Chapter 11
Political Parties and Interest Groups
Essentials of American Government

What is a Political Party?

Basically, a political party is a group of office holders, candidates, activists, and voters who identify with a group label and seek to elect to public office individuals who run under that label. This is a practical definition in keeping with the practical nature of American politics. Our parties tend not to be as ideological as parties in other countries. Ours is a centrist party system.

Our system contains two major parties: The Democratic Party and The Republican Party. We also have a number of minor or third parties at any given time. Among the more important third parties today are the Reform Party and the Libertarian Party. Parties are made up of three types of “members”:
- the office holders and candidates
- workers and activists
- those who vote for the party or consider themselves to be allied or associated with it

The Evolution of American Party Democracy

Americans have had a love-hate relationship with parties since the beginning of the republic. George Washington despised parties and used his Farewell Address to warn against them. However, Hamilton and Jefferson, as heads of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist groups, respectively, are often considered 'fathers' of the modern party system. By 1800, this country had a party system with two major parties that has remained relatively stable ever since. We have had some people sound the death knell for both parties on a variety of occasions but, they always seem to survive somehow.

The period from 1817 to 1825 was called the Era of Good Feelings and party politics practically disappeared at the national level. However, parties were alive and well at lower levels. The electorate expanded dramatically at this time—the US pushed westward, most states abolished property requirements for voting, and immigration continued.

Nomination processes and the Electoral College also opened up to additional participation. This broadened the base of the parties. Conventions were held beginning with the 1832 Democratic Convention to nominate presidential candidates. Andrew Jackson was the first candidate nominated at a party convention.

Jackson's populism and strong personality polarized politics and the Whig Party emerged to oppose him. The Whig Party was descended from the Federalists and its early leaders included Henry Clay (Speaker of the House). The Whigs and Democrats were fiercely competitive. However, the issue of slavery plagued the Whigs and they soon dissolved to be
replaced by the Republican Party formed in 1854. The Republicans set their sights on the abolition of slavery and by 1860 elected Abraham Lincoln as president.

Democrats and Republicans

From the presidential elections of 1860 to the present, the same two major parties have contested elections in the United States: Republicans and Democrats. Control of the major institutions of government has seesawed between them.

• Reconstruction--Republican dominance
• 1876-1896--close1y competitive system
• 1896-1929--Republican dominance
• 1930s and 40s--Democratic dominance
• 1950s and 60s--mixed
• 1970-present--neither party dominant

The Modern Era

The 'Modern Era' of political parties began in the 1920’s. Party and government in large cities seemed interchangeable. This was the era of political machines, bosses, and patronage. Political machines—party organizations that recruit members by offering tangible incentives such as jobs, money, favors, and so on—were central to the lives of millions of people. They helped new immigrants settle in, they provided social services, jobs, sponsored community events, and gave food and housing to the poor. All in exchange for votes.

Government has gradually taken over many of the functions that were performed by the party-based political machines. Government now prints ballots, provides social welfare monies, conducts elections, and so on. So party organizations have fewer functions and less ability to enforce party-line votes and strict discipline.

Several other developments have decreased the power of political parties:

• direct primary --the selection of candidates was moved out of the smoked filled room and into a more public setting. Qualified voters now determine who runs for office.
• civil service laws --have removed patronage or the spoils system from the control of parties. Now government jobs go to people who pass merit-based tests not loyal party workers.
• the rise of issue-oriented politics --social changes and broad based education has led to more thoughtful voters and issues that cut across traditional party lines, like environmentalism. Ticket-splitting has become commonplace.
• television --TV emphasizes individuals and personalities over party labels.
• the rise of political consultants --these hired guns often work for both sides and use whatever works. They are the new intermediary between the voter and candidate and, thus, weaken the parties.
Political parties have changed a lot over the years but remain reliable vehicles of mass participation. Parties have adapted to changing conditions.

The Basic Structure of American Political Parties

- **National Committees**—The Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC) are the national policy organs of the parties. They choose national chairpersons and run the quadrennial conventions. In addition, the Senate and House parties also have committees that are located with the national committees in Washington, DC.

- **Leadership**—The party chairpersons are usually selected by the current president for the party in power, party national committee usually selects the other national chairperson. The chair is an important spokesperson for party interests.

- **National Conventions**—Every four years, the national committees put together the presidential nominating conventions. Until 1984, they got gavel-to-gavel coverage by media outlets. Today coverage is more selective. The conventions allow parties to nominate candidates but also to discuss party organizational matters.

- **States and Localities**—Parties are structurally based at the state and local levels. Much of the work of the party is carried out at the precinct, city, county, and state level.

