

American Federal Government

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11. Parties and Ideology 1: The Two Party System and Ideological Representation

Chapter Roadmap

Most, but not all, democracies have a multi-party system in which more than two, and usually more than three, parties normally hold seats in the legislature. But the U.S. in its typical unusual fashion has a two-party system in which it is rare that any party other than Democrats or Republicans hold seats in Congress (in fact independents are more common in the U.S. Congress than third-party representatives). In this chapter we will see what causes different types of party systems, and the effects that has on the representation of different ideological perspectives in the government.

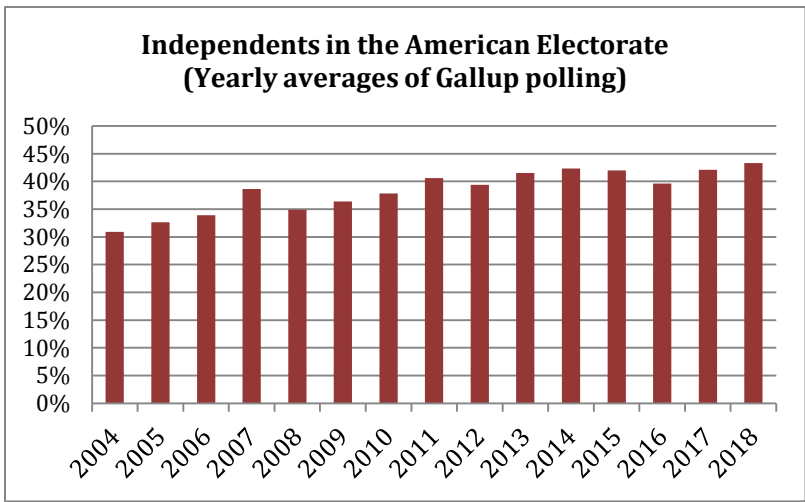
11. 1 Why Have Political Parties?

“Political parties created democracy . . . modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties’ (Schattschneider, 1942: 1).¹

American political scientists generally agree with the preceding quote by the late E. E. Schattschneider. It may not be strictly true, but it is close enough. Dutch political scientist Wouter Veenendaal showed that some very small democracies, such as the Pacific islands state of Palau, with fewer than 25,000 people, manage without political parties. And many U.S. cities have non-partisan elections, meaning that party names do not appear on the ballot and candidates normally do not name their party identification in their campaigning (although it may become obvious by

the positions they take). But there are no examples of large-scale democracies that do not have political parties.

This helps explain why political scientists love parties, even as American citizens come to despise them. Political scientists overwhelmingly prefer democracy to authoritarianism, and they see parties as indispensable elements of democracy. But Americans are increasingly falling out of love with political parties and declining to tell pollsters that they identify or align with any party, a process called dealignment. Between 1952 and 1964 about 75% of Americans identified with a party, but between 1964 and 1976 that number fell to 64%, indicating that 38% of Americans did not identify with a party.² While that number rises and falls over time, support for parties has not returned to its level of the 1950s. Throughout the 2000s the number of Americans declining to identify with a party when polled was generally in the mid to high 30s, and even into the low to mid 40s.³



However this concept of dealignment is somewhat superficial. Most of these so-called independent voters are actually “unrealized partisans:”⁴ reliable voters for one party or the other. They generally appear not to dislike political parties equally, but to be merely dissatisfied with one of the major parties while absolutely loathing the other.

Dealignment is not limited to the U.S., though, but is a “near-universal experience in Western democracies.”⁵ The U.S. is about

average in its decline in party identification, and some other western democracies show not only a decline in party identification but also a decline in trust of parties generally. In Sweden belief that parties were interested in more than just getting votes fell from 68% to 23% in the 1990s, confidence that parties amplified the voices of the people fell from 70% to 21%, and German confidence in political parties fell by almost half.⁶ Some political scientists now argue that the western world is in a process of democratic deconsolidation which may be “the beginning of the end for liberal democracy,”⁷ even, possibly, in the U.S.⁸

So what is it that parties do that makes political scientists like them? In a nutshell parties organize, and ideally moderate, the processes of government by serving as a mediator between the public and the institutions of government.

