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THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES



Barack Obama Speaking at the Democratic National Convention

Overview

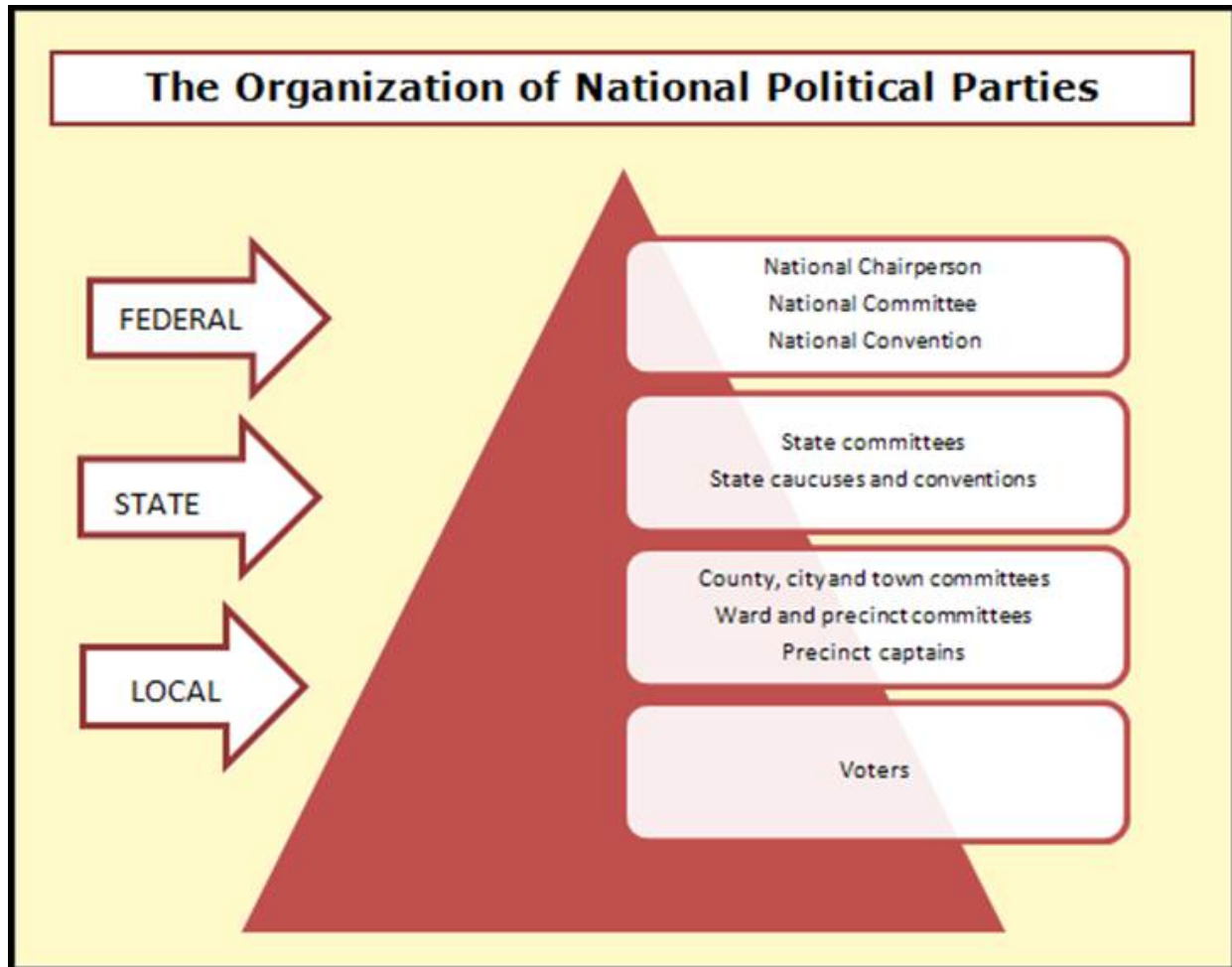
Although George Washington and other illustrious Americans were critical of political parties, it is impossible to imagine the democratic system of the United States without them. Political parties play a major role in the process of government, the determination of policy and the formation of public opinion. Citizens may have very little power as individuals, but they can influence decisions through collective action. By competing in elections and energizing people, political parties expand participation in government and shape the country's future.