- **Informal Groups**—Parties are supplemented by a number of other groups such as the National Federation of Democratic Women, the Young Republicans, State Governor's Associations, interest groups, PACs, and many more. In addition there are think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation for the Republicans and the Progressive Policy Institute for the Democrats.

The Roles of the American Parties

For 150 years, the two party system has been used to organize and resolve political and social conflicts. They are less popular today than at earlier points in history but remain a vital agent of change and representation in our system. One of the most important roles the parties fulfill is that they convert a huge array of ideas and opinions (of millions of voters) into a comprehensible pair of ideas. They aggregate public opinion to a manageable level.

**Mobilizing Support and Gathering Power**
Members of the party can usually be counted on to support office holders elected under the party banner. Party is a fairly simple way of determining how much support one has in Congress or among the electorate.

**A Force for Stability**
Parties promote stability and act to moderate public opinion due to their pragmatic drive to win elections.
Unity, Linkage, and Accountability
Parties provide linkages among branches and levels of government. They allow the often disparate parts of our political system to work together. Parties also link voters and elected officials and can hold office holders accountable at periodic party meetings. Because parties must win national elections, they can also function as unifiers of the country. They dampen sectionalism and give people in remote parts of the country something in common with other Americans far away.

The Electioneering Function
Parties organize and compete in elections. The parties recruit candidates, provide staffing, give money, and provide numerous other important services during election cycles.

Party as a Voting and Issue Cue
A voter's party identification acts as a filter for information. It provides the single most important cue for voting. If a citizen does not know much about candidate or race, they generally vote for the party they prefer.

Policy Formulation and Promotion
Parties formulate and convey their ideas about public policy through the national party platform. Every four years, the party gathers and writes a lengthy document explaining their positions on key issues in advance of the presidential nominating convention. About two-thirds of platform promises have usually been implemented when the party's candidate wins the election.

The Two Party System and Third Parties
One of the most significant political trends of recent times is the demise of one-party dominance of elections in a given area. The formerly "Solid South" is no longer solidly Democratic. There are no truly Republican or Democratic states at this time. This growth in competition among the parties seems to be a sign of party weakness. More and more individuals split their vote between the parties and sometimes vote for third parties.

Minor Parties: Third-Parties
Third parties appear sporadically. These minor parties are not a threat to the two major parties. Among the third parties that have had some success are:

- 2000: Ralph Nader Green Party
- 1996 and 1992: Ross Perot's Reform Party
- 1968: George Wallace and the American Independent Party
- 1924: Robert LaFollette’s Progressive Party
- 1912: Teddy Roosevelt and the Bull Moose Party
- 1856: Millard Fillmore’s American Party

Third parties generally arise from one of the following causes:

- sectionalism—Dixiecrats in 1948
- economic protest—Populists in 1892
- specific issues—Green party and the environment
• ideology--Socialists, Communists
• charismatic personalities--George Wallace's American Independent Party
• failures of the major parties--Ross Perot arose out of the major parties' failures to deal with the deficit and debt as a key issue

Third parties help the major parties change and force them to acknowledge alienated groups, incorporate new ideas, and nominate more attractive candidates. Although third parties form for a variety of reasons usually the issues are almost always co-opted by the major parties, and tend to disappear for the following reasons:

• "single member plurality" electoral system—in this system, only the winner gets elected. In proportional representation systems there tend to be more parties because parties are rewarded (with seats in parliament for example as little as 1% or 5% of the vote.

• most states allow Democrats and Republicans an automatic place on the ballot but have laws requiring third parties to gather signatures

• state and national legislatures are organized on a party basis and aim to perpetuate that organization.

• public funding of campaigns is more generous for the two major parties; third party candidates must get more than 5% of the vote.

• the news media ignores minor parties since they perceived as “non-winners.”

The Party-In-The-Electorate

The mass of potential voters identify with labels. This group is self-identified and seems to exhibit ever-lower levels of party loyalty.

Party Identification

American voters identify with a party but rarely belong to it. They tend not to physically join and pay dues, instead they simply assert they are a Republican or a Democrat. The party label becomes a voter’s central political reference symbol and a way of interpreting a complex world.

Party loyalties generally come from one's parents but can be affected by a number of factors such as peers, charismatic personalities, cataclysmic events, and intense social issues.

Declining Loyalty

The number of independents in the US is rising, however, identification with the two major parties today is in the mid-80 percent range. If pollsters go beyond simply asking
affiliation, they often find that self-declared independents often 'lean' quite strongly in one direction or the other. These 'leaners' do feel party affiliations but choose not to self-identify with a party. In addition, new issues have cut across traditional party lines and have weakened party affiliation. Personality politics, fostered by television and political consultants, also weakens party loyalty.