1. *Voter Mobilization*: On a very practical – strategic – level, parties help mobilize voters for the purposes of winning elections. They sponsor voter registration drives, contact voters to remind them of upcoming elections, and even offer to drive them to the polls if they can’t get there on their own. In addition they provide financial and logistical support to candidates running under their label.
2. *Legislative Coalition Formation*: In legislatures parties are the foundation for legislative coalitions that make effective legislating possible. Rather than having to try to build a legislative coalition from scratch for every issue, legislators sponsoring a bill begin with a structured group of likely – although not certain – supporters.
3. *Public Accountability*: These normally stable coalitions also enable the public to hold the legislature accountable for their actions. If the majority party in the legislature passes unpopular legislation, or becomes corrupt, ideally the voters can respond by voting against the party (in proportional representation systems), or in a district-based system like the U.S. has, against their own representative from that party, even perhaps if the representative did not support their party’s unpopular action, depriving that party of its legislative majority.

4. *Disciplining Candidates:* Parties can keep candidates within the bounds of democratic legitimacy by refusing to support ones they think will tarnish their party's brand. A prime example is the Republican Party's response to former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke running for office under their label. In 1991 Duke came in second in the primary election for U.S. Senator from Louisiana, but lost in the run-off after being openly rejected by state and national Republican Party. In 2016 he again ran for the Senate, but the Louisiana Republican Party announced that they would oppose his campaign, and he gained only a handful of votes. The Democratic Party played a similar role against Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders when he sought the Democratic nomination for President in 2016. An avowed socialist, Sanders held office as an independent, and while he caucused in Congress with the Democrats in order to get committee assignments, he never joined the party (apparently not even when he was running for their nomination!). Democratic Party leaders saw him as an outsider trying to co-opt their party for his purposes, and worked against him to secure the nomination for long-time party adherent Hillary Clinton. The most crucial aspect of this role is parties potential to prevent the election of demagogues – tyrants in waiting who appeal to the public through the democratic system but without respect for or a commitment to the maintenance of democracy. In this role they serve as democracy's gatekeepers, serving as filters to keep out the worst.
5. *Disciplining Elected Officials:* Parties can also discipline elected officials. In a party-list system, where the party controls which of its members get seats in the legislature, party leadership can demote a member on its list, diminishing their status and their chance of holding a legislative seat. American political parties have less power to discipline their members, but party leaders in Congress can take away good committee assignments, decline to help a member achieve their legislative goals, or deny them support in their bid for re-election. They can even expel Representatives and Senators from Congress, although this is a rare action, having occurred only twenty times.

6. *Two-way Communication*: Parties, along with a free press, are a major conduit for communication between government and citizens. Parties “make proposals and recommendations or accept them to broadcast to the public and call to the attention of government.”⁹

We can use these roles of the party to make sense of political scientists’ belief in parties with the public’s growing dissatisfaction with them. While political scientists are focusing on the ideal political party, in terms of its critical role in supporting democracy, the public may conceive of parties as they perceive them now, non-ideal and failing in their roles, particularly – as many see it – in their failure to listen to and be responsive to the public. If the public’s perception is accurate – and political scientists may be inclined to agree with them – their dissatisfaction with parties portends future challenges in maintaining democracy in the U.S. Ironically, the public will also play a role in those challenges by withdrawing support from parties rather than strengthening them in those roles and opting for voting for charismatic candidates who promise that only they can solve the problems Americans see.

