

## THE FUNCTIONS OF THE AMERICAN PARTIES

FOR 150 YEARS, the two-party system has served as the mechanism American society uses to organize and resolve social and political conflict. (Of course, third parties have periodically made important contributions to American politics, and they will be discussed later in the chapter.) Although political parties are less popular today than in previous times, it is important to remember that political parties often are the chief agents of change in our political system. They provide vital services to society and it would be difficult to envision political life without them.

### Mobilizing Support and Gathering Power

Party affiliation is enormously helpful to elected leaders. They can count on support among their fellow party members not just in times of trouble and times when they need to gather support for tight votes, but also on general political and legislative matters. Therefore the parties aid office holders by giving them room to develop their policies and by mobilizing support for them. When the president addresses the nation and requests support for his policies, for example, his party's members are usually the first to respond to the call, perhaps by flooding Congress with telegrams urging action on the president's agenda. Additionally, a recent study found that the more liberal and competitive the Democratic Party is in a state, the greater the level of mobilization and voter turnout among the lower classes. The lower classes, after activation by the Democrats, presumably then vote and participate in ways favorable to that state's Democratic Party or their position on relevant issues.<sup>8</sup>

Because there are only two major parties, citizens who are interested in politics or public policy are mainly attracted to one or the other party, creating natural majorities or near majorities for party office holders to command. The party generates a community of interest that bonds disparate groups over time into a **coalition**. This continuing mutual interest eliminates the necessity of forming a new coalition for every campaign or every issue. Imagine the constant chaos and mad scrambles for public support that would ensue without the continuity provided by the parties.

#### **coalition**

A group of interests or organizations that join forces for the purpose of electing public officials.

## A Force for Stability and Moderation

As mechanisms for organizing and containing political change, the parties are a potent force for stability. They represent continuity in the wake of changing issues and personalities, anchoring the electorate in the midst of the storm of new political policies and people. Because of its unyielding, practical desire to win elections (not just to contest them), each party in a sense acts to moderate public opinion. The party tames its own extreme elements by pulling them toward an ideological center in order to attract a majority of votes on Election Day.

The parties encourage stability in the type of coalitions they form. There are inherent contradictions in these coalitions that, oddly enough, strengthen the nation even as they strain party unity. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Democratic New Deal coalition, for example, included many African Americans and most southern whites, opposing groups nonetheless joined in common political purpose by economic hardship and, in the case of better-off Southerners, in longtime voting habits. A recent study determined that the liberalization of the formerly conservative southern Democratic Party was a direct result of the growth of the viable and conservative southern Republican Party, and the extension of greater voting rights to African Americans.<sup>9</sup> As many white Southerners abandoned the Democratic Party for the GOP, the Democrats became even more dependent on black votes, and their policy positions changed in order to retain those votes.<sup>10</sup>

## Unity, Linkage, and Accountability

Parties are the glue that holds together the disparate elements of the fragmented U.S. governmental and political apparatus. The Framers designed a system that divides and subdivides power, making it possible to preserve individual liberty but difficult to coordinate and produce action in a timely fashion. Parties help compensate for this drawback by linking all the institutions of power one to another. Although rivalry between the executive and legislative branches of U.S. government is inevitable, the partisan affiliations of the leaders of each branch constitute a common basis for cooperation, as the president and his fellow party members in Congress usually demonstrate daily. When

■ Among the many reasons the California recall campaign was so fascinating was how it brought the Democratic “royal family,” the Kennedys, together with a Republican, albeit liberal, candidate for governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. His wife (left), Maria Shriver, is a member of the Kennedy family.