Functions of Political Parties

Political parties are groups of citizens who organize to control government by winning elections and by shaping public policies. In other words, they offer ways for Americans to have a say in who serves in government and what issues are addressed. These organizations have become a major link between the citizens and the country's leaders.

Political Parties and Government

One important function of a political party is the recruitment and selection of competent leaders. Candidates are typically nominated and elected to public office through the work of political parties. Following an election, these same groups play a major role in organizing and managing the government. Party leaders set priorities for making new laws and encourage support for the party's positions on specific issues. This happens on every level of government. State legislatures as well as Congress are structured along party lines; mayors, governors and Presidents all appoint individuals from their own party to direct policies.



The party that loses the election, known as the **opposition party**, plays a significant role, too. Their members, while loyal to the national, state or local government, oppose the policies of the party in power. The minority party checks the dominance of the majority party informally by questioning decisions and proposing alternative strategies and methods. This interaction prevents one party from gaining too much influence.

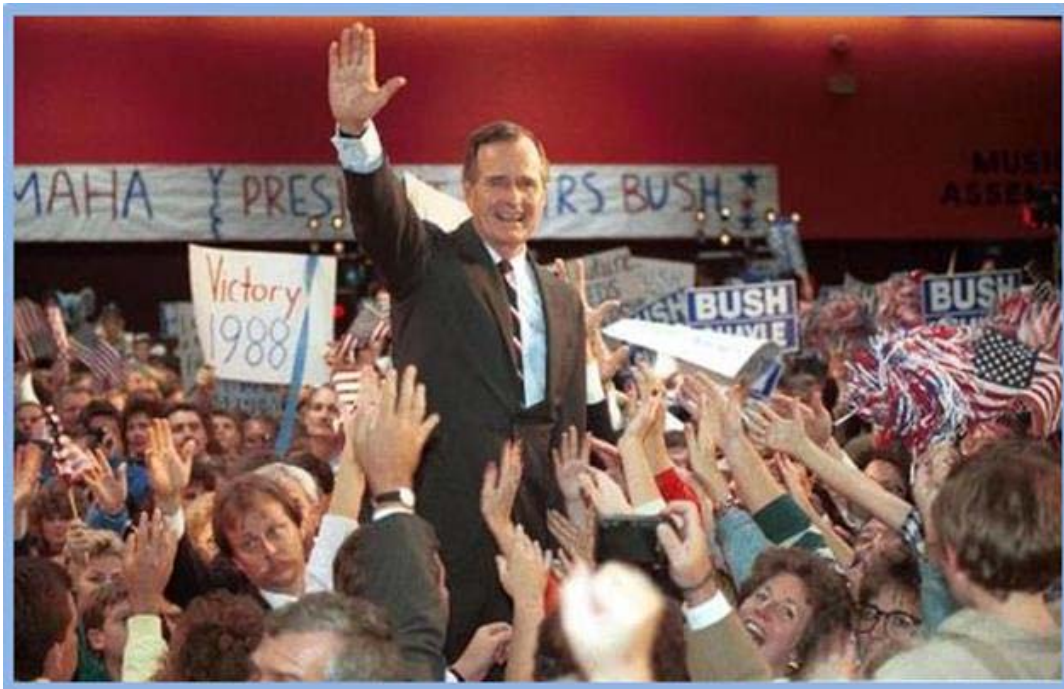
While the media and concerned citizens draw attention to specific problems and issues, it is political parties that transform these concerns into workable plans and practical programs through government action. Parties also help lawmakers with diverse viewpoints to make compromises and to reach consensus. This brings people together and reduces controversy. Political parties sometimes arrange temporary alliances among groups that maintain opposing opinions. This type of agreement is referred to as a **coalition** and is often used to win an election for a particular candidate. The **New Deal Coalition** was formed by the Democratic Party and was first used to support the election and programs of Franklin Roosevelt. It successfully united state party committees, minorities, labor unions and farmers from the 1930s to the 1960s. Even though it often seems that political parties keep the government from moving forward, we have come to rely on them for getting things done.



Go to Questions 1 through 4.

Political Parties and People

Aside from the actual workings of government, political parties serve the general public in a number of ways. They sponsor political debates, campaign rallies, press conferences, websites, newspaper ads and television talk shows. Although it is important to remember that the information presented in these formats is often biased in favor of one party's aims, these organizations do highlight and publicize critical issues. Parties also conduct opinion polls and surveys that reveal the concerns and priorities of U.S. voters.



