Chapter 8: Parties, Interest Groups, and Public Policy

2. Political Parties in the United States

Political parties have played an important role in American politics since the early years of the Republic. Yet many of the nation's founders did not approve of parties. In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington warned against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party." He believed that parties would divide the American people and have a negative influence on government.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson shared Washington's concern. Adams said, "There is nothing which I dread so much as the division of the Republic into two great parties . . . in opposition to each other." Jefferson claimed, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." Nevertheless, both men eventually became leaders of political parties, and the party system itself became entrenched in American politics.

What Do Political Parties Do in a Democracy?

The primary goal of parties is to get their candidates elected to office. However, they also have a number of other functions, some of which are listed below.

Parties recruit candidates and support campaigns. Each year, political parties seek out and enlist candidates to run for thousands of local, state, and national offices. They look for people with the skills to run a successful electoral campaign and to be effective in office. Political parties also provide some funding for candidates.
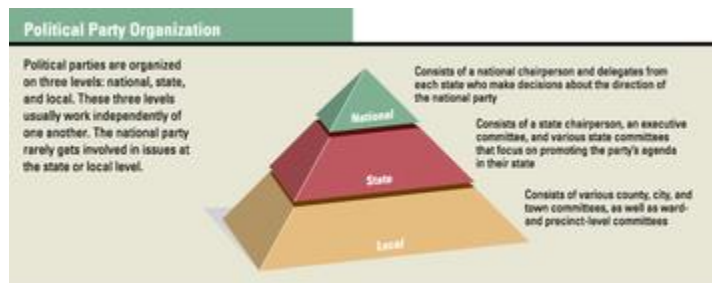
Parties help organize elections and inform voters. Although state and local governments run elections, political parties help by promoting voter interest and participation. They register voters and monitor the polls on Election Day. They also help inform voters on political issues.

Parties organize the government. Congress and most state legislatures are organized along party lines. After congressional elections, members of the majority party in Congress choose one of their members to be speaker of the house or Senate majority leader. Committee chairpersons in Congress also come from the majority party.

Parties unite diverse interests and make collective action possible. Parties bring diverse groups together by building coalitions based on shared beliefs and common goals. Delegates attending national party conventions create **platforms** that outline the party's position on important issues. In that process, they seek to balance the interests and concerns of members from across the country. Their goal is to produce a document that all party members can unite behind to achieve their shared political objectives.

Parties serve as a loyal opposition to the political party in power. The goal of a political party is to win control of the government so that it can translate its objectives into laws and policies. The party not in power, or the minority, serves as a "loyal opposition" to the majority party. Minority party members act as critics of the majority party's proposals. They also serve as government watchdogs, always on the lookout for corruption or abuses of power.

The Structure of Political Parties: Local, State, and National

Political Party Organization

Political parties are organized on three levels: national, state, and local. These three levels usually work independently of one another. The national party rarely gets involved in issues at the state or local level.

Consists of a national chairperson and delegates from each state who make decisions about the direction of the national party

Consists of a state chairperson, an executive committee, and various state committees that focus on promoting the party's agenda in their state

Consists of various county, city, and town committees, as well as ward- and precinct-level committees

Both major political parties in the United States are organized at the local, state, and national level. Committees manage the affairs of the party at each level. This diagram shows the basic organization of a major political party.

The national committee is made up of delegates from each state. A national chairperson oversees the day-to-day operations of the committee. The chairperson also makes public appearances to raise support for the party and improve its chances in upcoming elections.

The organization of state and local committees mirrors the structure of the national committee. Each state has a central committee with a chairperson. Beneath the state committee are various county committees. Some states also have committees at the city, town, or **precinct** level. A precinct is a local voting district.

Political parties offer various ways for citizens to get involved in politics. The most common way is through voter registration. Most Americans identify with one party or the other, and they register to vote as a member of that

party. Citizens can also donate money to a political party or its candidates, show their support using social media, and attend party rallies or meetings. In addition, some citizens volunteer to work on party committees or individual campaigns..

