presidential candidate wins the election usually increases the number of congressional seats it holds. This is one of the unofficial linkages between presidential and congressional elections. The president and members of Congress are officially elected separately, but some voters go to the polls to vote for or against Republicans and Democrats so the president’s popularity has an impact on congressional elections.

There is a historical pattern that the incumbent president’s party loses seats in mid-term elections. In mid-term elections, the president is not on the ballot. The president’s party usually loses seats in mid-term elections. One reason for mid-term losses is the president’s popularity has slipped during the two years in office. Another cause of mid-term election losses is the fact that voter turnout is lower in mid-term elections, and members of the president’s party are less likely to vote in an election when their president is not on the ballot. These patterns of voting behavior illustrate the partisan linkages between congressional and presidential elections.

10.35 | Gerrymandering

In 2010, Allen West (R) challenged incumbent and Ron Klein (D) in Florida District 22. West emphasized his military experience. A neighborhood campaign supporter produced a sign which framed the choice as “The Wimp or the Warrior.”
Over time, congressional districts have become far less competitive. Congressional districts are drawn to protect individual incumbents and political parties. Another way to describe this is that congressional districts are drawn to create safe districts. A safe district is one that is not competitive; it is a safe district for the Republican Party or a safe district for the Democratic Party because the district boundaries are drawn to ensure that it contains a majority of Republicans or Democrats. One consequence of drawing safe districts is a reduction in voter choice. The Constitution requires that congressional districts be reapportioned after every census. This means that reapportionment or redistricting is done every ten years. The reapportionment is done by each state. In most cases, the political party with a majority in the state legislature controls redistricting. The fact that either one or the other major party controls the reapportionment encourages partisan gerrymandering.

Gerrymandering is drawing electoral district lines in ways that advantage one set of interests and disadvantage others. Historically, gerrymandering advantaged rural interests and disadvantaged urban interests. Voters in rural districts were over-represented and voters in urban districts were under-represented. Racial gerrymandering is done to advantage one race and to disadvantage others. Historically, racial gerrymandering over-represented white voters and under-represented Black voters. Racial gerrymandering is illegal because the Fourteenth Amendment prohibits states from denying people the equal protection of the laws. Partisan gerrymandering is drawing electoral lines to benefit the majority party and hurt the minority party. It is still practiced as a way for the majority party to use its political power.

One of the ways that the two major parties cooperate is in the creation of safe electoral districts. The Democratic and Republican parties have a vested interest in reducing the number of competitive districts and increasing the number of safe seats. The fact that more than nine out of ten Americans live in congressional districts that are not really competitive, but are safe seats for one party or the other, means that elections are not really very democratic. Redistricting to create safe seats for incumbents (those in office) gives an incumbent a great advantage over any challenger in House elections. In the typical congressional election, only a small number of incumbents lose their seat. Only a small number of seats change party control in each election. Gerrymandering to create safe districts results in fewer than 10% of all House seats actually being competitive in each election cycle—competitive meaning that a candidate of either party has a good chance of winning the seat. The lack of electorally competitive districts means that over 90% of House members are almost guaranteed reelection every two years.

This is a significant development because competitive elections are one measure of how democratic a political system is. The large number of safe districts makes a political system less democratic because there are fewer competitive elections. Creating safe seats for 1) Republicans and Democrats; and 2) incumbents in either party, results in conditions that resemble one-party politics in a large number of districts. If one party almost always wins a district, and the other party almost always loses, the value of political competitions is greatly diminished.

10.36 | A Duopoly (or Shared Monopoly)

The two major parties collude to create these political monopolies (technically they are duopolies because the two major parties control the political marketplace). The creation of a large number of safe seats makes districts more ideologically homogeneous, thereby making negotiating, bargaining, and ultimately the need to compromise less likely. A candidate who does not have to run for office in a politically diverse district is less likely to have to develop campaign strategies with broad public appeal, and once in office such a legislator is less likely to have to govern with much concern about accommodating different interests or representing different constituents.
10.4 | Campaigns

A political campaign is an organized effort to influence the decisions of an individual, group, organization, or government institution. Campaigns are one way that individuals, parties, and other political actors compete for popular support. Campaigning is a type of advertising: it is political advertising rather than commercial advertising. A candidate, political party, or interest group campaigns by providing the public with favorable information about their issues (this is positive campaigning) or unfavorable information about the opposition (this is negative campaigning). Political (or electoral) campaigns are organized efforts with three elements: message, money, and machine.

10.41 | The Message

The campaign message is usually a clear and concise statement that explains why voters should vote for a candidate or an issue. Some examples of campaign messages include the following:

- John Doe is a business man, not a politician. His background in finance means he can bring fiscal discipline to state government.
- Crime is increasing and education is decreasing. We need leaders like Jane Doe who will keep our streets safe and our schools educating our children.
- Jane Doe has missed over 50 congressional votes. How can you lead if you don’t show up to vote?
- Jane Doe is not a Washington politician. She remembers where she came from and won’t become part of the problem in Washington.
- Jane Doe knows how to keep Americans safe from terrorism.
- John Doe is an experienced leader.
- Vote Yes on Number Four to Protect Marriage.

The message is one of the most important aspects of any political campaign, whether it is an individual’s campaign for office or a referendum on an issue. The media (radio, television, and now the new media) emphasize short, pithy, memorable phrases from campaign speeches or debates. These “sound bites” are the short campaign slogans or catchy messages that resemble bumper-stickers. Sound-bite campaigns and campaign coverage reduce political messages to slogans such as “Peace through Strength” (Ronald Reagan), “Its Morning in America” (President Reagan), and “Change We Can Believe In” (Barack Obama). The Museum of the Moving Image has archived presidential campaign ads. A memorable campaign slogan from the 1984 Democratic primary campaign was Walter Mondale’s ad dismissing his main Democratic challenger, Gary Hart, with the catch phrase from a popular Wendy’s commercial: “Where’s the beef?” The implied charge was that the photogenic Hart lacked substance, particularly when compared to the dull but experienced Mondale. The mantra of Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign in 1992 was “It’s the economy stupid.” This slogan stressed the importance of keeping the campaign focused on the state of the economy rather than other issues that sometimes distract Democrats. Candidate George W. Bush’s campaign used the slogan
“compassionate conservatism” to appeal to both conservatives and those who worried that conservatives did not care about the poor or disadvantaged.