*Photo courtesy: Rachel Epstein/The Image Works*



President George W. Bush proposed a major new program of tax cuts, Republican members of Congress were the first to speak up in favor of the program and to orchestrate efforts for its passage. Not surprisingly, presidential candidates and presidents are inclined to push policies similar to those advocated by their party's congressional leaders.<sup>11</sup>

Even within each branch, there is intended fragmentation, and the party once again helps narrow the differences between the House of Representatives and the Senate, or between the president and the department heads in the executive bureaucracy. Similarly, the division of national, state, and local governments, while always an invitation to conflict, is made more workable and more easily coordinated by the intersecting party relationships that exist among office holders at all levels. Party affiliation, in other words, is a basis for mediation and negotiation laterally among the branches and vertically among the layers.

The party's linkage function does not end there. Party identification and organization foster communication between the voter and the candidate, as well as between the voter and the office holder. The party con-

nection is one means of increasing accountability in election campaigns and in government. Candidates on the campaign trail and elected party leaders in office are required from time to time to account for their performance at party-sponsored forums, nominating primaries, and conventions.

Political parties, too, can take some credit for unifying the nation by dampening sectionalism. Because parties must form national majorities in order to win the presidency, any single, isolated region is guaranteed minority status unless it establishes ties with other areas. The party label and philosophy build the bridge that enables regions to join forces; in the process, a national interest, rather than a merely sectional one, is created and served.

## The Electioneering Function

The election, proclaimed author H. G. Wells, is “democracy’s ceremonial, its feast, its great function,” and the political parties assist this ceremony in essential ways. First, the parties funnel eager, interested individuals into politics and government. Thousands of candidates are recruited each year by the two parties, as are many of the candidates’ staff members—the people who manage the campaigns and go on to serve in key governmental positions once the election has been won.

Elections can have meaning in a democracy only if they are competitive, and in the United States they probably could not be competitive without the parties. (When we use the term *competitive*, we mean that both parties have enough organization, money, and people to run a vigorous election campaign, and to sustain their arguments through the period of governance.) Even in the South, traditionally the least politically competitive U.S. region, the parties today regularly produce reasonably vigorous contests at the state (and increasingly the local) level.

## Party as a Voting and Issue Cue

A voter’s party identification acts as an invaluable filter for information, a perceptual screen that affects how he or she digests political news. Parties try to cultivate a popular image and help inform the public about issues through advertising and voter contact. Therefore, party affiliation provides a useful cue for voters, particularly for the least informed and least interested, who can use the party as a shortcut or substitute for interpreting issues and events they may not fully comprehend. Better-educated and more involved voters also find party identification helpful. After all, no one has the time to study every issue carefully or to become fully knowledgeable about every candidate seeking public office.

## Policy Formulation and Promotion

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the **national party platform** is the most visible instrument that parties use to formulate, convey, and promote public policy. Every four years, each party writes for the presidential nominating conventions a lengthy platform explaining its positions on key issues. Platforms have considerable impact. About two-thirds of the promises in the victorious party’s presidential platform have been completely or mostly implemented. Even more astounding, one-half or more of the pledges of the losing party find their way into public policy (with the success rate depending on whether the party controls one, both, or neither house of Congress).<sup>12</sup> The party platform also has great influence on a new presidential administration’s legislative program and on the president’s State of the Union Address. While party affiliation is normally the single most important determinant of voting in Congress and in state legislatures,<sup>13</sup> the party–vote relationship is even stronger when party platform issues come up on the floor of Congress.

### national party platform

A statement of the general and specific philosophy and policy goals of a political party, usually promulgated at the national convention.



■ Senator Huey Long (D-LA) campaigned for the presidency in 1935 on a populist platform, arguing in fiery speeches that neither of the major parties' policies had the people's best interests at heart.



*Photo courtesy: Bettmann/CORBIS*

Besides mobilizing Americans on a permanent basis, then, the parties convert the cacophony of hundreds of identifiable social and economic groups into a two-part semi-harmony that is much more comprehensible, if not always on key and pleasing to the ears. The simplicity of two-party politics may be deceptive, given the enormous variety in public policy choices, but a sensible system of representation in the American context might be impossible without it.

