

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
AND  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
Posc 150**

**POLITICAL PARTIES**

- I. CONTENTS:
- A. Parties in theory
  - B. American political party system.
- II. “STRONG PARTY SYSTEM” ON PAPER:
- A. What is a strong party system and why is it potentially useful for popular control of democracy? The characteristics of a strong or disciplined party system:
  - B. ✱Functions of a political party system:
    - 1. Organize elections
    - 2. Educate and motivate voters
    - 3. Aggregate” interests and demands.
    - 4. Offer meaningful choices: *party platform*
      - i. ✓Contract with America.
    - 5. Recruit, train, and support *legislative* members **committed** to the party's general philosophy and platform.
    - 6. Govern according to the platform.
  - C. The organization of a strong party: a pyramid of power
    - 1. Leader and “lieutenants”
    - 2. Legislative members
    - 3. Party activists and workers
    - 4. “Party in the electorate”
    - 5. ○“Discipline”: legislative members are required to support leaders and platform after debate and discussion.
      - i. Instruments of control: nomination, funding and support; favors
    - 6. ○Because a strong party “disciplines” legislative members voters can be reasonably certain that it will govern according to the platform.
    - 7. Moreover, it can enact policy in a timely fashion.
    - 8. “Shadow government”: the “loyal” opposition waits in the wings offering the electorate an alternative program. It too has control over legislative members.
      - i. Thus it offers a meaningful choice to the governing party.
    - 9. Can such a party system be democratic?
- III. THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM:
- A. ✱American parties are de-centralized, somewhat loose coalitions of semi-sovereign powers. They remind one of a feudal system of independent barons and knights.
  - B. ○Who are the “players?”

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1. State and local organizations.
2. National party
3. Candidate organizations and campaigns.
- i. Presidential and congressional office seekers.
- C. ○ National party system: a weak hierarchy in the usual sense (e.g., national chairperson is not a "boss" in the usual sense of the word.)
1. Parties sometimes remind one of feudal systems
2. Roles
- i. National parties establish rules that govern nomination process and act as campaign service organizations for candidates.
- ii. Help raise money for candidates.
- iii. Relatively little policy or platform or program development.
3. \*Leaders, legislative members, and candidates are independent entrepreneurs.
4. \*No binding platform
- i. This point is debated among political scientists, but my view is that key elements of programs are frequently implicit, not explicitly stated.
- ii. Congressional candidates usually do not run on national platforms and in fact can challenge them.
- iii. State party nominees are similarly independent.
- D. Actually the United States has multi-party system: many Democratic and Republican parties.

#### IV. PARTIES IN THE GOVERNMENT:

- A. In spite of weaknesses, parties organize Congress and are thus important.
1. Congressional organization:
- i. Committees and subcommittees.
- ii. Staff
- iii. Agenda
- iv. Rules committee in the House

#### V. EXPLANATIONS FOR FORM AND WEAKNESSES:

- A. Nomination process
1. Increasing importance of primaries over conventions and caucuses in the nomination process
- B. Constitutional system, especially federalism and independently elected legislative members, creates numerous power centers.
1. Separate constituencies
- C. Campaign strategies
1. 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.
- i. Examples:

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- 1) ✓ Democratic presidential candidates: George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, Michael Dukakis, Bill Clinton
  - 2) ✓ 1992 Republican presidential primaries and Patrick Buchanan.
- D. General distrust of parties and party bosses.
1. ✓ In 2000 former Senator Bill Bradley's and Senator John McCain ran against the "establishment" and politics as usual.
  2. ✓ Jesse Ventura.
  3. ✓ Popularity of term limits reflects distrust of parties and party politics.
- E. Recent trends in party development:
1. Television gives candidates independent "access" to voters.
    - i. Party leaders are "circumvented"
    - ii. And it increases costs of running for office
  2. Campaign finance reform during the 1970s strengthened interest groups
    - i. Perhaps surprisingly, campaign finance reforms have (in my view) further weakened parties.
- VI. NEXT TIME:
- A. Campaign finances.
  - B. Film, "Washington's Other Scandal"
  - C. Reading:
    1. Required: David Broder, "The Party's Over," (1972) available through the Cyber Reserve Room or directly from <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/policamp/partysov.htm>. This is a good article.
    2. Suggested: "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties," American Political Science Review, September, 1950, available on "Jstor" at this address: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0554%28195009%2944%3C%3E1.0.CO%3B2-S>.
      - i. Try to look at this document. It's one of the most famous and influential in American political science history. More important, it discusses the putative advantages of responsible parties.
    3. Required: The "Contract With America" in the Cyber Reserve Room.