Today’s national and state campaigns are typically professional, sophisticated, carefully crafted campaigns to develop and control the image of a candidate. The marketing of political campaigns has been described as the “packaging” of a candidate and the “selling” of a candidate—even “The Selling of a President.” The reference to selling a president is from Joe McGinniss’ *The Selling of the President* (1968). McGinniss described how candidate Richard Nixon used Madison Avenue marketing professionals and strategies to win the White House. At the time, the idea that a political campaign could, or should, market and sell a candidate the way that beer, deodorant, and bars of soap were marketed and sold other products like beer or deodorant or a bar of soap was controversial. The idea of corporate advertising expertise being applied to democratic politics in order to influence what citizens thought of the president seemed inappropriate and threatening. Bringing marketing values to politics seemed to demean or diminish politics by treating people as consumers rather than as citizens. Political advertising also seemed threatening in the sense that it used psychology to manipulate or control what people think.

In the years since 1968, the marketing and advertising of candidates is widely accepted as the way to conduct a successful national campaign. Presidential campaigns develop a message or candidate “brand.” After the Watergate Scandal exposed President Nixon’s dishonesty, the Jimmy Carter campaign brand was honesty: “I will not lie to you.” During the Carter Administration the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Americans were taken hostages during a revolution in Iran that overthrew the Shah of Iran who was an ally of the United States, and a hostage rescue mission failed. These events, coupled with the loss of the Vietnam War, allowed presidential candidate Ronald Reagan to portray President Carter, the Democrats, and liberals as weak on national defense. The Reagan campaign theme “Peace through Strength” successfully branded Carter, Democrats, and liberals as weak on national defense and Reagan, Republicans, and conservatives as strong on national defense.

The comparison of campaigning and advertising is appropriate because many of the techniques and strategies that are used by Madison Avenue advertisers are mainstream politics. The similarities between the selling of a product or service and the selling of candidate are now acknowledged. In order to be successful, national campaigns spend a great deal of money on gathering information about political consumers so that candidates and parties can craft and present a message that is appealing.

10.42 | *Money*

Campaign finance has become more important as campaigns have changed from traditional *retail politics* to *wholesale politics*. The term retail politics refers to campaigns where candidates actually meet voters one-on-one, in small groups or communities, at town hall meetings, or other face-to-face settings such as walking a neighborhood. The term wholesale politics refers to campaigns where candidates address large audiences often using the print and electronic mass media.

The change to wholesale politics has increased the cost of campaigning by shifting from labor-intensive campaigning—where friends and neighbors and campaign workers and volunteers canvas a district or city or make personal telephone calls to
individual voters—to capital-intensive campaigns where money is used to purchase television air time or advertising. The change from campaigns as ground wars to air wars has increased the cost of campaigning.

Fundraising techniques include having the candidate call or meet with large donors, sending direct mail pleas to small donors, and courting interest groups who could end up spending millions on the race if it is significant to their interests. The financing of elections has always been controversial because money is often considered a corrupting influence on democratic politics. The perception is that the wealthy can purchase access to government officials or pay for campaigns that influence public opinion. The fact that private sources of finance make up substantial amounts of campaign contributions, especially in federal elections, contributes to the perception that money creates influence.

As a result, voluntary public funding for candidates willing to accept spending limits was introduced in 1974 for presidential primaries and elections. The Federal Elections Commission was created in the 1970s to monitor campaign finance. The FEC is responsible for monitoring the disclosure of campaign finance information, enforcing the provisions of the law such as the limits and prohibitions on contributions, and overseeing the public funding of U.S. presidential elections.

A good source of information about money matters in American campaigns and elections is The Center for Responsive Politics. The Center tracks money in politics as part of an “open secrets project.” The recommendation to “Follow the money” has become all-purpose slogan that is applicable to criminal investigations and investigations of political influence and campaign ads. The saying comes from the Hollywood film All the President’s Men which tells the story of how Washington Post reporters investigated the Watergate scandal. A secret source named Deep Throat advised the reporters to “Follow the Money.”

The National Institute on Money in State Politics is still following the money trail to determine political influence in state politics. The U.S. Supreme Court’s rulings in campaign finance cases has made “Follow the money” even more relevant in today’s politics. In a series of rulings, the Court has said that campaign contributions are speech that is protected by the First Amendment and that government restrictions on campaign contributions are subject to strict scrutiny—which means that the government has to show that campaign finance laws serve a compelling interest in order to be upheld. As a result, corporations can make unlimited independent campaign expenditures. Even the existing requirements that contributions be publicly disclosed are now being challenged. The Campaign Finance Information Center’s mission is to help journalist follow the campaign money trail in local, state, and national politics. The landmark Supreme Court ruling that has changed the campaign finance rules is Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010).

http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZS.html

10.43 | The Machine

The third part of a campaign is the machine. The campaign machine is the organization, the human capital, the foot soldiers loyal to the cause, the true believers who will carry the run by
volunteer activists, the professional campaign advisers, pollsters, voter lists, political party resources, and get-out-the-vote resources. Individuals need organizations to campaign successfully in national campaigns. Successful campaigns usually require a campaign manager and some staff members who make strategic and tactical decisions while volunteers and interns canvass door-to-door and make phone calls. Large modern campaigns use all three of the above components to create a successful strategy for victory.

10.5 | The Media

Modern campaigns for national offices—the presidency, the Senate, and the House of Representatives—are largely media campaigns. They are conducted using the print media, electronic media, and the “new” media (the Internet and the social media). Communication technology has fundamentally altered campaigns. The development of the broadcast media (radio and television) changed political campaigns from “ground wars” to “air” wars. The term ground war refers to a campaign that relies heavily on candidates and their campaign workers meeting voters and distributing campaign literature. The term air war refers to campaigns that rely heavily on the mass media.

The following two quotes from the Museum of the Moving Image archive of presidential campaign ads illustrate the change in thinking about television campaign advertising:

- “The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.”
  Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson (1956)
- “Television is no gimmick, and nobody will ever be elected to major office again without presenting themselves well on it.” Television producer and Nixon campaign consultant (and later President of Fox News Channel) Roger Ailes (1968)

10.51 | Who Uses Whom?