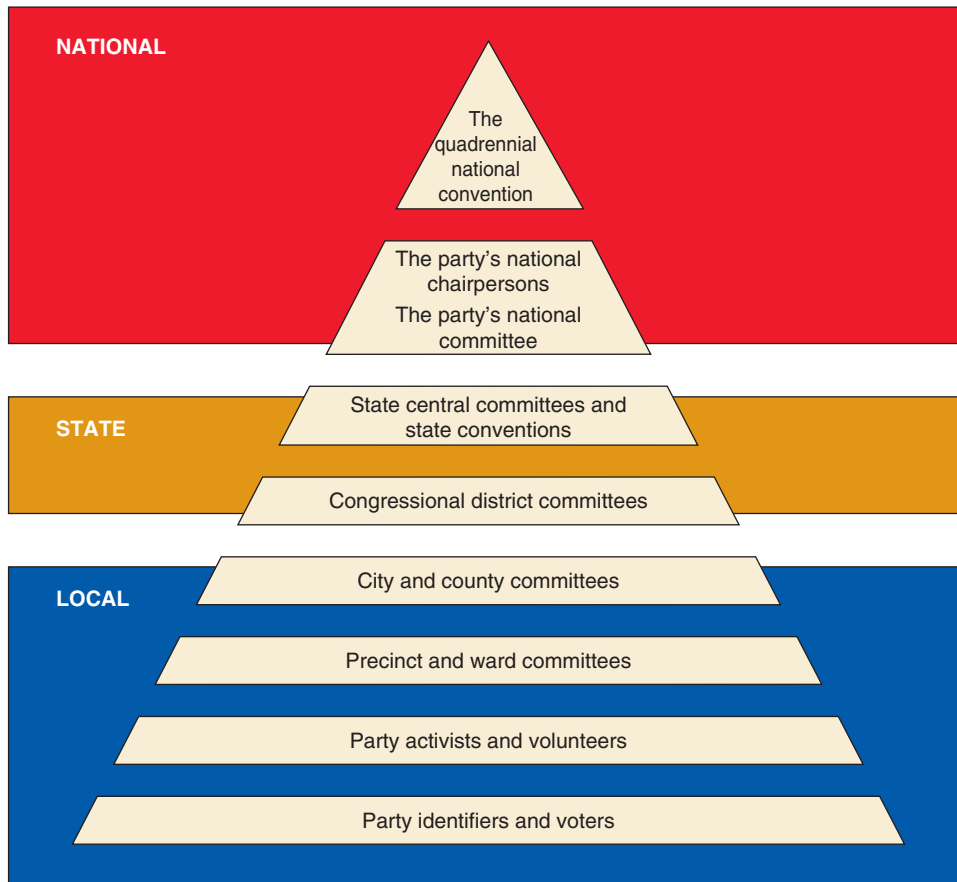
## THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

ALTHOUGH THE DISTINCTIONS might not be as clear today as they were two or three decades ago, the two major parties remain fairly simply organized, with national, state, and local branches (see Figure 12.2). The different levels of each party represent diverse interests in Washington, D.C., state capitals, and local governments throughout the nation.

The pyramid shown in Figure 12.2 illustrates the hierarchy of party organization in the United States, and it will help you to see how parties operate in a general sense. This very simple diagram, however, is deceptive in one important way: not shown is that the national, state, and local parties overlap. Frequently, state and local parties have more influence than the national party in their region, and their decisions can override those of the national party.

### National Committees

The first national party committees were skeletal and formed some years after the creation of the presidential nominating conventions in the 1830s. First the Democrats in 1848 and then the Republicans in 1856 established national governing bodies—the



**FIGURE 12.2** Political Party Organization in America: From Base to Pinnacle. ■

Democratic National Committee, or DNC, and the Republican National Committee, or RNC—to make arrangements for the conventions and to coordinate the subsequent presidential campaigns. The DNC and RNC were each composed of one representative from each state; this was expanded to two in the 1920s after the parties established the post of state committeewoman. The states had complete control over the selection of their representatives to the national committees. In addition, to serve their interests, the congressional party caucuses in both houses organized their own national committees, loosely allied with the DNC and RNC. The National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) was started in 1866 when the Radical Republican congressional delegation was feuding with Abraham Lincoln's moderate successor, President Andrew Johnson, and wanted a counterweight to his control of the RNC. At the same time, House and Senate Democrats set up a similar committee.