The dangers are not just apparent, but in the view of some concerned observers, already present. The surprise victory in 2008 of the inexperienced Barack Obama – first over party-leadership – favored Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic Party presidential nomination and then over long-time Republican Senator John McCain – with his charismatic political slogan suggesting that he was the source of “hope and change” looks uncomfortably like this kind of demagogic turn. And late in his presidency, unable to gain support from the Republican majority in Congress and contemptuous of the voters who had replaced the Democratic majority with a Republican one, he resorted to attempting to make policy unilaterally, disregarding the constitutional design of the American Government. If Obama was *demagogish*, his successor Donald Trump is fully demagogic. His victory over, and co-optation of, the Republican Party in 2016 was driven by populist demagogic appeals, as he made the explicit claim that only he was capable of solving America’s problems. His open disdain for democratic processes and institutions is part of his political method, from his early claims that the election was going to be rigged by his opponents, to his

persistent attack on the First Amendment freedom of the press, to his efforts to undermine the legitimacy of a legal investigation that he feared could undermine his position. Stronger political parties may have been better able to manage their nomination processes and select more manageable presidential nominees, as they did through most of the 19th century and deep into the 20th century, but the American public appears to no longer want stronger parties. And the parties are ultimately the cause of the public's dissatisfaction, having failed to fulfill their roles in ways that earn and maintain the public's trust.

11.2 Why Two Parties and Not More?

Some countries, like the U.S. have a two – party system. There may be multiple “third parties,” but they rarely have any influence, and may only rarely win any elections. In the U.S., for example, at the state and national level a candidate is more likely to win election as an independent – not affiliated with any party – than as a representative of a third party. Other countries have multiple political parties represented in their parliament, from 3 (often called a 2 party-plus system) to 6 or more, as in Italy. The reason for this is not that some countries are necessarily less ideologically diverse, but is a consequence of different electoral systems. French political theorist Maurice Duverger (1917-2014) argued that proportional representation (PR) systems tend to produce multi-party systems, while electoral systems based on single-majority districts and plurality voting tend to produce two-party systems. This is now called *Duverger's Law* (although it is really only a tendency, not a true social scientific law). In this section we'll look first at the PR system, and then look at the single-majority system in the United States.

Proportional Representation

To look at the PR system, let's assume a hypothetical country that we'll call the Republic of Hypothetica. While there is a marvelous variety in electoral systems, we'll keep Hypothetica simple, a pure proportional representation system without any odd variations. In Hypothetica, the whole country is one electoral district, and instead of voting for individual candidates, people vote for the party they prefer, with parties needing to earn at least 5% of the vote to get any seats in the parliament (called a threshold requirement). The number of seats a party gets is

determined by the percentage of votes it gets, and then the party leadership determines who gets to be its representatives in the legislature, based on a party list – an ordering of potential legislative members from 1 (the party leader) to n (the lowest person on the list).

In the last national elections in Hypothetica, the results were:

Party	Vote Share
Conservative Party	34%
Liberal Party	28%
Christian Democrats	16%
Social Democrats	14%
Green Party	6%
Labor Party	1.5%
Nationalist Party	.5%

Since the threshold was 5% of the vote, the Labor Party and Nationalist Parties do not get any seats in the legislature, while the Green Party just makes it. Assume you're a member of the Conservative Party, which got the largest share of the vote, and let's say that 34% earns them 72 seats in a 200 seat legislature. The party assigns those seats to the top 72 members on its party list. Where are you on the list? If you're in the top 72, you get a seat, but if you're number 73 or lower, you're out of luck and just have to hope the party does better next time, or work to gain more favor with the party leadership to improve your ranking (or hope someone more highly ranked dies, retires, or leaves for any other reason).

But who controls the legislature, since no party won a majority? As the largest party, it is up to the Conservatives to forge a coalition with one or more other parties to create a majority. In Hypothetica, the Liberals and Conservatives are very far apart from each other, but the Conservatives can accept the Christian Democrats as coalition partners, and together they have a majority of votes and a majority of seats.