Campaign organizations have a complicated relationship with the media. They need and use each other but they have different, sometimes conflicting needs. The media like **good visuals** and compelling personal interest stories which capture the attention of the public and turn the general public into an audience. Campaigns like to provide such visuals. But the media (and campaigns) also like to play “gotcha.” The media consider it a good story to catch a candidate’s ignorance, mistake, or gaffe—or even to ask a question that might cause a candidate to make a mistake. The mistake might be

- Misspelling a word. Vice-presidential candidate Dan Quale spelled “potato” “potatoe.”
- Ignorance. Not knowing the name of a foreign leader. Presidential candidate George W. Bush did not know the name of the leader of Pakistan.
- Misrepresentation. During the presidential primary campaign, Hillary Clinton misrepresented a trip to Kosovo as one where she landed at an airport under fire to convince voters that she had the experience to be commander in chief.
Math problems. Announcing budget numbers that do not add up.
Ignorance. Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin did not know the name of any Supreme Court decision that she disagreed with.

10.52 | The Social Media

Communication technology has changed national campaigns from primarily ground wars (walking the neighborhoods; kissing babies; shaking hands) to air wars (broadcast radio and television ads). Campaigns are now using social media to post material on Tumblr (videos and photos) or Spotify or Pinterest. According to Adam Fletcher, deputy press secretary for the Obama re-election campaign, “It’s about authentic, two-way communication.” This may be true, but it may also be about a campaign strategy to try to reach people where they are: Online using social media. A presidential campaign that shares songs with the public may be less interested in actually creating two-way communication with the public than it is in establishing social connections with people by appearing to share tastes. Familiarity (with songs, photos and videos that are posted on Spotify, Flickr, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) creates trust. Socialbakers, a social media analytics group, says the campaigns have to try to reach people wherever they are, and young people in particular are on-line more than reading newspapers or watching broadcast television networks.

10.53 | The Age of Digital Campaigns

The digital age is fundamentally changing campaign advertising. In the age of mass media, campaign ads that aired on the major television and radio networks were intended for the general audiences that were watching or listening to national programs. The digital age allows targeted advertising. Political intelligence companies such as Aristotle gather large files of detailed information about a person’s behavior from commercial companies that keep track of consumption patterns or Internet searches, and then sell that data to campaigns. The campaigns, which then know where a person lives; what their demographics are; what they purchase; what they read; what their hobbies are; and other factors that might be related to how they think about politics, can tailor ads to very specific audiences. This digital information is very good for campaigns, but is it good for us? See the following PBS story about “How Campaigns Amass Your Personal Information to Deliver Tailored Political Ads.” The digital campaigns are also developing ways to target “off the grid” voters, the voters who do not get their public affairs information from the traditional media sources (papers, television, and radio). Identifying such voters is one thing. Getting them to vote is another. Having a good ground game—people in neighborhoods, cities, districts, and states who can actually contact voters and get them out to vote—is still an important element of a successful presidential campaign strategy.

Think About It!
President Obama’s reelection campaign was successful because it combined air wars with a solid ground game in the states that it identified as the key swing states in the 2012 presidential election.

10.54 | Campaign Fact Checking

Candidates, parties, and organizations supporting or opposing a candidate, or an issue, say things which may not meet the standard of “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” In an age of electronic communications, it is even more likely that Mark Twain, the American humorist, was right when he said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes.” As a result, a number of organizations have developed campaign fact-checking operations to hold campaigners accountable for what they claim as facts. One of these organizations is Factcheck.org. Its Web site provides running description and analysis of inaccurate campaign statements. Some of the more interesting false statements that they fact-checked were claims that Democratic presidential candidate Barack Hussein Obama was a radical Muslim who refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and took the oath of office as a U.S. Senate swearing on the Koran, not the bible.

10.55 | Political Futures Market

One of the more innovative and interesting perspectives on the measurement of public opinion as a predictor of the outcome of an election involves the application of economic perspectives. The “political futures” markets are designed to provide an economic measure of support for a candidate as a predictor of whether the candidate will win an election. One example of this approach is The Iowa Electronic Markets. These are real-money futures markets in which contract payoffs depend on economic and political events such as elections. These markets are operated by faculty at the University of Iowa Tippie College of Business as part of their research and teaching mission.

10.6 | How to “Do” Civic Engagement

The importance of fostering civic engagement in higher education is described in Civic Responsibility and Higher Education (2000), a book edited by Thomas Ehrlich. Ehrlich worked to promote including civic engagement along with the traditional academic learning in the mission of universities. The American Association of Colleges and Universities stresses the role that higher education plays in developing civic learning to ensure that students become an informed, engaged, and socially responsible citizenry. These efforts emphasize the importance of connecting classroom learning with the community. The connection has two points: usable knowledge and workable skills. The emphasis on usable knowledge includes promoting social science research as problem solving. The term usable knowledge refers to knowledge that people and policy makers can apply to solve contemporary social problems. (Lindblom and Cohen) The emphasis on workable skills is even more directly related to civic engagement. Today there are many organizations that advance the cause of linking academic study and social problem
solving. One of these organizations is the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. This Foundation was created by the cereal company magnate. The Foundation emphasizes the importance of developing the practical skills that will enable individuals to realize the “inherent human capacity to solve their own problems.” These skills include dialogue, leadership development, and the organization of effort. In effect, civic engagement develops the practical skills that can help people help themselves. How can you “do” civic engagement?

- Contact a government official. Contact a local, state, and national government official. Ask them what they think are the major issues or problems that are on their agenda. Contacting your member of Congress is easy. (See the Chapter on Congress.)
- Attend a government meeting. Attend the public meeting of a local government: a neighborhood association; a city council meeting; a county commission meeting; a school board meeting; or a state government meeting (of the legislature or an executive agency).
- Contact an organization. Contact a non-government organization to discuss an issue of your concern, community interest, or the organization’s mission. These organizations, political parties, and interest groups represent business, labor, professional associations, or issues such as civil rights, property rights, the environment, immigration, religion, and education.