After the popular election of U.S. senators was initiated in 1913 with the ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment, both parties organized separate Senate campaign committees. This three-part arrangement of national party committee, House party committee, and Senate party committee has persisted in both parties to the present day, and each party's three committees are located together in Washington, D.C. There is, however, an informal division of labor among the national committees. Whereas the DNC and RNC focus primarily on aiding presidential campaigns and conducting general party-building activities, the congressional campaign committees work primarily to maximize the number of seats held by their respective parties in Congress. In the past two decades, all six national committees have become major, service-oriented organizations in American politics.<sup>14</sup>



## Leadership

The key national party official is the chairperson of the national committee. Although the chair is formally elected by the national committee, he or she is usually selected by the sitting president or newly nominated presidential candidate, who is accorded the right to name the individual for at least the duration of his or her campaign. Only the post-campaign, out-of-power party committee actually has the authority to appoint a chairperson independently. The committee-crowned chairpersons generally have the greatest impact on the party, because they come to their posts at times of crisis when a leadership vacuum exists. (A defeated presidential candidate is technically the head of the national party until the next nominating convention, but the reality is naturally otherwise as a party attempts to shake off a losing image.) The chair often becomes the prime spokesperson and arbitrator for the party during the four years between elections. He or she is called on to damp down factionalism, negotiate candidate disputes, raise money, and prepare the machinery for the next presidential election. Balancing the interests of all potential White House contenders is a particularly difficult job, and strict neutrality is normally expected from the chair.

## National Conventions

Every four years, each party holds a **national convention** to nominate its presidential and vice presidential candidates. Much of any party chairperson's work involves planning the presidential nominating convention, the most publicized and vital event on the party's calendar. Until 1984, gavel-to-gavel coverage was standard practice on all national television networks. Recently, however, television networks have cut back their air time to no more than one hour a day, during which the most important speaker speaks as much to viewers as he or she does to convention attendees. In addition to nominating the presidential ticket, the convention also fulfills its role as the ultimate governing body for the party. The rules adopted and the platform passed at the quadrennial conclave are durable guidelines that steer the party for years after the final gavel has been brought down.

Most of the recent party chairpersons, in cooperation with the incumbent president or likely nominee, have tried to orchestrate every minute of the conventions in order to project just the right image to voters. By and large, they have succeeded, though at the price of draining some spontaneity and excitement from the convention process.

## States and Localities

Although national committee activities of all kinds attract most of the media attention, the party is structurally based not in Washington, D.C., but in the states and localities. Except for the campaign finance arena, virtually all governmental regulation of political parties is left to the states, for example, and most elected officials give their allegiance to the local party divisions they know best. Most importantly, the vast majority of party leadership positions are filled at subnational levels.

The pyramid arrangement of party committees provides for a broad base of support. The smallest voting unit, the precinct, usually takes in a few adjacent neighborhoods and is the fundamental building block of the party. Each of the more than 100,000 precincts in the United States potentially has a committee member to represent it in each party's councils. The precinct committee members are the foot soldiers of any party, and their efforts are supplemented by party committees above them in the wards, cities, counties, towns, villages, and congressional districts.

The state governing body supervising this collection of local party organizations is usually called the state central (or executive) committee. Its members come from all major geographic units, as determined by and selected under state law. Generally, state parties are free to act within the limits set by their state legislatures without interfer-

### national convention

A party conclave (meeting) held in the presidential election year for the purposes of nominating a presidential and vice presidential ticket and adopting a platform.



