

Main Idea

Political parties are formal organizations that work to elect candidates to public office. Our political system is dominated by two major parties, but other parties are actively involved in the system.

Reading Focus

1. What are political parties, and what role do they play in the political process?
2. How does the American two-party political system work?
3. How are political parties organized?
4. Do political parties serve the public good?

Key Terms

political party
 political spectrum
 nomination process
 electorate
 one-party system
 two-party system
 multiparty system
 third party
 independent candidate
 precinct
 ward

The Role of Political Parties (p. 261)

Political parties nominate, elect, and monitor our representatives. A **political party** is an organization that tries to elect its members to public office so that its views can become public policy.

Party Ideology Each political party has a basic set of ideas, theories, and aims about society and government that its members and supporters share. When these are united into a social and political program, that program is the party's ideology. This ideology is what sets one party apart from others. It also determines the party's place on the **political spectrum**, or the continuum of general political beliefs. *Continuum* means the continuous sequence of values or elements that vary only by small degrees.

On the political spectrum, the Democratic Party is considered liberal, and the Republican Party is considered conservative. Liberals generally support government action to change social, political, or economic policies believed to be unfair. Conservatives generally support limited government, lower taxes, and traditional social values.

Parties' Three Main Roles Parties play three main roles in the political system. These are nominating candidates for office, assisting the electoral process, and helping to operate the government.

The **nomination process**, or naming candidates for elective office, is a party's main function. Candidates must generally support the party's views. Parties bring money, campaign workers, and other support to candidates.

Parties aid the electoral process by educating people about their position on the major issues. They provide a “brand name” that indicates what the candidates’ views generally are. They help the **electorate**—the body of people entitled to vote—register to vote, learn about the issues and the party’s position on them, and find out where to vote. They also watch how officeholders perform to ensure that officials are doing their jobs well. Finally, they help run the government. For example, in each house of Congress, one party usually is in the majority and controls that house.

Reading Check Summarizing What are the functions of political parties in elections and government at the state and local levels?

The American Two-Party System (pp. 261–264)

The role that political parties play in a nation’s political system or government depends on the type of party system the country has. Generally, the more parties there are, the smaller the role and influence of any one party.

Party Systems There are three basic types of party systems. A **one-party system** is one in which a single political party controls government. In a **two-party system**, two major parties compete to control government. In a **multiparty system**, several parties compete for control. Generally, in a multiparty system, when no party has a consistent majority, unstable government can result.

American Political Parties The first American political parties were created soon after the Constitution was ratified. They

were the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party. After 1824 the Democratic-Republican Party split into two groups. The two groups became today’s two major U.S. political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans.

These two parties have controlled American politics for more than 150 years. Even so, in some elections voters have supported third-party and independent candidates. A **third party** is any political party in a two-party system besides the two major ones. An **independent candidate** is a candidate who is not associated with any political party.

Reading Check Identifying Supporting Details What are the three types of party systems?

Party Organization (p. 264)

Parties are organized at all levels. Each level contributes to the success of the party.

Local Parties The most common local party organization is the county party, which is usually run by a committee with a chairperson. The county committee is usually selected by party members from precincts in the county. A **precinct** is the smallest unit for administering, or running, elections and local voting. Some cities have voting units, usually for city council elections, called wards. A **ward** is a voting district made up of several precincts.

State Parties Each state party is run by a central committee made up of representatives from the party’s county committees. Party leaders and members in each state support and try to elect local, state, and national candidates from their party.

National Parties The national party of each major party is headed by a national committee of members from its state parties. A national chairperson leads a large paid staff and manages the party's operations. National parties have committees for fund-raising and campaigning. They also sponsor other organizations to attract voters at the state and local level.

Reading Check Summarizing What are the three levels of political parties?

Political Parties and the Public Good (pp. 264–265)

Political parties have benefited the American system in many ways. At the same time, they are often criticized.

Benefits of Political Parties Some political scientists believe that the two-party system is good because both parties filter out extreme or unconventional ideas. Because each wants to win a majority in government, they must appeal to more voters. Parties try to accommodate the many views of their constituents and therefore must include many opinions. The result may be an increase in political and social stability.

Because parties represent a variety of viewpoints, their supporters will not

abandon them over one issue with which they disagree. Party loyalty encourages political stability.

Finally, parties provide a “brand name.” Voters might choose a party's candidate simply because overall, they support the party's views.

Criticisms of Political Parties Some critics argue that by trying to appeal to as many types of voters as possible, the major parties lack unity, discipline, and loyalty. As a result, they may not be able to fulfill the campaign promises they make. Others say that parties and officeholders take money from interest groups and thus act in ways that benefit narrow interests.

Critics also say that parties are full of office seekers who are more interested in their own personal success than in serving the public good. Some candidates will even reverse their own opinions on an issue to get elected. This reversal of position is called a flip-flop.

Finally, some people are angered by the fighting between the parties. They say that parties are more interested in winning public opinion and votes than in solving the issues the nation faces.

Reading Check Summarizing How is a party's broad based support both good and harmful to a society?

SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

1. **Identify** What is a **political party**?

2. **Recall** What were the earliest political parties?

3. **Summarize** What is the main purpose of a political party at all levels of its organization?

4. **Recall** What are some criticisms of political parties?