But to return to the main issue, *why* does the PR system promote multiple parties? Because the parties that come in second and third, and in our example even fourth and fifth, in the election still win seats in the legislature – they aren't the big winners, but they also aren't complete losers. And because no party won an outright majority, our third-place party actually got to be part of the governing coalition, having real

influence despite being also-rans. The threshold is an important factor in determining how many parties are likely to gain seats, with lower thresholds giving more parties a chance to win some. In the Dutch House of Representatives, the election threshold is less than 1% of the vote, and in 2012 eleven parties won seats. Each of those parties' share of the votes and the number of seats they won is shown in the table below.

2012 Dutch General Election Results		
Party	Vote Share	Seats
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	26.6%	41
Labour	24.8%	38
Party for Freedom	10.1%	15
Socialist Party	9.7%	15
Christian Democratic Appeal	8.5%	13
Democrats 66	8.0%	12
Christian Union	3.1%	5
Green Left	2.3%	4
Reformed Political Party	2.1%	3
Party for the Animals	1.9%	2
50+	1.9%	2

Single-Member Plurality Elections

The United States and some other democracies use a single-member district plurality electoral system. In plain English, this means the country is divided up into districts, each district gets one representative, and the representative is the person who won a plurality – getting more votes than any other candidate, even if less than a majority – in the election. Obviously U.S. Representatives are elected from districts, and in the case of states having only one Representative, the whole state is the district. Likewise for U.S. Senators and state governors their whole state is their district. And in each of those elections, the winner of the plurality of the vote wins the office.

<p>Plurality Election: Top vote-getter wins, even if they get less than a majority of the vote.</p>
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Plurality winners are common in single-member district elections. For example, 47 governors of U.S. states have won with less than 50% of the vote just in the years 2000-2014. Four governors during that time have won with less than 40% of the vote.¹⁰ In 2010, Independent Lincoln Chaffee won the governorship of Rhode Island with only 36% of the

vote, while his Republican and Democratic challengers had 33.6% and 23%.¹¹

The need for only a plurality to win might suggest that a third party could be successful, but it happens only under special circumstances, and not in the United States. The presence of a legislative seat-winning third party is called a two-party-plus system. In Canada, for example, Quebec has the Quebecois Party representing the province's unique culture within Canada. The United Kingdom is another example, where a third party has successfully won enough parliamentary seats to often prevent the two larger parties from gaining a majority, but the UK does not have a presidency like the U.S., which has a single-member district encompassing the whole country and pushing the whole country towards a two-party system. In the U.S. third parties have come and gone, but except for the Republican Party replacing the Whig Party in the 1860s, no third party has gained significant national strength. This is demonstrated by the 47 gubernatorial elections between 2000 and 2016 that had plurality winners. All but two of those elections were won by the major party candidate, and those other two winners both ran as independents, non-party affiliated, rather than as third parties.

The basic difficulty for third-parties in a plurality system is the difficulty of sustaining a supporter base when you never win. As we saw above, in a proportional representation system even the fourth or fifth place parties may win some seats in the legislature. But third place in a single-member district gets nothing. Second place at least wins hope that next time you might win (especially since most states have a history of each party winning some elections), but third place doesn't even provide hope. And while no individual's vote is likely to make any difference, people often feel as though they're wasting their vote if they don't vote for someone with a chance to win.

There are many small parties in the United States despite not having electoral success, because the country is diverse enough that there are always some people dissatisfied with the two major parties. See the table below for a list of some of the third parties in the U.S. Most of these exist in just one or a few states, because all parties – even the Democrats and Republicans – are organized and registered at the state level, and some states make it more difficult to get a party on the ballot than other states do. Of course it is the parties that are in control of the

state legislatures – again, the Democrats and Republicans – who write the rules for becoming a recognized political party in the state and what it takes to get your candidates on the ballot, and if they have one value in common it's the preservation of their duopoly. So in many states the two major parties have collaborated to write rules that discourage the chances of third-party success.

