The Function of Political Parties in American Politics

A **political party** is a group of people who try to influence policy agendas and whose ultimate goal is to run the government by getting their favorite candidates elected. Two political parties, the **Democratic Party** and the **Republican Party**, have long dominated American government and politics. These and other parties are typically differentiated by their beliefs, principles, and policy agenda. In other words, they can be distinguished by their **political ideologies**.

Political parties have several functions in local, state, and national politics. One function is to create a rally point or “home” for diverse groups that share similar economic, social, or political concerns. If there is dissention among factions, political party representatives work to find compromise and build coalitions. The more people they can bring together, the more likely it is that their candidates will be elected. One point around which a political party might rally people is the economy. If the economy is good, the incumbent’s party will use it to support re-election; if the economy is bad, the challenger can use that as a point of attack.

Another function of political parties is to simplify the voting process for the electorate. Imagine what would happen if 20 people ran in the same election for President of the United States. The electorate would very likely be overwhelmed by the slew of campaign messages, and many people might decide not to vote out of frustration and information overload. Political parties limit the number of candidates in elections by endorsing, or nominating, the ones they think best fit their ideologies and image, and the ones who have the best chances of winning. These endorsements not only help the electorate understand the candidates’ positions and philosophies, but they also promote party identification.

A third function of political parties is to generate excitement about an election. The parties organize rallies, parades, conventions, and speeches to capture voters’ attention and educate them about candidates’ backgrounds and campaign platforms. Generating excitement is also useful for raising campaign funds. Today, political parties hold fundraisers at which people and organizations donate millions of dollars of “soft money,” which is not limited or regulated by the Federal Election Commission, toward campaigns. These organized activities also show the media where to shine their spotlights, giving candidates wider name recognition and spreading campaign messages to people who do not directly participate in the parties’ activities.

Organizing the government is a fourth function of political parties. Although not set up this way in the U.S. Constitution, both the state and federal legislatures are centered on the parties. The reason is that the majority of officeholders are affiliated with a political party that played a role in their election. Strong party affiliations have led to **partisanship**, which means officeholders base their decisions on the party’s interests.

Partisan politics are also a consideration in the executive and judicial branches of government. For example, when a Supreme Court justice retires, the President will likely appoint a new justice who shares the same party affiliation. Sometimes, however, the President will select one or more opposing party members for the Cabinet as a show of “good faith.”

A fifth function of political parties is accountability—people hold their political parties responsible for making sure officeholders fulfill platform and campaign promises. The electorate judges officeholders’ success by whether the agenda issues have been addressed. Political parties track the success of their own party members in office as well as the failures of officeholders from rival parties. Documenting what the people in office have and have not accomplished gives the parties support for their positions and “ammunition” against opponents in future elections.

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Factors Influencing Party Identification

A person’s loyalty to or preference for one political party is called **party identification**. When people identify with a party, they usually agree with the party’s stance on a few major issues and give little weight to its stance on issues they consider minor or secondary. An individual’s party identification tends to be life long unless there is a major shift in a party’s agenda or problems with its leadership.

Several factors influence party identification, and one of these factors is a person’s race. In the years following the Civil War, the majority of African Americans and Northerners favored the Republican Party. Many African Americans changed their party identification during the 1930s Depression Era, when they began supporting the Democratic Party and its New Deal policies. The 1960s civil rights movement marked another shift in which African Americans increasingly supported Democratic candidates at the polls. In the last half of the twentieth century, African Americans and Mexican Americans have tended to be Democrats. Conversely, other Hispanics such as Cubans have shown strong allegiance to the Republican Party.

A person’s gender also influences his or her party identification, especially in areas concerning abortion, equal pay, the military, and affirmative action. Some women today support the Democratic Party because of its liberal position on such issues. However, men and women who belong to evangelical Christian groups tend to favor the family-values platforms of the Republican Party.

People’s religious beliefs, whether strongly held or not, are another big influence on their party identification. Catholics were once loyal Democrats but have switched their support to the Republican Party. Two issues that contributed to this shift are abortion and birth control—issues on which Republicans usually take a more conservative stance than Democrats. Protestant Christians, especially those who identify themselves as evangelical, also favor the Republican Party for its stance on family values, homosexuality, and abortion. However, the American Jewish community is still strongly Democratic, as they have been for the last half-century.

Education and economics also affect a person’s party identification. Highly educated people usually have higher-paying jobs, and consequently better economic status, than the less educated. Middle-class white-collar workers tend to be Republican, whereas blue-collar, union, and working-class people tend to be Democrats. This economic party alignment is true for all races within these economic classifications. Also, urban populations, which typically tend to have lower income and economic status, identify strongly with the Democrats, while suburban voters typically tend to identify with the Republican Party.

Education can have a liberalizing effect on individuals. This idea, however, should not be construed to mean that all well-educated people are liberals—quite the opposite is true. However, well-educated conservatives tend to be less conservative than they were before they attended college. Colleges usually allow individuals to question assumptions, experiment with new ideas, and experience the world in ways the individual had not prior to going to college, all of which can have liberalizing effects. In this way, college can also make those who are already liberal even more liberal. This effect can be seen among the “intelligentsia” class, which consists of very liberal intellectuals who tend to be Democrats. These intellectuals can be found at higher education institutions such as Berkeley and Wisconsin-Madison, both of which are “hotbeds” for liberal thinking.

Age is another factor that helps determine a person’s party identification. Young people usually identify with the party their parents support. Although important, the age factor is less influential than race, gender, religion, and economics in determining party identification.

Historically, voters who identified with a party voted for that party’s candidates in all of the elections in which they voted. This trend has been changing since the 1960s, however, because people have access to more information during election periods. People who once relied heavily on political parties for information now get it from television, radio programs, and the Internet. This access to information not only makes voters less dependent on political parties but also makes them less likely to vote along party lines in all elections.

Another reason why voters no longer vote strictly along party lines is because they now have greater access to personal information about political candidates. A candidate’s image is important to voters. If a party’s candidate does not meet people’s expectations, they often vote for a different party’s candidate.

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