10.7 | Summary

One aspect of the power problem is the government authority over individuals. The government’s ability to tell an individual what to do is legitimate—that is, it is authority rather than merely power—if the government’s ability is based on the consent of the government. Democracy, or self-government, requires an active and engaged citizenry in order to make government control over individuals legitimate. Political participation is one of the measures of how democratic a political system is. Therefore, political participation is also a measure of government legitimacy. Voting, elections, and campaigns provide opportunities for individuals to be active and engaged citizens.

10.8 | Additional Resources

10.81 | In the Library


McGinniss, Joe. 1968. The Selling of the President.


10.82 | Online Resources

Each state has primary responsibility for conducting and supervising elections. For information about Florida elections go to the My Florida Web site http://www.myflorida.com/ and click on government, then executive branch, then state agencies, then department of state, then http://election.dos.state.fl.us/. Or you can learn about Florida election laws by going directly to the Florida Department of State Web site which provides information about voter registration, candidates, political parties, and constitutional amendment proposals.

Votesmart provides basic information about American politics and government. It is, in effect, American Government 101.

C-SPAN election resources are available at http://www.c-span.org/classroom/govt/campaigns.asp.


Rock-the-Vote is an organization dedicated to getting young people involved in politics. www.rockthevote.org/

Project Vote-Smart is a nonpartisan information service funded by members and nonpartisan foundations. It offers “a wealth of facts on your political leaders, including biographies and addresses, issue positions, voting records, campaign finances, evaluations by special interests.” www.vote-smart.org/

The U.S. Census Bureau has information on voter registration and turnout statistics. www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html

C-Span produces programs that provide information about the workings of Congress and elections. www.c-span.org
Key Terms:
- voter fatigue
- open primaries
- closed primaries
- presidential primary
- caucus
- voter turnout
- rational choice model
- civic duty model
- political efficacy
- Individual explanations
- System explanations
- Voter registration
- “Air” campaigns

10.9 | Study Questions

1. What is the rational choice theory of voting?
2. What are the primary factors at the individual level that influence whether someone turns out to vote?
3. What are the institutional factors that depress voter turnout in the United States?

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2 For the methodology and results, see http://www.economist.com/markets.rankings/displaystory.cfm?story_id=8908438
4 Declare Yourself has information on each state and the requirements for voter registration at http://www.declareyourself.com/voting_faq/state_by_state_info_2.html
6 The National Conference of State Legislatures provides detailed information about ballot initiatives in each state: http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?TabID=746&tabs=1116,114,802#802
11.0 | Why Political Organizations?

Why do people everywhere live, work, and play in groups? Why are large organizations—corporations, political parties, interest groups—the predominant actors in our political, economic, and social systems? Is there something natural about social organizations? And what is the role of individuals in political systems where groups are the dominant actors? Political scientists are not the only scholars who ask such questions. These are some of the oldest and most interesting questions that are asked by other social scientists (economists, sociologists, and anthropologists), philosophers, and
natural scientists. Scientific research studies the phenomenon of grouping in the animal kingdom to learn why animals such as fish, birds, and elephants live in groups. Social scientific research studies ideological, partisan, and other political groupings of people.

This chapter examines one form of political organization: political parties. Parties exist in all modern democracies but there is an underlying tension between democratic theory, which values individualism, and the political reality that organizations are the dominant actors in modern politics and government. The tension between individualism and organization is one reason why Americans are more skeptical of political parties than people in other western democracies where political parties tend to be stronger. Americans have such a strong commitment to individualism that there is a healthy skepticism about organizations, particularly large, powerful organizations whether in government, politics, or economics. In American politics and government, parties are considered a necessary evil. Their influence over voters and government officials is frequently questioned, but parties are also considered essential for organizing public participation in politics and control over government. The following sections explore these aspects of party politics in the U.S.

11.1 | What is a Political Party?

A political party is an organization of people with shared ideas about government and politics who try to gain control of government in order to implement their ideas. Political parties usually try to gain control of government by nominating candidates for office who then compete in elections by running with the party label. Some political parties are very ideological and work to get their set of beliefs implemented in public policy. Other political parties are not as ideological. A party may not be ideologically united because it represents a coalition of different interests. Or it may be more interested in gaining and holding power by having its members win elections than strongly advocating a particular set of beliefs.

Political organizations play an important role in government and politics around the world. It is impossible to understand American government and politics without understanding the role of political parties and interest groups. This is ironic because American culture values individualism, but political organizations such as parties and interest groups have come to play an extremely important role in our political and economic life. Parties and interest groups are linkage institutions. Linkage institutions are sometimes called aggregating or mediating institutions. The media are also a linkage (or mediating) institution. A linkage organization is one that links individuals to one another or the government. A linkage organization aggregates and collects individual interests. This is an important function in large scale (or mass) political systems because it is a way for individuals with shared interests to speak with a single or louder voice. Linkage organizations are also important because they mediate between individuals and government, they “mediate” between the lone (or small) individual and (increasingly) big government. The mediating role becomes more important as a country’s population...
increases and as government get larger and larger. Intermediary organizations make it possible for individuals to think that they can have an impact on government. In this sense, political parties like other “mediating structures” actually empower people. Parties are part of civil society. The term civil society refers to the non-governmental sector of public life. Civil society includes political, economic, social, religious, cultural activities that are part of the crucial, non-governmental foundations of a political community: the family, neighborhoods, churches, and voluntary associations (including parties and interest groups). The Heritage Foundation is a conservative think tank. One of its goals is to promote these mediating structures as a way to empower people and limit government as envisioned by Peter Berger and John Neuhaus in To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy (1977). Civic engagement maintains these traditional mediating structures and supports their development.

The following sections examine political parties and their role in American politics pays some. Some attention is paid to the historical development of the U.S. party system, particularly the features of the two-party system.