So who remains loyal to the party? In general, the following trends seem to hold true:

- group affiliation—labor unions tend to vote Democratic; Chambers of Commerce tend to vote Republican
- geographic region—the South still tends to vote Democratic in presidential races, the Western states tend to vote Republican
- gender—the Democrats seem to have a slight lead in garnering the women's vote
- race and ethnicity—over 80% of African Americans and many Hispanics vote Democratic except for Cuban Americans who are generally Republicans.
- age—young people are again becoming more Democratic
- social and economic factors—the GOP remains the party of professionals, executives, and white collar workers and the Democrats lead among blue collar workers and the unemployed
- religion—Protestants tend to favor the Republican Party while Catholics and Jews tend to be Democrats.
- marital status—married couples tend to lean toward the Republican Party; widows are mostly Democrats
- ideology—liberals tend to be Democrats and conservatives tend to be Republicans

What Are Interest Groups?

An interest group is an organization whose members share common concerns and try to influence government policies affecting these concerns. Interest groups also are known as lobbies; lobbying is one of the ways interest groups shape legislation and bring the views of their constituents to the attention of decision-makers.

Interest groups are more easily understood by using examples. What is the largest and most powerful interest group in this country? The AARP—American Association of Retired Persons with 32 million members. Other influential groups include the NRA—National Rifle Association (only 1 million members), the AFL-CIO (14.1 million members) and the American Medical Association (300,000 members). What makes them successful and powerful?

Why and How Interest Groups Form and Maintain Themselves

Interest groups tend to form in response to change. The tendency of groups to form organizations for lobbying and carrying their interests to Washington DC is a fairly recent
phenomena, related to the Great Society, and the increase in funding available from the federal government.

David Truman, a political scientist, argued that interest groups rise in response to the actions of other interest groups. The disturbance theory of interest groups formation focuses on the government’s role as a forum, where competing interests and demands for resources can be heard and balanced. Robert Salisbury expanded on Truman’s contention, by arguing that groups also form when resources—such as clean air and water, or rights—are scarce. Leaders of groups act to form larger bodies that demand government attention to these scarcities.

**The Rise of the Interest Group State**

Substantial new group formation began in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. The rise of public interest groups during these years was reminiscent of the Progressive Era. The new groups were devoted to the interests of blacks, women, the elderly, the poor, and consumers as well as the environment. These groups were strongly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War and the movements opposed to it. Other groups formed long ago, found new vigor like the NAACP and the ACLU. Foundations such as the Ford Foundation funded groups liberally. Among the most influential the public interest groups formed at this time were Common Cause and Public Citizen, the latter formed by Ralph Nader.

**Conservative Backlash: Religious and Ideological Groups**

The growth and success of public interest groups, civil rights organizations, and women's rights movements in the 1960’s and 1970’s led to a conservative backlash in the late 1970s and 1980s. Religious and ideological conservatives became a potent force in US politics with the founding of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in 1978. This group was widely credited with helping Ronald Reagan win the presidency. In 1990, Pat Robertson of the TV program *The 700 Club* formed a new group called the Christian Coalition. Religious conservatives accounted for one-third of votes cast in the 1994 elections. Following IRS troubles in the 1990s, the Christian Coalition had its tax-exempt status revoked and the group began to restructure as a for-profit entity with a smaller non-profit affiliate. The religious right continues to pressure Congress and others in power for bans on abortions, repeal of the marriage penalty tax, and a constitutional amendment allowing prayer in schools.

This leaves a quandary for the Republican Party. The religious right can really deliver votes but they turn off moderate Republicans and business groups who donate most of the money for campaigns.

**Business Groups, Trade and Professional Associations**
Business and other groups also rallied in the 1970’s and 1980’s. In 1972, they created the Business Roundtable to encourage business leaders to directly lobby government officials. Most large corporations have their own lobbyists in Washington and give huge sums to favored politicians.

**Organized Labor**

The political clout of organized labor has been falling since its heyday (the late 1950s after the merger of the AFL and the CIO). Union membership has been falling for decades, as the economy has been shifting from industry to service and now high-tech. In 1997, only 13.9% of its workers were unionized. In 1996, the unions seemed to reclaim some of their clout. They went back to basics, ran grassroots campaigns, and did lots of soft money advertisements. In 1998, they moved away from the ads and vested more heavily in grassroots campaigning. Union members went to the polls in record numbers voting mostly Democratic.