The Evolution of the Two-Party System

In 1787, when the Constitution was written, no political parties existed in the United States. Perhaps this is why the Constitution makes no mention of parties. Before long, however, the nation's leaders had begun to divide into factions, or groups with differing views. These factions soon gave rise to the nation's first political parties. By the early 1800s, a political system based on two major parties was beginning to emerge. This **two-party system** has endured to the present day.
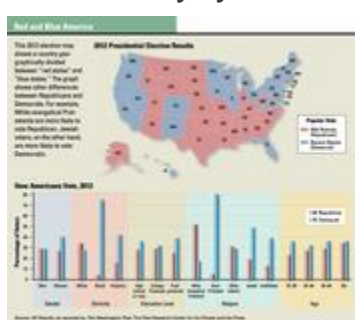
The first parties formed around two powerful figures in President Washington's administration. Alexander Hamilton and his followers became known as Federalists. They favored a strong national government and drew their support largely from commercial and industrial interests in northern cities. Thomas Jefferson and his supporters, known as Democratic-Republicans, favored a much weaker national government and strong state governments. They gained the backing of farmers and rural interests in southern states.

In 1796, John Adams, a Federalist, succeeded Washington in office. Four years later, however, Adams lost the election to Jefferson. After that defeat, the Federalist Party declined and, within a few years, disappeared altogether.

For a brief time, one party—the Democratic-Republicans—dominated U.S. politics. In the 1820s, however, disgruntled members broke away and formed a new political faction. First called National Republicans, the new faction later became known as the Whig Party. Around the same time, the remaining Democratic-Republicans became known simply as Democrats.

Evolution of the Two-Party System

The tradition of two major parties in U.S. politics goes back to the 1790s. The two-party system has evolved and changed since then. By the late 1800s, Democrats and Republicans were firmly established as the two main parties.
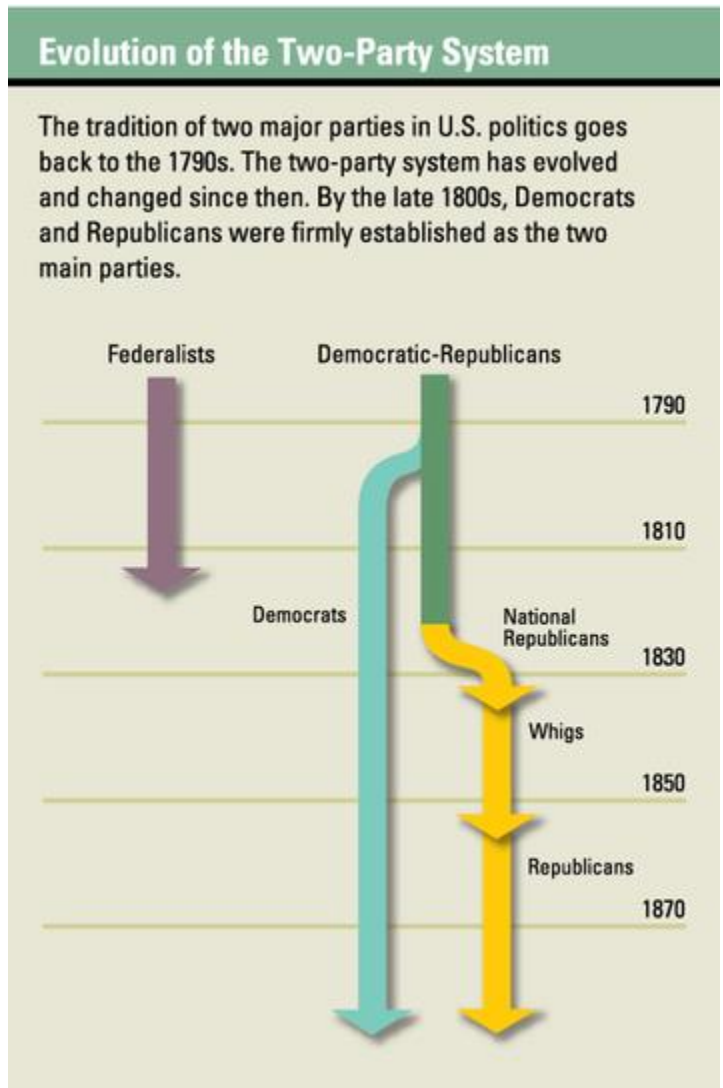
In the 1850s, the issue of slavery deeply divided the Whigs, and their party soon fell apart. A number of former Whigs joined with antislavery activists to form the Republican Party in 1854. During the Civil War and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, the Republicans established themselves as the nation's second major party. The Democratic and Republican parties have dominated American politics ever since.