11.2 | Roles in Modern Democracies

It is hard to imagine modern democracies without political parties. They exist in all democratic political systems. The freedom to form parties and compete in the electoral process is considered one of the essential measures of democracy because parties are considered vital elements of self-government. Political parties perform the following functions:

- Recruit and nominate candidates for office.
- Help run campaigns and elections.
- Organize and mobilize voters to participate in politics.
- Organize and operate the government.
The recruitment and nomination of candidates is one of the most important functions of political parties. In the past, party leaders in the U.S. exerted a great deal of control over the party’s candidate for office. Party leaders and activists chose their party’s nominee. Today, however, party control over nominations has been weakened by the increased use of primary elections to choose party candidates. In primary elections, the public votes for a party’s nominee, which has opened the process and limited the influence of party officials and activists. The party’s weakened control over the nomination process has weakened American political parties.

Political parties also organize and mobilize voters. This function is important in large countries because it can help organize the public in ways that increase an individual’s sense of political efficacy. Political efficacy is the belief that a person’s participation matters, that a person’s vote can make a difference. In large scale democracies such as the United States, political parties organize individuals, synthesize their interests, and link or collect their views on government and politics into two or more perspectives. This collection or organization can magnify an individual’s political voice. So political parties are not just divisive forces in politics; they can unite individuals with other like-minded people who share their thinking on government and politics.

The role of political parties does not end with an election. After an election, the parties work to organize and operate the government. The majority party in Congress and the party that wins the presidency work to organize the actions of the candidates who campaigned successfully and became government officials. The *Ins* generally support one set of public policies, and the *Outs* support an alternative set of public policies.

The above roles explain why political scientists see parties as vital elements of modern liberal democracies. Liberal democracies are a form of representative government that is based on individual rights and limited government with political participation organized by parties. But the American political tradition includes skepticism of parties. The fact that about one-third of voters consider themselves Independents rather than members of either of the two major parties (the Republican and Democratic parties) is evidence that Americans do not have a particularly strong attachment to parties. The Independents apparently think parties are not an essential element of modern democracy, or they associate political parties with the kinds of partisan bickering and fighting that prevent well-meaning people from working together to solve problems.

11.3 | Founding Era Opposition to Political Parties

Political parties have a familiar place in American politics today and they are accepted as established features of politics and government. However, this was not always so. The Constitution does not mention political parties. Indeed, political parties did not even exist when it was written. During the founding era, the groups that pursued a particular political interest were referred to as factions—and they were generally considered harmful influences whose power needed to be checked.
The Founders opposed political parties, and warned against their development in American politics. But they were not banned. The Founders felt that federalism and the separation of powers and checks and balances would keep factions from advancing their special interests and harming the public interest in the new republic. The anti-party views of George Washington and James Madison illustrate the early hostility to the emergence of political parties in the American political system.

**11.31 | George Washington**

George Washington’s *Farewell Address* on September 19, 1796 is a famous statement warning against the spirit and actions of political parties. He warned against the development of state parties that created geographic divisions among Americans as well as “the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally,” a spirit that was “inseparable from our nature,” and existing in all forms of government, but “it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy,” in popular forms of government:

> The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.

> …[T]he common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it. It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.”

James Madison also considered factions and other social, economic, and political divisions a vice. But he thought that banning factions would be a cure that was worse than the disease because factions were rooted in human nature. In *Federalist Number 51* he describes his ingenious solution to the problem of factions. He made factions, which were a problem, part of the solution. The system of checks and balances required so many different interests, parties, and factions that *no one* could dominate the political process and use government power against the others. So the political solution to the problem of factions was more of them. The way to guard against a united majority threatening the rights of the minority is to create a society with “so many separate
descriptions of citizens as will render an unjust combination of a majority of the whole very improbable, if not impracticable.” Madison specifically compared the problem of protecting political rights with the problem of protecting religious rights:

“In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects. The degree of security in both cases will depend on the number of interests and sects; and this may be presumed to depend on the extent of country and number of people comprehended under the same government.”

11.32 | Parties and the Constitution

As previously mentioned, the Constitution does not say anything about political parties. Parties developed after the Constitution was written. Shortly after the Constitution was written the Federalist and Anti-federalist Parties had emerged to compete for control of the federal government. The Federalist Party supported a strong national government, a strong executive in the national government, and commercial interest. The Federalist Party’s geographic base was in New England. The Anti-federalist Party supported strong state governments, legislative government, and agrarian interests. Its geographic base was strongest in the South and West. Alexander Hamilton and Chief Justice John Marshall were strong Federalists. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were Anti-federalists (a party which came to be called the Democratic-Republicans). The election of 1800 was a presidential contest won by Jefferson, and the landmark case of *Marbury v. Madison* (1803) began as a political contest over Federalist and Anti-federalist control of government. The Jeffersonians (or Democratic-Republicans) then became the dominant party, winning seven consecutive presidential elections from 1800 to 1824.

The fact that the Constitution does not say anything about one of the most important features of modern American government and politics is surprising. It also explains why it is not possible to read the Constitution to get a good understanding of how government and politics actually work. It is hard to understand American government and politics without understanding the role that political parties play.

11.4 | Party Systems

Modern governments typically have one-party systems, two-party systems, or multi-party systems. The U.S. has a two-party system.

11.41 | One –Party Systems

In one-party systems, only one political party is legally allowed to hold power. Although minor parties may sometimes be allowed in a one-party system, the minor party is legally required to accept the leadership of the dominant party. In a one-party system, the dominant party is usually closely identified with the government. The party organization and the government may not be identical, but sometimes party officials are also government officials so the separation between party and government may not be very
great. In fact, in some one-party systems the party leadership position may be more important and powerful than positions within the government itself. Communist countries such as China and Cuba, and formerly the Soviet Union, are examples of one-party political systems. One-party systems are usually in countries without a strong democratic tradition.

Although there are few one-party systems, there is a variant called the dominant party system that is fairly common. A dominant party system is one where one party is so strong, so dominant, that even though other parties are legally allowed no other party has a real chance of competing in elections to win power. Dominant party systems can exist in countries with a strong democratic tradition in the country. The inability of any party other than the dominant party to compete in elections may be due to political, social and economic circumstances, public opinion, or the fact that the dominant party is entrenched in government and uses the government powers to preserve its privileged position. In countries with weak democratic traditions, the dominant party may remain in power by using political patronage (distribution of government jobs, contracts, or other government benefits to influence votes), voting fraud, or other manipulations of the electoral process. Where voting fraud is used to stay in power, the definition between a dominant and a one-party system is blurred. Examples of dominant party systems include the People’s Action Party in Singapore and the African National Congress in South Africa. Mexico was a one-party dominant system with the Institutional Revolutionary Party until the 1990s. In the United States, the south was a one-party dominant region from the 1880s until the 1970s. It was controlled by the Democratic Party as a result of the Civil War: the Republican Party was the party of Lincoln.