The largest third parties in the U.S. are the Libertarian Party and the Green Party. Both regularly get less than 2% of the presidential vote, have no party members in Congress, no governorships, and few seats in state legislatures. In 2017 the Libertarians had 1 state senator out of 1,972, and 3 lower house seats out of 5411; the Green Party had 0 state senators and 2 lower house seats. Third party members are most likely to win local elections on city councils, where the electorates are smaller and voters are more likely to have a sense of the candidate as a person rather than a party label. There are likely more representatives named Green than there are Green Party representatives.

Third parties are so ineffective in the U.S. that dealignment has not led to people choosing third parties over the Republicans and Democrats, but just opting to dealign and identify with no party, as discussed above. That is the power of the single-member plurality district electoral system.

An Incomplete List of Third Parties in the United States

Most of these parties do not have ballot status for their presidential candidate in enough states to have even a theoretical chance to win.

Because parties are organized on a state-by-state basis and becoming an official party is easier in some states than others, some presidential candidates were endorsed by different parties in different states.

Alaskan Independence Party	Conservative Party	Labor Party	Republican Moderate Party
Alaska Libertarian Party	Conservative Party of New York State	Liberal Party (New York)	Revolutionary Communist Party
American Constitution Party	Constitution Party	Libertarian Party	Socialist Action Party
American Independent Party	Constitutional Party	Liberty Union Party	Socialist Alternative Party
America First Party	Constitution Action Party	Light Party	Socialist Equality Party
American Heritage Party	D.C. Statehood Green Party	Marijuana Party	Socialist Labor Party
American Independent Party	Democratic-Farmer Labor Party	Mountain Party	Socialist Party
American Nazi Party	Democratic-Nonpartisan League	Natural Law Party	Socialist Party USA
American Party	Florida Socialist Workers Party	Nebraska Party	Socialist Workers Party
American Reform Party	Freedom Socialist Party	New Party	Southern Party
American Patriot Party	Grassroots Party	New Union Party	The Better Life Party
Christian Falangist Party of America	Green Party USA (The Greens)	New York State Right to Life Party	United Citizens Party
Christian Freedom Party	Green Independent Party	Pacific Green Party	U.S. Pacifist Party
Communist Party USA	Green-Rainbow Party	Peace and Freedom Party	U.S. Taxpayers Party
Concerned Citizens Party	Independence Party	Peace and Justice Party	We the People Party
Concerns of the People Party	Independent American Party	Personal Choice Party	Workers World Party
	Iowa Green Party	Populist Party	Working Families Party
		Progressive Party	Workers Party, USA
		Prohibition Party	
		Protect Working Families Party	
		Reform Party	

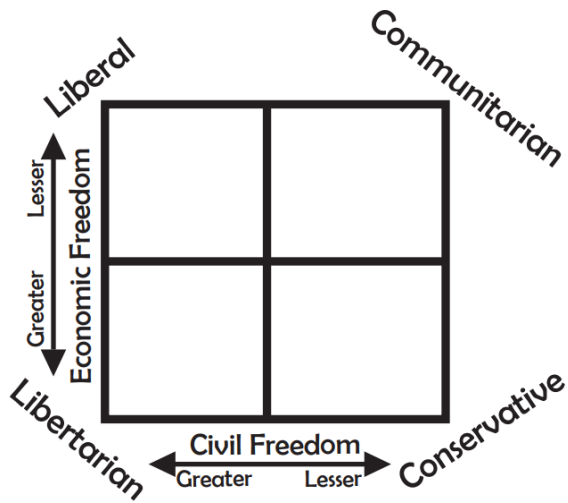
11.3 Party Systems and Ideological Representation

There are several different types of parties, each of which is an organizational response to their country's electoral and social structure. Parties that incorporate a variety of ideological, ethnic, religious, or socio-economic classes under a single party label are called *catch-all* parties (also umbrella or big-tent parties). They try to attract a broad base of support for the purpose of winning as many legislative seats as possible. While they have a broad based of supporters, the support may often be tepid, because supporters see the party as not wholly committed to their particular interests, but also concerning itself with the concerns of people who have a different, perhaps partially overlapping, set of interests. The Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S. traditionally have been catch-all parties, although they are becoming somewhat less so. Until the 1990s or 2000s there were conservative Democrats as well as liberal ones, and liberal Republicans as well as conservative ones. The Republicans, in fact, used to call themselves the Big Tent. As we'll see in the next chapter, this is less true now than in the past, as the parties have become more polarized. But in a two-party system in a politically diverse country, neither party can help but still be something of a catch-all party.