The Two-Party System Today

Over the years, the two parties have evolved and changed, and so have their bases of support. For example, the Democrats were once the strongest party in the South. Today the Republicans generally enjoy more support among southern voters.

In 2000, political analysts began to speak of a regional divide in American politics. The 2012 presidential election results also showed clearly defined "red states" and "blue states." The red states—mainly in the southern and central parts of the country—were those in which the majority of people voted Republican. The blue states—mainly in the Northeast and far West—were those in which the majority voted Democratic. The distribution of red and blue states led many political observers to conclude that the United States had become deeply divided along political lines. This map shows the results of the 2012 presidential election.

This red-state, blue-state political divide is probably not as sharp or as deep as the map suggests. In many states, the number of Republicans and Democrats is roughly equal. Moreover, people who call themselves Republicans or

Democrats do not all agree on what their party stands for. Nevertheless, the two parties and their supporters do differ in some important ways.

Republicans and Democrats in the Twenty-first Century
While all kinds of Americans support either party, a Republican is more likely to be white, male, and relatively affluent. A Democrat is more likely to be a member of a minority group, female, and less affluent. This graph shows other differences between the Republicans and Democrats.

In general, Republicans hold more conservative views, and Democrats more liberal views, on the issues that follow.

Size of the national government. In general, Democrats support a strong federal government and look to it to solve a wide variety of problems. Most Republicans favor limiting the size of the national government and giving more power to the states to solve problems at a local level.

Taxes. Republicans favor broad-based tax cuts to encourage economic growth and to allow people to keep what they earn. Although Democrats favor tax cuts for the poor, they are more willing to raise taxes on affluent Americans in order to support programs that they see as beneficial to society.

Regulation of business. Democrats generally support government regulation of business as a way to protect consumers, workers, or the environment. Most Republicans oppose what they see as excessive business regulation by the government believing that too much regulation prevents economic growth.

Social issues. Republicans tend to oppose legalizing same-sex marriage, abortion, and gun control laws. Democrats are more likely to support same-sex marriage rights, abortion, and gun control laws.

Environment. Most Democrats favor strict environmental regulations. Republicans tend to oppose such regulations because they believe it hurts businesses and the economy.

While these generalities hold for the two political parties, individual Democrats or Republicans may not share the same views on every issue. Republicans who call themselves Log Cabin Republicans, for example, strongly support equal rights for gay and lesbian Americans. At the same time, many traditional Republicans are just as strongly opposed to granting certain rights, such as the right to marry, to gay and lesbian couples.

Nevertheless, for most Americans, identifying with one party or the other provides a useful way to make sense of the candidates at election time. In effect, party labels tell voters what the candidates stand for and help them make choices when they vote.

Third Parties: Single-Issue, Economic Protest, Ideological, and Splinter Groups
Not all Americans identify with the two major parties. Throughout our country's history, people frustrated with the status quo have formed third parties to express their opinions in constructive ways.

There are four main types of third parties in the United States. Single-issue parties tend to focus on one issue, such as taxes or immigration. Economic protest parties unite opponents of particular economic policies or conditions. Ideological parties view politics and society through the lens of a distinct ideology, such as socialism. And splinter parties develop as offshoots of the major parties. The table below lists an example of each type of third party.