**What Do Interest Groups Do?**

As an example of what interest groups do, let's take the 1993 health care reform proposal put forward by President Clinton. More than $100 million was spent in campaign contributions, television ads, expense paid trips for lawmakers on both sides, and more. Campaign contributions alone were over $25 million and over $8.2 million of that went to members of the five committees most likely to have jurisdiction over the legislation. 650 health related groups made contributions. The AMA sponsored 55 trips to sunny spots where lawmakers addressed groups, played golf, and sunned themselves. At least 80 former executive and legislative branch officials went to work for health interests at this time. This is an extreme example.

Interest groups also do a lot of good. And some groups with little political clout and little money have made a huge difference like the NAACP. Interest groups allow individuals to gather together to multiply their political power. A congressman may not meet with you as an individual, but they will meet with a representative of an association of 800,000 members. Banding together promotes common interests.

The downside is that most interest groups make claims without regard to broad interests or the effects of their demands on other groups or individuals. This selfishness is not positive for society as a whole.

**Lobbying Congress**

The most common and effective interest group technique is lobbying or seeking to influence and persuade others to support your group's position. Universities, businesses, foreign countries, trade associations hire lobbyists, and anyone else wanting their voice heard on Capitol Hill.

The most popular ways to lobby include:
- testifying at legislative hearings
• talking directly to government officials
• helping to draft legislation
• alerting state legislators of a bill's effects on their districts
• having influential constituents contact a legislator's office
• mounting grassroots campaigns
• letter writing
• donating money
• litigation
• endorsing candidates and more

However, a lobbyist cannot lie or misrepresent the truth if he or she wants to remain effective. Access to lawmakers is critical and if you get the reputation of being untruthful doors will close all over Washington. Of course, lobbyists put their group's position in a favorable light but good lobbyists will also make lawmakers aware of the downsides of a bill and the arguments on that side as well.

Attempts to Reform Congressional Lobbying

The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act in 1946 was the first attempt to regulate lobbying. The Act required lobbyists to register as a lobbyist and file quarterly financial reports. Few did. Public opinion polls continued to show that Americans think Congress is often 'bought' so in 1995 Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act. Lobbyists (those who spend over 20% of their time in lobbying activities) are required to register with the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate, report their clients and the agency or house they lobbied, and estimate the amount they were paid by each client. In 1998, 14,000 lobbying groups were registered in Washington, DC.

Lobbying the Executive Branch

In the executive branch, lobbyists work closely with the administration to try to influence policy at the formulation and implementation stages of the process. There are many points of access in the executive from the White House to the agencies and beyond.

Especially strong links exist between interest groups and regulatory agencies. Groups monitor and report on laws and the expertise of the lobbyists is often needed by various agencies as well.

Lobbying the Courts

Many court cases are supported by an interest group or interest groups submit a friend of the court brief to lobby the courts. Interest groups also attempt to influence judicial appointments aiming for judges who might be sympathetic to their issues.

Grassroots Lobbying and Protest Activities
Interest groups also mobilize individuals at the grassroots through door-to-door campaigns or petition drives. Fax campaigns and Internet lobbying are also becoming popular. The goal is to get constituents to argue your case for you. They are often quite influential. The Civil Rights Movement used non-violent protest to excellent effect and others have used more violent forms of protest to draw attention to problems. This has been an American tradition since the Boston Tea Party.

**Election Activities**

Interest groups can also have an effect by electioneering such as:

- Endorsements
- Rating the Candidates or Office Holders
- Creating Political Parties
- Get out the vote campaigns
- Giving money
- Creating political parties

**Interest Groups and Political Action Committees (PACs)**

Since the 1970s, most interest groups have formed PACs. A PAC is a political arm for a business, labor, trade, professional, or other group legally authorized to raise funds on a voluntary basis from employees or members to contribute to a party or candidate. PAC money plays a significant role in campaigns.

**Conclusion**

Interest groups are both democratic and anti-democratic, they are part of the system and hurt the system, in truth they are a paradox. Was Madison right? Does the proliferation of groups keep a balance in the system and prevent anyone group from getting too powerful or has money corrupted the whole theory?

Your answers may rest on what you think of government. If you believe that government is made up of self-seeking, power and money hungry, dishonest individuals—then interest groups are bad because they encourage the corruption inherent in the system. On the other hand, if you believe people go into government for good sound reasons like helping others or solving societal problems. And believe most are honest and have principles...then they probably can't be bought. Alternatively, you can think of it this way: do interest group contributions change minds? Or do interest groups contribute to like-minded people? Could the NRA give enough money to Jim Brady to change his pro gun control stance? Not likely. Could the Abortion Rights League give enough money to an anti-abortion congressman to change his or her vote? No. So are interest groups good, bad, or indifferent? You will need to decide.