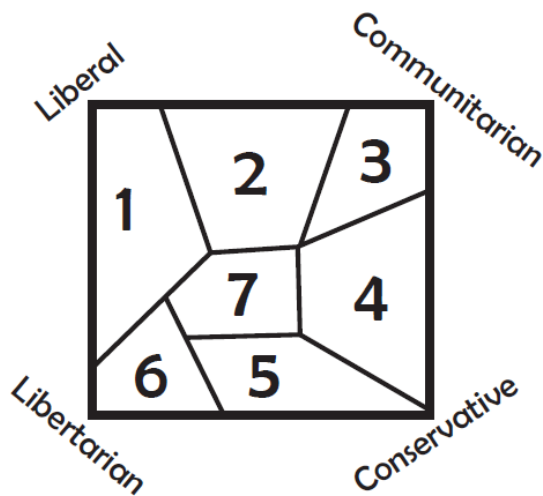
More narrowly focused parties are called *particularistic* parties, and often draw much more committed support because they are more strongly committed to a single set of interests. Particularistic parties come in two types, clientelistic and ideological. Clientelistic parties focus on a particular social group, which is the client the party represents politically. This could be a religious group, such as a European political party that represents Catholics, an ethnic group in a multi-ethnic country, or a party focused on the interests of labor. Ideological parties focus on a narrow political ideology, such as the Libertarians' focus on free markets and limited government, the Green Party's focus on eco-feminism, the Marijuana Party's focus on legalization of drugs, or the U.S. Taxpayer's focus on lower taxes. While the narrow focus helps ensure a dedicated group of supporters, it also limits the size of that party's appeal. Speaking broadly, parties can either have large numbers of supporters who are only lightly committed or it can have fewer but more dedicated supporters.

The diagrams below demonstrate the way two-party and multi-party systems divide up the electorate ideologically. If we map ideology on

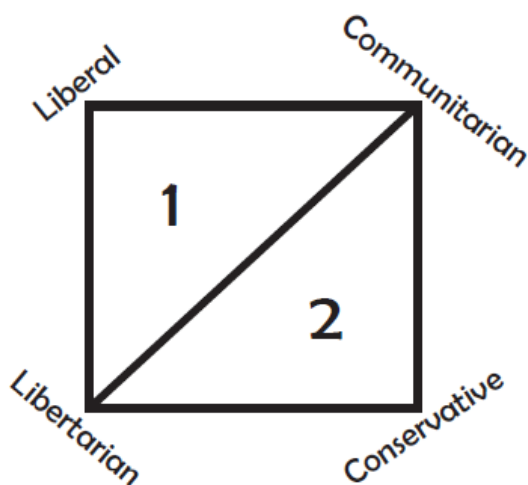
two dimensions, civil liberties and economic liberties, we get a basic map that looks like this.



Political parties do not map perfectly onto these dimensions, and different party systems will map onto them differently. But the following diagram shows one possible division of ideological space where seven parties are competing for the public's support. In this model people have a good chance of having a party whose core ideological positioning is close to their ideological perspective.



In contrast, a two party system would divide the ideological space more roughly, slicing it in two, and leaving some people far away from the party's core ideological position, as seen in the next diagram. In the U.S., party 1 would be the Democrats, who would be trying to incorporate both moderates and what in the U.S. is called the far left, while the Republicans, party 2 in this diagram, would be trying to incorporate moderates and the far right. Much of the internal dynamics of both parties is driven by the effort of groups occupying different ideological space to control the ideological message and choices of their party.