Third Parties in the United States

Third parties have been formed for many reasons. In 1912, former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt formed the Progressive, or Bull Moose, Party. This cartoon portrays Roosevelt as Humpty Dumpty to parody the fact that his party split the Republican vote in the 1912 election, which helped ensure victory for Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

Types of Third Parties	
Type	**Examples from U.S. History**
Single-issue party Formed to oppose or promote one issue	**National Women's Party (1913–1920)** Promoted voting rights for women
	Right to Life Party (1970–present) Opposes legalized abortion
Economic protest party Formed to promote "better times"	**Greenback Party (1874–1884)** Promoted use of paper money, silver coinage, and the eight-hour workday
	Populist Party (1892–1908) Protested economic conditions and government policies that hurt farmers
Ideological party Formed by people committed to a set of beliefs	**Socialist Party of America (1901–1973)** Promoted government ownership of basic industries
	Libertarian Party (1971–present) Favors reducing the role of government in citizens' lives
Splinter party Formed by people unhappy with a major party	**Progressive "Bull Moose" Party (1912–1952)** Separated from the Republican Party to promote progressive reforms
	States' Rights "Dixiecrat" Party (1948) Separated from the Democratic Party to oppose desegregation

Third parties have had some electoral successes. The Socialist Party gained a substantial following in the early 1900s. More recently, Independent Party candidate Lincoln Chafee won election as governor of Rhode Island in 2010. That same year, the Tea Party movement was also successful when members obtained seats in both the Senate and House. Although the Tea Party is not officially recognized as a political party, it is considered a third party by some. The Green Party has also enjoyed some success in elections, particularly at the local level.

Third parties have also advocated reforms that have eventually been adopted by the major parties. In the 1990s, for example, the Green Party helped raise awareness of environmental issues. Today "green" positions on the environment can be found in the platforms of the two main parties.

In general, however, third parties face an uphill battle given the strength of the two-party system. Smaller parties find it hard to raise money and get the media coverage they need to challenge the two major parties.

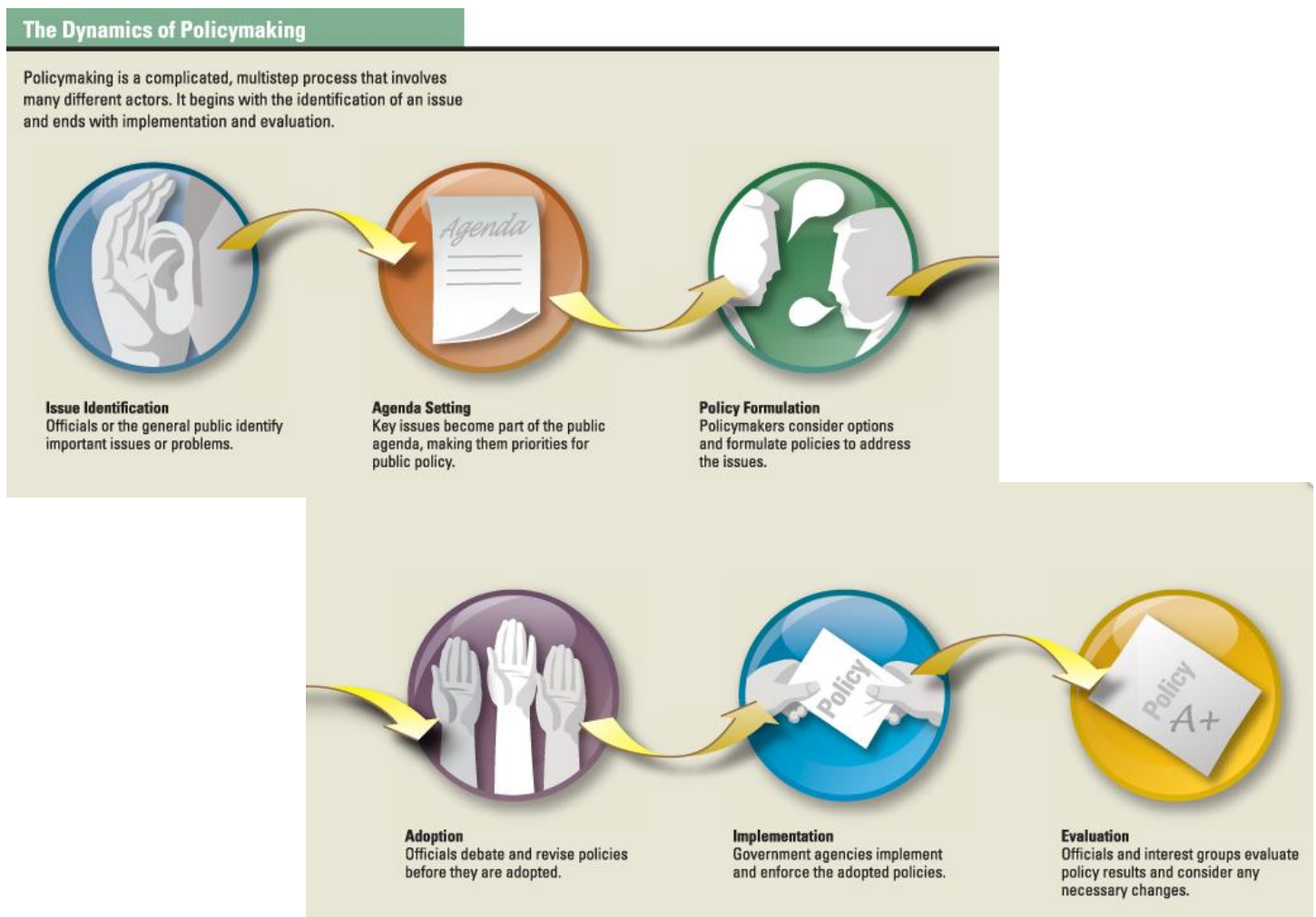### The Moderate Middle: Centrist and Independent Voters