11.42 | Two –Party Systems

A two-party system is one where there are two major political parties that are so strong that it is extremely difficult for a candidate from any party other than the two major parties to have a real chance to win elections. In a two-party system, a third-party is not likely to have much electoral success. The U.S. has a two-party system. The two major parties, the Republican and Democratic Parties, are the dominant parties. It is difficult for any third or minor party to win elections.

In the U.S., parties are mostly regulated by the laws of the individual states, which organize elections to both local and federal offices. No laws limit the number of political parties that may operate, so it is theoretically possible for the U.S. to develop a multi-party system. However, the country has had a two-party system since the early years of the republic. Third or minor parties do appear periodically. The fact that states have restrictive ballot access laws limits the development of third parties, but most are generally of only limited and temporary political significance.

In a two-party system, the typical ideological division is to have one party consisting of a right wing coalition and one party consisting of a left wing coalition. A coalition is a (usually temporary) combination or alliance of different interests that agree to unite to achieve shared goals. In the U.S., the Republican and Democratic parties are coalitions of interests. The Republican Party coalition consists of libertarians, economic conservatives, social conservatives, and national security and public order advocates. The Democratic Party coalition consists of racial and ethnic minorities, civil libertarians, organized labor, and the elderly. The components of the two major party coalitions can
Duverger’s Law is a principle that a plurality election system tends to produce a stable, two party system. An electoral system based on proportional representation creates conditions that allow new parties to develop and smaller parties to exist. The winner-take-all plurality system marginalizes new and smaller political parties by relegating to the status of loser in elections. A small third party cannot gain legislative power if it has to compete and win in a district with a large population in order to gain a seat. Similarly, a minor party with a broad base of support that is geographically spread throughout a state or spread across the nation is unlikely to attract enough votes to actually win an election even though it has substantial public support. For example, the Libertarian Party has supporters throughout
the country, and may attract a substantial number of votes, but the votes are not enough to be the majority in a single district or a single state.

Duverger also believed the SMDP vote rule produces moderation and stability. Take, for example, the following scenario. Two moderate candidates (from two moderate parties) and one radical candidate are competing for a single office in an election where there are 100,000 moderate voters and 80,000 radical voters. If each moderate voter casts a vote for a moderate candidate and each radical voter casts a vote for the radical candidate, the radical candidate would win unless one of the moderate candidates gathered less than 20,000 votes. Consequently, moderate voters seeking to defeat the radical candidate/party would be more likely to vote for the candidate that is most likely to get more votes. The political impact of the SMDP vote rule is that the two moderate parties must either merge or one moderate party must fail as the voters gravitate to the two strong parties.

A third party usually can become successful only if it can exploit the mistakes of one of the existing major parties. For example, the political chaos immediately preceding the Civil War allowed the Republican Party to replace the Whig Party as the more progressive party. Loosely united on a platform of country-wide economic reform and federally funded industrialization, the decentralized Whig leadership failed to take a decisive stance on the slavery issue, effectively splitting the party along the Mason-Dixon Line. Southern rural planters, initially lured by the prospect of federal infrastructure and schools, quickly aligned themselves with the pro-slavery Democrats, while urban laborers and professionals in the northern states, threatened by the sudden shift in political and economic power and losing faith in the failing Whig candidates, flocked to the increasingly vocal anti-slave Republican Party.

In countries that use proportional representation (PR), the electoral rules make it hard to maintain a two-party system. The number of votes that a party receives determines the number of seats it wins, so new parties can develop an immediate electoral niche. Duverger believed that the use of PR would make a two-party system less likely, but other electoral systems do not guarantee new parties access to the system.

11.43 | Multi-party systems

Multi-party systems are systems with more than two parties. The Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook provides a list of the political parties in the
countries of the world. Canada and the United Kingdom have two strong parties and a third party that is electorally successful, may place second in elections, and presents a serious challenge to the other two parties, but has still never formally won enough votes to gain control of government. However, strong third parties can play a pivotal “king making” role if one of the two major parties needs its support in order get the most votes and gain control of government.

Finland is unusual in that it has an active three-party system in which all three parties routinely win elections and hold the top government office. It is very rare for a country to have more than three parties that are equally successful and have the same chance of gaining control of government (that is, “forming” the government or appointing the top government officials such as the prime minister). In political systems where there are numerous parties it is more common that no one party will be able to attract a majority of votes and therefore form a government, so a party will have to work with other parties to try to form a coalition government. Coalition governments, which include members of more than one party, are actually commonplace in countries such as the Republic of Ireland, Germany, and Israel.

In countries with proportional representation, the seats in a country’s parliament or representative assembly would be allocated according to the popular votes the party received. The electoral districts are usually assigned several representatives. For example, assume the following distribution of the popular vote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Percent of the Popular Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian Party</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The seats in the country’s 100-member representative assembly would be allocated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats in the Representative Assembly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian Party</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proportional representation makes it easier for smaller or minor parties to survive because they can win some seats in an election even though they never win enough votes to form a majority and control the government. Consequently, proportional representation tends to promote multi-party systems because elections do not result one winner (the candidate or party that get the most votes) and all the rest of the candidates are losers.
11.5 | U.S. Political Parties

The U.S. has a two-party system. The two major parties are the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. There are, however, minor parties. Two well-established minor parties are the Libertarian Party and the Green Party. The following table includes the largest current largest parties. Each party was on the ballot in enough states to have had a mathematical chance to win a majority of Electoral College votes in the 2008 presidential election. Project Vote Smart provides a useful list of political parties in each of the 50 states.