11.4 The Ideology of American Political Parties

Describing the ideological positions of American political parties is like taking a photograph: it captures a moment *in* time while the parties continue to change *over* time. Some ideological positions have a long-lasting connection to a particular party, but as public perceptions of issues change, and various people within parties fight for ideological control and persuade others to their way of thinking, parties continuously evolve.

The Democratic Evolution from South to North

One example of the fight for ideological control over a party is the Democratic Party's shift from a segregationist southern-based party to a

civil-rights oriented northern and western-based party. The Democrats trace their party history back to Thomas Jefferson's fight against John Adams in the 1796 and 1800 presidential elections, with Adams winning the first and Jefferson the second. In 1796 no political parties existed, and the Founders didn't want them. The Constitution provided no role for political parties, so since their creation they have functioned in an extra-constitutional role as elements of the American political system. In the Constitutional Convention Ben Franklin spoke critically of "the infinite mutual abuse of parties" he observed in Britain, in Federalist number 10, James Madison warned of "factions," which he defined as groups whose interests were "adverse to the rights of others citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community," while later George Washington, in his farewell address when leaving the presidency, warned his fellow Americans against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party." Even Jefferson, in a 1789 letter to fellow founder Francis Hopkinson, said "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." But apparently he valued the presidency even more highly than heaven, because in his pursuit of it he organized supporters into what became the Democratic-Republican Party, which eventually evolved into the Democratic Party.

Jefferson was a southerner, and his drive for the presidency was based on the preference he shared with other southerners for a more limited federal government, while the general preference in the northern states was for a more active government, which Jefferson feared as the beginning of tyranny. As a southern party the Democrats defended slavery, then, after passage of the 13th Amendment prohibiting slavery, defended policies of segregation across the south. The Republicans remained weak in the south because they were identified as the party of Lincoln, the man who had declared war on them and destroyed their traditional way of life.

But in the north the Republican Party was identified as the party of business interests and Protestants, and was hostile to Catholic immigrants from Ireland and eastern and southern Europe, so a northern branch of the Democratic Party found operating space as the party of the lower classes and immigrants. Some northern cities, such as New York and Chicago, became dominated at the local level by Democrats, and some continue to be so today. This northern Democratic wing eventually

adopted an anti-segregationist ideology, and were more politically liberal on international affairs during the Cold war, which put them on a collision course with southern Democrats who wanted to maintain segregation and distrusted anyone seen as soft on communism. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s drove a wedge between these two groups, especially with passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which received almost all its support from Democrats and Republicans in the north. The first notable Democrat to switch to the Republican party was South Carolina's Strom Thurmond in 1964. Over the next several decades the south shifted from a predominantly Democratic stronghold to a predominantly Republican stronghold (at least among white voters), a movement that culminated in 1994, when Republicans – led by Georgian Newt Gingrich – took control of the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, and most of the remaining southern Democrats switched parties so they could remain in the majority with a party they liked better than suddenly find themselves in the minority with a party they no longer identified with.

Since the 1990s the southern influence has come to dominate the Republican Party, driving away many northern moderates (most of whom dealigned rather than joining the Democrats) and amplifying the strength of strong conservatives in the north and west. This led to the Tea Party (“Taxed Enough Already”) movement in the late 2000s that backed – often successfully – much more conservative candidates for Congress and derided traditional Republican moderates from the north and Midwest as “RINOs,” (Republicans in Name Only). The Democrats, once split by a battle between conservative and liberal wings, are now engaged in a battle between moderate liberal and left-progressive factions.

Wedge Issues

Parties also change in which groups adhere to them based on new issues arising and becoming politically salient. When members of one party hold a position on an issue more commonly associated with the other party that issue can be used as a wedge to split that group off and bring them into the other party. One of the most successful examples of this is the development of abortion as a political issue in the 1970s. The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision identifying a constitutional right

to abortion in 1973 created a hot political issue that has not cooled down in the nearly half century since. Ronald Reagan successfully used this issue to split many Catholic voters off from the Democratic Party (the traditional home of Catholics because the Republican Party was Protestant dominated). Not all of Reagan's supporters joined the Republican Party – some remained “Reagan Democrats” – but enough did that one could no longer assume a Catholic was a Democrat.