In recent years, a growing number of Americans have identified themselves as political independents. As such, they are not aligned with any political party. According to some political analysts, the rise of independent voters represents a turn away from the more liberal or conservative views of the two major parties toward a centrist, or middle-of-the-road, position.

Nevertheless, political scientists note that many people who embrace the "independent" label still tend to lean toward one or the other major party at election time. In other words, although these voters call themselves independent, they still vote like either Democrats or Republicans. The proportion of voters who are truly independent of either party has hovered around 10 percent since the 1950s.

4. Making Public Policy

For decades, U.S. officials have considered ways to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil as part of a broad-based energy policy. Should the government permit oil drilling in waters off the nation's coasts? Should drilling be allowed in national parks and wildlife refuges? Should public money be used to develop other energy sources, such as solar, wind, and nuclear power? The answers to such questions have shaped our nation's **public policy** on energy.

Public policy refers to government actions or programs designed to achieve certain goals. Creating public policy is a multistep process. Government officials, policy experts, political parties, interest groups, and concerned citizens all take part in such policymaking. This diagram outlines how the policymaking process works.

The Dynamics of Policymaking

Policymaking is a complicated, multistep process that involves many different actors. It begins with the identification of an issue and ends with implementation and evaluation.

Issue Identification
Officials or the general public identify important issues or problems.

Agenda Setting
Key issues become part of the public agenda, making them priorities for public policy.

Policy Formulation
Policymakers consider options and formulate policies to address the issues.

Adoption
Officials debate and revise policies before they are adopted.

Implementation
Government agencies implement and enforce the adopted policies.

Evaluation
Officials and interest groups evaluate policy results and consider any necessary changes.

Seeing What Needs Attention: Issue Identification
The first step in policymaking is identifying problems and issues that need to be addressed. Sometimes a crisis brings an issue to public attention. This happened when Middle East oil producers blocked sales to the United States for a few months in 1973 and 1974. The resulting energy crisis forced Americans to begin thinking of ways to reduce this nation's dependence on foreign oil.

Public officials can also raise awareness of issues. Until 1964, for instance, most Americans viewed smoking as a matter of personal choice. That year, the surgeon general of the United States issued a report linking cigarette smoking to lung cancer. His report raised the issue of whether smoking should be discouraged as a matter of public policy.