12.51 | Current Largest Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
<th>Founder(s)</th>
<th>Associated Ideologies</th>
<th>Current Party Chair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Party</td>
<td>1792/1820s</td>
<td>Thomas Jefferson/Andrew Jackson</td>
<td>Liberalism, Progressivism, Social Liberalism</td>
<td>Tim Kaine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>Alvan E. Bovay</td>
<td>Conservatism, Neoconservatism, Economic Conservatism, Social Conservatism</td>
<td>Reince Priebus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian Party</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>David Nolan</td>
<td>Libertarianism</td>
<td>Mark Hinkle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Howie Hawkins John Rensenbrink</td>
<td>Environmental Protection, Liberalism</td>
<td>Theresa El-Amin, Mike Feinstein, Farheen Hakeem, Julie Jacobson, Jason</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11.6 | Political Party Eras

Political scientists have identified distinctive party eras in the U.S. party system. A party era is a time period when the two major parties took different sides on the most important issues that were facing the nation during that time period. The following describes six party eras.

11.61 | The First Era: the 1790s until around 1824

The election of 1796 was the first election where candidates ran as members of a political party. The Federalist Party and the Anti-Federalist Party (or Democratic Republicans) differed on the question of the power of the national government. The Federalists generally supported a strong national government and the Jeffersonian Democratic Republicans supported state government. The election of 1800 produced a number of firsts. It produced “America’s first presidential campaign.” It marked the beginning of the end for the Federalist Party. John Adams and the Federalist Party supported England, a strong national government, industrial development, and aristocracy. Thomas Jefferson and the Republican Party supported France, decentralized state governments, and agrarian society, and egalitarian democracy. Jefferson won the election of 1800 which was the first transition of power from one party to the opposition party and the beginning of a party system. By 1820, the Federalist Party had gone out of existence and James Madison (of the Democratic Republicans) was elected president in what came to be called the “Era of Good Feelings” because it was a period of one party-dominance (therefore there was little party competition).

11.62 | The Second Era: from 1824 until the Civil War

During the second era, Andrew Jackson and the Democrats were the dominant party. The Democrats advocated a populist political system that is often called Jacksonian Democracy. One feature of Jacksonian Democracy is governing based on political patronage. The familiar political slogan, “To the victor go the spoils of office,” describes how the candidate that won an election was entitled to give government jobs (and other benefits) to the people (including the members of his or her
political party) that supported the campaign. This was the era that produced political parties as mass membership organizations rather than political parties as legislative caucuses. The most important national political issues during this era were economic matters, such as tariffs to protect manufacturing and the creation of a national bank to direct economic development, slavery, and the territorial expansion of the republic. In the years 1854 to 1856, the Republican Party emerged to replace the Whig party as the second of the major political parties of the era.

11.63 | The Third Era: from the Civil War to 1896

During this party era, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party were divided on two major issues: Reconstruction of the South and the Industrial Revolution. The Republican Party was a northern party that supported manufacturing, railroads, oil, and banking as part of the broader support for the Industrial Revolution. The Republican Party supported the national government’s Reconstruction of the South after the Civil War. The Democratic Party was based in the South. It opposed the use of federal power, including civil rights laws, to regulate the way that Southern states treated newly freed slaves. In terms of economic policy, the Democratic Party also supported rural or agrarian interests rather than urban and industrial interests.

11.64 | Fourth Era: from 1896 to 1932

The Republican Party was the dominant party during the fourth party era. It was strongly identified with big business, the northeast, and the west. The Democratic Party was largely limited to its base in the southern states of the old Confederacy. The early years of this era, the period from the 1890s until World War I, were the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era was a major reform era in American politics and government. It produced the civil service system, primary elections, nonpartisan elections, and direct democracy mechanisms such as referendum, initiative, and recall. The civil service system was an effort to replace the spoils system of political patronage with a merit selection system of government officials. Primary and nonpartisan elections weakened political parties by giving voters more control over the selection of candidates for office any by having candidates run without party labels. These reforms were intended to get politics out of the “smoke-filled back rooms” where party bosses chose candidates for office. Referendum and initiative were two electoral reforms that expanded direct democracy by allowing the public to vote on laws proposed by state legislatures or to initiate their own laws without having to rely on state legislatures. Finally, Recall was a way for voters to vote government officials out of office.

11.65 | The Fifth Era: from the 1930s until the latter 1960s

During this era the Democratic Party was the dominant party. The era includes the major expansions of the federal social welfare state during the New Deal programs advocated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Society programs advocated by President Lyndon Johnson. During this era, the Democratic Party became identified with the common person, minorities, and labor, while the Republican Party became identified with business and the wealthy. The New Deal issues included the national government’s
response to the Depression and foreign policy matters related to World War II and the Cold War. The Great Society issues focused on the expansion of the social welfare state and civil rights and liberties. Egalitarianism is one of the values associated with New Deal/Great Society liberalism.

11.66 | The Sixth Era: from the latter 1960s—

This era began as a conservative backlash or reaction against the liberalism of the New Deal and Great Society. Republicans opposed liberal Democratic policies that conservatives blamed for an increase in crime, social disorder (race riots, prison riots, and antiwar demonstrations), the loss of the War in Vietnam, loosening of sexual mores, school busing, affirmative action, the separation of church and state, inflation, and going soft on communism. Both of the major parties are coalitions of interests or viewpoints. During this era, the Republican Party was like a four-legged stool supported by following four legs:

- Anti-crime: Advocates of getting tough on crime.
- Anti-communism: Cold Warriors.
- Economic conservatives: advocates of the free market.
- Values voters: the conservatives who support traditional and religious values.

The values voters in the Republican Party focus on social issues. The values and lifestyles conflict between liberals and conservatives was called the culture wars. An important movement in the culture war was Patrick Buchanan’s Address at the 1992 Republican Party Convention. Buchanan, a traditional conservative who lost the Republican Party nomination for president, gave a rousing speech that inspired the social conservative base of the Republican Party with the following declaration and call to action: “There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the cold war itself—for this war is for the soul of America.”

On economic issues, Republicans during this sixth era took two main positions: de-regulation of business and opposition to taxes. On national security matters Republicans were staunch anti-communists who supported getting tough on the Soviet Union. These issues became the basis for the Republican Party’s rise in national politics beginning with President Nixon’s election in 1968. The Republican Party won the presidency five of the six presidential elections between 1968 and 1988. And until the mid-term elections in 2006, Republican President George W. Bush’s party controlled both houses of Congress. Democratic President Obama’s victory in the 2008 presidential election increased speculation that the country was entering a post-party era where party politics was less important than issue politics, but the intense partisan divisions that characterized governance since then have ended such speculation about post-party politics.