The attempted wedge did not work with all ethnic groups, however. Republicans hoped abortion and other “family values” issues would help them capture the growing Latino vote throughout the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, but did not have success, possibly due to economic and immigration issues being more important to many Latino voters. But that does not mean Latinos will necessarily join the Democrats, although traditionally Democrats have received a larger portion of the Latino vote. Despite the grouping under one term, Latinos are a diverse group of people with different interests, including Cubans in Florida who have traditionally been Republican because they hate the communist government in Cuba, and third and fourth generation people of Hispanic heritage who are deeply integrated into American culture and may have little in common with, and little sympathy with, new immigrants. Latino voter turnout still lags behind white and African-American voter turnout, but has been steadily increasing. Many of these new voters may choose to register as independents rather than joining either party. Any predictions about their future political orientation should be viewed with caution, if not outright skepticism.

Fluidity of Conservative and Liberal Issues

The battle between the various ideological groups within a party can also mean that issues can be reinterpreted over time to become liberal or conservative when they weren't before. One current manifestation of this is conservative supporters of Donald Trump who support restrictions on international trade. Free trade was favored by conservatives since the Reagan administration, and opposed by liberals. The idea for a North American free trade zone was put on the political agenda by Reagan in 1979 as he began his campaign for the presidency. It resulted, at the end of his term in office in a Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, which then developed into a U.S-Canada-Mexico agreement (the North American

Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA) negotiated in Republican George H. W. Bush's administration. While it was Democrat Bill Clinton's administration that got final approval for the agreement in Congress, he was a member of the Democratic Leadership Council, a more centrist faction within the Democratic Party. In the House of Representatives, only 40% of Democrats supported NAFTA, while 75% of Republicans did. In the Senate, 49% of Democrats supported it, compared to 77% of Republicans. But by 2018 Republican President Donald Trump's implementation of tariffs was strongly approved of by many of his supporters, and a battle was being fought among Republicans as to whether supporters or opponents of free trade were the true conservatives.

In part the conflict is among those who feel benefited by free trade and those who feel they've been harmed by it, but all of whom consider themselves conservative. And in part it may be that people are more committed to being followers of certain politicians than they are to particular political issues. While political scientists have long assumed that people favored politicians who were closest to them on the issues, psychologists now suggest that people may choose their beliefs to match those of politicians they favor.

But people can also reinterpret issues to redefine their ideological position. A case in point is same-sex marriage. Gay rights were first supported by the Libertarian Party, in its first national platform in 1972. By the 2000s libertarians had moved to support of same-sex marriage, and probably most liberals had joined them (although the Democratic platform did not explicitly support same-sex marriage until 2012, with the Libertarians first putting it in their 2008 platform). Support for same-sex marriage is lowest among conservatives, including Republicans, but has grown steadily over time. As early as 2010, nationally respected conservative lawyer Ted Olson – one of the lawyers involved in court challenges to bans on same-sex marriage – wrote an essay in *Newsweek* arguing that there is a conservative case for same-sex marriage, emphasizing the foundational principle of equality and conservatives' traditional support for families as the building blocks of society.¹² While not all conservatives have agreed, the number of articles making the same claim became more common over the next five years.

11.5 Summary

Political parties work to organize people into relatively stable groupings so they can mobilize them to win elections. These groupings are only relatively stable because they do shift around over time. In organizing people, parties serve as conduits between citizens and government, and – when functioning properly – support democracy by providing accountability and controlling demagogic politicians who might threaten democracy. Whether they are doing this well today or not in the United States is questionable, and support for parties is declining, weakening their ability to act as the gatekeepers of democracy. Only time will tell whether the current trends in the U.S. and the western nations in general continue to lead away from democracy or whether there will be a democratic resurgence before a new age of authoritarianism takes hold.

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