During national election years, political parties become a much more important and visible feature in the political landscape of the United States.

I. WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

A political party is a group of political activists who organize to win elections, to operate the government, and to determine public policy. This definition makes a distinction between a political party and an interest group. Interest groups want to influence public policy, but are not interested in controlling the government. This definition also distinguishes parties from factions, which are smaller groups of individuals, often within a political party, who are acting together in pursuit of some special interest or position. For a political party to be successful, it must unite diverse groups that have different policy orientations. These are the functions of political parties in the United States:

- Recruiting candidates to run for elective offices at all levels of government on the party label. By attracting quality candidates the party enhances its chance of winning the elective positions and controlling the government.

- Organizing and running elections is technically a government responsibility, but the parties mobilize citizens to vote and participate.

- Presenting alternative policies to the electorate is an essential role. By understanding the position of each party on the major issues the voter has some indication of the position of the party’s candidates.

- Accepting the responsibility of operating government at all levels of the government is crucial to the functioning of the political process. