

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**POSC 105
MORE ON POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY**

- I. THIS MORNING:
 - A. Responsible party system
 - B. The American party system: political feudalism

- II. THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTIES:
 - A. Reprinted from the last set of notes.
 - B. 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.

- III. 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, as noted last time the political system has briefly approximated a responsible party system.
 - 1. Newt Gingrich and Congress 1995 is a good example.

IV. THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM:

- A. American parties are de-centralized, somewhat loose coalitions of sovereign powers. They remind one of a feudal or tribal system of independent powers.
 - 1. Party organization:
 - a. Local (precinct, neighborhood) organizations.
 - b. County parties
 - c. State parties
 - d. National party
 - * National convention
 - * National committee
 - * National party chairs
 - * Staff
 - e. Congressional election parties.
 - 2. No hierarchy in the usual sense (e.g., national chairperson is not a "boss" in the usual sense of the word.)
 - a. On paper the president is head of his party, but the amount of control varies.
 - 3. Leaders, legislative members, and candidates are independent entrepreneurs.
 - a. Example: Clinton's failures in 1993-94; Gingrich's problems in 1996-97.
 - 4. No binding platform
 - a. Key elements of their programs are frequently implicit, not explicitly stated.
 - b. There is debate about how closely presidents follow the platform. But for practical purposes congressional candidates do not run on national platforms.
- B. Summary: American parties are usually called weak, non-disciplined

V. EXPLANATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM:

- A. Constitutional system, especially federalism and independently elected legislative members, creates numerous power centers.
 - 1. Separate constituencies
- B. Candidate-centered campaigns: candidates (e.g., senators and representatives) have their own sources of support and power and do not rely on the central party organization.

- C. General-welfare liberalism: distrust of parties and party bosses.
 - 1. Perot's candidacy and Colin Powell are examples
- VI. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:
- A. Trends in party development:
 - 1. Nomination system: primaries vs conventions and caucuses
 - 2. Television gives candidates independent "access" to voters.
 - 3. Money and politics
 - B. Campaign finance reform during the 1970s strengthened interest groups (PACs) and individual candidates and consequently weakened parties.
 - 1. Disclosure, spending limits, FEC.
 - 2. **Political action committees**: organizations that solicit contributions from members and others and distributes to candidates
 - 3. "Soft money": contributions ostensibly made to parties for purposes such as "get-out-the-vote" drives, but in actuality support candidates at all levels.
 - 4. The effect of reforms has been to weaken parties by giving group greater access through funding opportunities.
 - C. The strength of interest groups and now their PACS.
 - D. All of these developments conspire to weaken parties and strengthen both individuals and interest groups.
- VII. NEXT TIME:
- A. The structure of American political parties and understanding politics.
 - B. Interest groups
 - C. Reading:
 - 1. Patterson, *We the People*; chapter on parties as described last time.

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