Republican Rally in Omaha, Nebraska

Along with presenting valuable information to the public, political parties increase participation and interaction within the democratic process. For instance, party workers often conduct voter registration drives and supply services, such as transporting people to the polls. Both Democrats and Republicans sponsor clubs, like the Muleskinners Club (for Democrats) and the Pachyderm Club (for Republicans), to create a greater interest in politics and to promote discussions on significant issues. The use of the Internet by political parties has also opened the lines of communication between citizens and their government. Citizens can now easily interact with party and government representatives through tweets, videos, blogs, online petitions and social media posts.

For some voters, membership in a political party can simplify the decision-making process. Many citizens do not have the time or the patience to investigate the qualifications and the positions of every candidate on the ballot. They do, however, know which party best reflects their attitudes and visions for the future. Therefore, they vote for the candidates and issues favored by their political party. This is one way to deal with the vast amount of information and complex ideas involved in government.



Go to Questions 5 through 7.

The Two-party System

Although multi-party systems are common throughout the world, the United States and other English-speaking countries have remained true to their British roots and have adopted the two-party system. Minor parties have occasionally influenced American politics, but two major parties have been consistently dominant. For the most part, Americans agree on many fundamental values; this cuts down on the need for a larger number of political parties to represent multiple viewpoints. The Constitution itself makes no reference to political parties, but the winner-take-all policy practiced in counting votes in the Electoral College has contributed to the success of the two-party system. Since the election of 1860, the Democrats, symbolized by the donkey, and the Republicans, symbolized by the elephant, have accounted for ninety percent of the popular vote. Over time, American families have perpetuated this system by teaching it as part of their family heritage. Federal and state laws have been passed to ensure its stability, but this has also created legal barriers that make it difficult to establish third parties.



Political Party Symbols

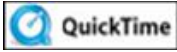


Go to Questions 8 and 9.

The Democratic Party v the Republican Party

What makes a Republican a Republican? What makes a Democrat a Democrat? There are no simple answers to these questions. This is true because, although the major parties have real differences, they also have several similarities. Anyone can become a member of either of these parties by simply saying that they wish to do so. Unlike other organizations, there are no membership fees or specific requirements. Therefore, both parties serve a broad base of people from every economic level and geographic area. This also has encouraged the major political parties to encompass individuals from both the conservative and liberal ends of the political spectrum within the same party. In other words, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party try to remain “middle-of-the-road” but still attempt to

appeal to constituents outside of the mainstream. Both parties maintain a national headquarters and choose a national committee that has the responsibility for planning the presidential nominating convention every four years. Along with raising funds for the campaign, the national committee oversees the party **platform**. This document lists the specific goals which the party hopes to accomplish through the election of their candidate. The two major parties also have committees in each of the fifty states. Because these organizations are controlled by state law, their structures vary. They work with local party committees to raise money, to register voters and to recruit party candidates.



The Importance of Political Conventions (03:18)

In spite of their similarities, there are clear differences between Republicans and Democrats. Most of their disagreements question the appropriate amount of government intervention. To solve problems effectively over the long term, Republicans generally favor less government action and greater reliance on the private sector. Democrats, on the other hand, tend to rely more on government action and less on the response of the private sector. Several other differences are noted on the chart below. Keep in mind that these are only generalizations and are not true for every Republican and every Democrat.

Differences Between U.S. Political Parties		
Issue	Democrats	Republicans
The Economy	Stimulate the economy by increasing government spending. Biggest economic threat—unemployment.	Stimulate the economy with less government spending and lower taxes. Biggest economic threat—inflation.
Energy	Regulate resources and increase government spending on alternative sources of energy.	Rely on supply and demand to control prices and to fund research for alternative sources.
Business	Increase corporate taxes and regulations on business.	Decrease corporate taxes and regulations on business
Labor	Increase the minimum wage and benefits to workers.	Avoid hikes in the minimum wage because they are harmful to business.
Social Programs	Launch new social programs to help those who are unable to help themselves.	Use incentives to move people away from government support.
Education	Increase federal aid for education.	Rely more on state and local governments to fund education.



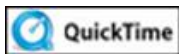
Go to Questions 10 through 13.