*Photo courtesy: Eric Risberg/AP/Wide World Photos*

■ Gay rights has become an issue in presidential politics, affecting Democrats and Republicans both personally and politically. Here, former presidential nominee and Representative Dick Gephardt campaigns with his openly gay daughter, Chrissy. Mary Cheney, daughter of Vice President Dick Cheney, is also openly gay.

ence from the national party, except in the selection and seating of presidential convention delegates. National Democrats have been particularly inclined to regulate this aspect of party life. With the decline of big-city political machines, few local parties are strong enough to defy national party policy positions or to select nominees against the national party's wishes.

Although weaker in respect to how they affect the national party, state and local parties have become significantly more effective over the past three decades in terms of fund-raising, campaign events, registration drives, publicity of party and candidate activity, and the distribution of campaign literature.<sup>15</sup> Examining separately the national, state, and local parties should not lead us to overlook the increasing integration of these committees. The national parties have also become fund-raising powerhouses during the last two decades, and they now channel significant financial support—much of it in soft money—to state parties. This financial support has given the national parties considerable leverage over the state committees—many of which have become dependent on the funding—and the national parties have increasingly used the state committees to help execute national campaigns.

The growing reliance of state parties on national party funding has changed fundamentally the balance of power in the American party system. Whereas power previously flowed up from the state and local parties to the national committees, the national committees now enjoy considerable leverage over state and local parties.<sup>16</sup> That said, the relationships among the national, state, and local party committees are now being altered because of the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act that took effect following the 2002 midterm elections (see chapter 14 for details of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act). New organizations are being formed that are hybrids of national, state, and local action, many of them had prominent positions in the 2004 campaign. The 527



groups, named after a provision of the federal tax code, were formed to circumvent the new regulations. Prominent 527s in 2004 included MoveOn.org, The Media Fund, and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

## Informal Groups

The formal structure of party organization is supplemented by numerous official, semi-official, and unaffiliated groups that both coordinate and clash with the parties in countless ways. Both the DNC and RNC have affiliated organizations of state and local party women (the National Federation of Democratic Women and the National Federation of Republican Women). The youth divisions (the Young Democrats of America and the Young Republicans' National Federation) have a generous definition of "young," up to and including age thirty-five. In 1991, Bill Clinton used his chairmanship of the Democratic Leadership Council as a stepping stone to his successful presidential bid. The state governors in each party have their own party associations, too.

Just outside the party orbit are the supportive interest groups and associations that often provide money, labor, or other forms of assistance to the parties. Labor unions, progressive political action committees (PACs), teachers, African American and liberal women's groups, and the Americans for Democratic Action are some of the Democratic Party's organizational groups. Business PACs, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, fundamentalist Christian organizations, and some anti-abortion groups work closely with the Republicans. Similar party-interest group pairings occur in other countries; for example, in Britain, trade unions have aligned themselves with the Labour Party, providing the bulk of the party's contributions, and business has been closely allied with the Conservatives.

Each U.S. party has several institutionalized sources of policy ideas. Though unconnected to the parties in any official sense, these **think tanks** (institutional collections of policy-oriented researchers and academics) influence party positions and platforms.

Finally, there are extra-party organizations that form for various purposes, including "reforming" a party or moving it ideologically to the right or left. In New York City, for example, Democratic reform clubs were established in the late 1800s to fight the Tammany Hall machine, the city's dominant Democratic organization at the time. About seventy clubs still prosper by attracting well-educated activists committed to various liberal causes. Over the past decade, informal groups allied with the two parties have become more fully (if informally) integrated into the increasingly complex party network, often working closely with the national and state parties in conducting campaigns. Indeed, as one observer noted, parties and interest group allies now work together so closely that "the traditional lines of demarcation between parties and interest groups are no longer clear."<sup>17</sup>

### think tank

Institutional collection of policy-oriented researchers and academics who are sources of policy ideas.