

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**POSC 105
POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY**

- I. THIS MORNING:
 - A. The system of elections and voting
 - B. Elections as devices for “controlling” public policy making.
 - C. The role of political parties in a democracy.

- II. THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM:
 - A. Reprint of last notes
 - B. How elections are organized and conducted has a profound affect on political capacity and the chances of democracy.
 - C. Plethora of public offices filled by elections and independent constituencies.
 - 1. Ballot confusion
 - 2. The party that wins the Congress (or one house) does not necessarily control the government.
 - 3. Decoupling of presidential and congressional elections leads to conflict, stalemate.
 - D. Primary versus general elections.
 - 1. Primaries: contests for a party’s nomination
 - a. Kevin Vigilante first had to defeat a primary opponent before running against Patrick Kennedy.
 - E. Single-member plurality, winner-take all districts.
 - F. “Election day”: second Tuesday in November.

- III. ELECTIONS AND PUBLIC POLICY:
 - A. See the notes from the last class.
 - B. Four ways of looking at elections and public policy.
 - 1. The simplistic view: legislators enact their constituents wishes.
 - a. Direct representation
 - 2. A more complicated interpretation: representatives consult their constituents preferences on some questions.
 - a. The public may have an impact in some policy areas but not others.
 - b. Many questions of foreign policy, for example, do not attract public attention and legislators have room to maneuver on their own.
 - c. In other areas an issue is so publicly that representatives cannot ignore the voters.
 - 3. Elections as mandates:
 - a. Winners frequently interpret their victories at the polls as mandates

- to enact certain policies.
- b. An example: the “Contract With America”
 - * Proposed September 1994
 - Statement embodies classical liberal principles
 - * House Republican candidates agree to support it.
 - * Republic victory in November 1994
 - * Claim of mandate January 1995
 - * An aside: why the Contract failed (see below)
- 4. For elections to count as mandates certain requirements must be met:
 - * Presumably to claim a mandate a candidate or party must speak for a majority of citizens, not just those who vote.
 - * The electorate must be aware of the candidate or party’s position.
 - * The electorate must have preferences.
- C. Elections as legitimizing rituals
 - 1. Public preferences as “dependent variables.” The idea is that policies are formulated or decided and **sold** to the public. Elections ratify or legitimize these decisions.
 - a. Example: support for IMF.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTIES:

- A. Three propositions:
 - 1. Strong political parties are essential to democracy. In fact, the stronger the party system, the stronger the democracy.
 - 2. Weak parties have contributed to the stalemate that (many argue) characterizes American national government.
 - 3. Surprisingly the absence of strong parties explains why Americans are frustrated and cynical about politics, even though they may not think in these terms.

V. STRONG PARTY SYSTEM IN THEORY:

- A. Political parties are organizations with these characteristics:
 - 1. Unlike "interest groups," parties strive to control government as a whole.
 - 2. They nominate candidates for office.
 - 3. They are in essence public agents, although legally they have many "private" rights.
- B. The characteristics of a **responsible** or **disciplined** party system:
 - 1. Organize elections and educate and mobilize the voters (e.g., create excitement, encourage turnout, etc.)
 - 2. Programs and platforms: present a philosophy of government and a general program of action. If platforms are clearly spelled out, they give voters a choice.
 - a. Example: the Contract With America
 - 3. Recruit, train, and support legislative members committed to the party's

- general philosophy and program.
4. Governance: The “winning” party runs government roughly according to its platform and is thus held accountable for the consequences.
 - a. It can be held accountable because it **disciplines** legislative members: that is, legislative members follow the commands of party leaders or lose their "power."
 - b. **Shadow** government: the opposition party “waits in the wings,” offering the electorate an alternative program. It too has control over legislative members.
 - c. Discipline allows voters to reward or blame parties for policy successes and failures.
 - C. Parties in the U.S. do not fit this description. Nevertheless, at times the political system has briefly approximated a responsible party system.
 1. Reagan and Congress 1981.
 2. Newt Gingrich and Congress 1995.
 - a. Why the Contract “movement” fell apart.

VI. NEXT TIME:

- A. The structure of American political parties and understanding politics.
- B. Reading:
 1. Start ***Debt and Deficits***.
 - a. I will discuss and explain many of the important points next week but you should really read this important book and at least understand the arguments.
 2. Patterson, ***We the People***
 - a. Chapter 8. Skim the history section, pages 234 to 241 but then read the remainder for understanding. Many of the terms I discuss are explained further here.
 - b. Unfortunately, there is relatively little interpretative material.

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