Third Parties

Although their success has been limited due to legal barriers and a lack of financial support, **third parties**, also known as minor parties, do play a significant role in the American political process. Sometimes they offer new ideas and suggest changes that are eventually incorporated into major party platforms. Occasionally, a third party makes such a strong showing that it impacts a presidential election by acting as a “spoiler”. For example, Theodore Roosevelt ran as a candidate for the Bull Moose Party, which broke away from the Republican Party in 1912. Because Roosevelt received 27.4% of the vote, William Howard Taft, the Republican candidate, lost the election to the Democratic nominee, Woodrow Wilson. Most third parties fit into one of three major categories: single-issue parties, ideological parties and splinter parties.

- **Single-Issue parties:** Most third parties throughout United States history have been formed to support social, economic or moral changes. For example, the Liberty Party, popular in the era before the Civil War, promoted the anti-slavery cause. Once the specific issue has been resolved, these parties frequently disappear. One exception is the Prohibition Party, which continues to oppose the use and sale of alcoholic beverages. This organization still runs presidential candidates even though Prohibition has been repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment.
- **Ideological parties:** Parties based on a particular ideology seek to change the underlying principles on which our government is based. They advocate long-range plans for the future and often represent political philosophies that outside the mainstream. The Communist Party, which encourages the overthrow of capitalism, and the Libertarian Party, which demands less government intervention in the lives of private citizens, are examples.
- **Splinter parties:** When serious disagreements erupt within a major party, a group may break away and form a splinter party. Such an organization is often centered on a popular candidate that does not win the support of the Democrats or the Republicans. Dissatisfied Republicans left the party in 1912 and formed the Bull Moose Party, which focused on Theodore Roosevelt. In 1968, the American Independent Party, made up of Democrats who opposed their party’s civil rights platform, rallied around George Wallace and supported his bid for the presidency.

Examples of Active Third Parties	
Third Parties	Major Concerns
Green Party	The Green Party supports environmental controls, social justice and non-violence.
Libertarian Party	The Libertarians favor freedom from government intervention. They call for free trade, no involvement in foreign affairs and the end of federally funded programs.
Reform Party	The Reform Party campaigns for a balanced federal budget, a new tax system and trade policies that protect American workers.
U.S. Pacifist Party	The Pacifist Party opposes all aspects of the military and views war as the cause of poverty, the arms race and political oppression.
Constitution Party	The Constitution Party favors a government based on the strict interpretation of the Constitution and limited federal interference.



Third Party Influence (03:13)



Go to Questions 14 through 17.

The Future of Political Parties

Although political parties have become an integral part of democracy as it is practiced in the United States, popular support for both Democrats and Republicans has declined in recent decades. Traditional party loyalty is disappearing, and this has caused voters to cast **split tickets** rather than **straight tickets**. With a straight ticket, voters select all the candidates from one party. With a split ticket, they choose a combination of Democrats, Republicans and third party candidates. There has also been an increase in the number of voters who are registered as **independents**. This refers to people that have not registered as members of any particular political party. This group consisted of 20% of the American electorate in the 1940s, but 30% of voters currently fall into this category.

This shift is the result of several factors. For many years, government workers, especially on the local level, were hired and fired when an administration representing a different political party took office. This practice, known as **patronage**, has been increasingly replaced by civil service examinations and laws prohibiting termination of employment based on party affiliation. The methods of choosing candidates and the funding of campaigns have also affected party membership. Many states use direct primaries based on popular vote to nominate candidates for public office. At one time, candidates relied on the organizational skills of political parties to conduct campaigns. Today, many candidates hire their own public relations directors and media specialists. Financial contributions come from special interest groups

and Political Action Committees so office seekers are less dependent on the fund-raising techniques supplied by political parties.



Weaknesses of Political Parties (02:59)

Does this mean that parties will disappear from the political scene? It is unlikely. Parties are firmly entrenched in the American political culture and continue to offer a means for the average citizen to have a say in government. The organization of the federal government, especially Congress, has come to depend on the concept of a majority party and a minority party. The performance of Democrats and Republicans in national elections determines House and Senate majority leaders, minority leaders and committee chairpersons. Although Americans hold conflicting views about its productivity, the two-party system in the United States seems to be here to stay.



Go to Questions 18 through 20.

What's Next?

Political parties provide opportunities for citizens to influence elections and public policy, but they are not the only ways to impact policy decisions. Interest groups also unite people who hold similar views on important public issues. In the next unit, you will look at what they do and how they differ from political parties. Before moving on, review Unit 12, and complete Questions 21 through 30.



Go to Questions 21 through 30.



Below are additional educational resources and activities for this unit.

[Unit 12 Advance Organizer](#)

[Unit 12 Application Activity](#)