Nevertheless, the U.S. party system is dynamic, not static. It is constantly changing. The advanced age of the current party era has raised two related questions. Is the Sixth Party Era about to end? Does the increase in the percentage of the public that consider themselves independents indicate the emergence of a post-party era? The political forces that shape the two major political parties are still at work:
“The modern Democratic Party was shaped by the populism of the 1890s, the antibusiness reformism of the 1930s and the civil rights crusade of the 1960s. The Republican Party was formed by abolitionism in the 1850s, anti-tax revolts in the 1970s and 1980s and the evangelical conservatism of the 1990s and 2000s.” The constituent elements of the two major party coalitions change over time, but the parties typically consist of components or interests that are associated with the different sides of public policy debates or issues. As these coalitions change, they pressure the parties to change to accommodate their interests. This could result in a new dominant party era. However, the increase in the number of Americans who consider themselves Independents, and the ability of candidates to run for office using their own resources rather than the resources traditionally provided by a political party, has renewed speculation about the decline of political parties or even an end to the era of political parties. Is the political party over?

11.67 | PARTIES, CAUSES, AND MOVEMENTS

One of the keys to understanding the continued life of the U.S. two-party system is the relationship between political parties and movements (or causes). A political movement or cause is an organized campaign on behalf of an issue or policy. The American political experience includes many movements: anti-slavery; prohibition; women’s rights; civil rights; anti-war; pro-life; the environment, etc. The Republican and Democratic Parties have causes or movements as part of their political bases. The Tea Party movement is an example of a recent movement within the Republican Party that advocated, among other things, a return to the original understanding of the Constitution.
The Democratic Party has incorporated the business reform movement of the 1930s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s into its base. Government regulation of business and government advocacy of civil rights, particularly of minorities, are causes or movements that are associated with the Democratic Party. The Republican Party has incorporated the anti-communist movement of the 1950s and the religious revivalism of the 1980s and 1990s into its base. Political movements to strengthen national defense and promote Christian activism are causes that are generally at home in the Republican Party. Political movements often change the political parties as their ideas are incorporated into the party.

In fact, the movement-party dynamic explains the continuity and change in the American political system. The continuity is the fact that the two-party system of Republicans and Democrats has remained the same for almost 200 years. The change is the fact that what it means to be a Republican or Democrat changes over time as movements arise to bring new issues to the political system. The dynamic of the relationship between a political party and the causes and political movements that periodically arise from within elements of a political party help explain how political change occurs within a party system that has not changed very much in 200 years in the sense that we have had the same two major parties since the early decades of the 19th Century.

11.7 | Party Affiliation and Political Attitudes

Political party is related to political attitudes. Therefore, the origins of political partisanship (the identification with a political party) have been studied extensively. There is broad agreement that a person’s identification with a political party is caused by upbringing, ethnicity, race, geographic location, and socioeconomic status. A person also identifies with a party because of ideology or positions on important issues. In order to better understand all of these factors, a Gallup Panel survey asked Americans who identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats (or said they leaned to either party if they initially said they were independents) to explain in their own words just what it is about their chosen party that appeals to them most. The following Gallup Polling data describe the appeal of the two major parties.

Democrats justify their allegiance to the GOP most often with reference to the party’s conservatism and conservative positions on moral issues. Beyond that, Republicans mention the party’s conservative economic positions, usually defined as support for smaller government. Finally, a much smaller number of Republicans mentioned a variety of other things that appealed to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative/More conservative</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Social/Moral issue positions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative family/moral values</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Overall platform/philosophy/policies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall platform/philosophy/policies</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Liberal/More liberal</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Democrats’ justifications are somewhat different. Compared to the percentage of Republicans who mention conservatism as their rationale for identifying with the Republican Party, the percentage of Democrats who mention liberalism is relatively small. Democrats are most likely to mention that the Democratic Party appeals to them because it is for the working class, the middle class, or the common man. Democrats also tend to mention issues or party stances in general, and to a lesser extent mention specific issues such as the party’s antiwar, pro-healthcare, and pro-environment stances.

11.8 | Summary

One example of how the U.S. political system did not develop the way the Founders intended is the development of political parties. The Founders worried about political parties as divisive forces. They saw parties literally dividing Americans into “parts” or parties. The two-party system has not changed for almost 200 years, but the two major parties have changed a great deal over time as political movements and third or minor parties arise to address new issues facing the nation. American political culture values individualism. Individualism produces skepticism about political parties, but parties are also considered important linkage institutions that organize public participation in politics. So despite a political culture that values individualism, despite skepticism about political organizations and partisanship, despite the rise of interest groups as alternative sources for campaign support, and despite the fact that around one-third of voters now consider themselves Independents, parties continue to play a central role in the modern system of government and politics. So despite the periodic claims that parties are dying, that American politics is entering a post-partisan era, and books entitled *The Party is Over,* the party is not over. The reports that parties are dead bring to mind Mark Twain’s
famous quip about a newspaper report that he had died: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

**Study Questions**

What are the roles and functions of political parties in America?
Do parties play a worthwhile role in the American political system?
1) How are political parties organized in America? What effect does this have on the political system?
2) Trace the evolution of the political parties from the founding through the New Deal. How and why did the parties change during this period?
3) What role do political parties play in elections?
4) What are the major eras in the history of American political parties?
5) Compare and contrast the platforms, strengths, weaknesses, and strategies of the Republican and Democratic Parties.

**Key Terms**

- political party
- nomination process
- one-party systems
- two-party system
- Duverger’s Law
- Multi-party systems

**Additional Resources**

Gov-Spot offers a list of many Political Parties and platforms for review. [http://www.govspot.com/categories/politicalparties.htm](http://www.govspot.com/categories/politicalparties.htm)

The University of Michigan Library Web site provides links to congressional party leadership and platforms. [www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/polisci.html](http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/polisci.html)

In the Library:


University of Michigan Press.

2 Edward J. Larson. 2007. *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election*