Choosing Issues to Address: Agenda Setting
Government officials cannot address all the problems facing the nation at any one time. They have to make choices, selecting the issues that seem most critical and setting others aside. Agenda setting requires officials to decide which issues should be part of the **public agenda**, or set of public priorities.

Some issues pop onto the public agenda as a result of a disaster. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon put fighting terrorism high on the nation's public agenda. Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, repairing damaged levees around the city shot to the top of that area's public agenda.

Other issues take a long time to become part of the public agenda. One example is global warming. For years, scientists have been warning about the effects of greenhouse gas emissions on Earth's climate. But for the most part, their concerns were ignored. As scientific knowledge and evidence of climate change have mounted, however, global warming has found its way onto the public agenda of many public officials and lawmakers.

Political parties and interest groups often play a role in setting the public agenda. Parties help by placing issues on their platforms, thus making those items a priority for the candidates they elect. Interest groups do the same by lobbying for certain issues.

Deciding What to Do: Policy Formulation
Once an issue is on the public agenda, government officials work on formulating a policy to address it. This step may take place within any branch of government. It can also happen at the local, state, or national level. Legislatures or city councils make policy by passing laws or statutes. Executive officials or agencies make policy by setting new rules and regulations. The judicial system can influence policy, too, through court decisions and rulings.

When officials begin to formulate a policy, they ask some basic questions: Is this a problem government should address? If so, what options should be considered? Should government pass a new law, create a new or expanded program, or offer a new benefit? What are the costs and benefits of each option?

In response to the surgeon general's report on smoking, for example, officials considered a number of policies. These ranged from warning labels on cigarette packages to regulating cigarettes as drugs. When considering such varied options, officials may ask experts to offer their opinions. They may also invite interest groups to present their views. This helps ensure that the policy they finally adopt takes various perspectives and interests into account.

Putting Proposals into Action: Policy Adoption
Many policies are formulated as legislation. These bills must first pass through Congress, state legislatures, or city councils to become law. This legislative process often results in substantial revisions. A policy proposal may be changed to gain the support of a majority of legislators. Or it may be modified to avoid legal challenges or a threatened veto by a governor or president.

Sometimes the president works with members of Congress and key interest groups to get policies adopted. President Lyndon Johnson, for instance, worked closely with Congress and civil rights leaders to win passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush joined with lawmakers and disability activists to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. This law helped make public facilities more accessible to people with disabilities.

In other cases, interest groups take the lead in getting new policies adopted. The American Cancer Society and the American Lung Association, for example, have taken the lead in promoting laws banning smoking in public places. By 2010, 25 states had enacted comprehensive smoking laws that banned smoking inside of worksites, bars, and restaurants.

Making a Policy Work: Implementation

After a policy is adopted, it must be implemented. Usually, implementation is assigned to a specific government agency. That agency then becomes responsible for making the new policy work.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, Congress enacted a number of antiterrorism policies. The job of implementing these policies was given to the newly created Department of Homeland Security. DHS took on a host of responsibilities, from intelligence gathering to border security. To accomplish its goals, DHS officials worked closely with state and local governments.

Assessing the Effectiveness of a Policy: Evaluation

The final step in the policy process is evaluation. Government officials and concerned interest groups assess whether implemented policies have met their goals. If changes need to be made, the policymaking process begins again.

After New York City outlawed smoking in bars and restaurants in 2003, the city's Department of Health carried out a study to assess the results. Its researchers found that air pollution levels had decreased sixfold in bars and restaurants after the ban went into effect. The study also found that contrary to predictions, business remained good despite the smoking ban. A 2006 study by the state of New York found similar results.

Not all policies that show positive results manage to survive, however. For example, studies show that a policy of requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets reduces the likelihood of dying in a crash by about one-third. Nonetheless, faced with stiff opposition from motorcycle riders, some states have not passed mandatory helmet laws. Moreover, a few states with such laws have repealed or are considering repealing them. For a policy like this one to be successful, it must achieve its goals and win public approval.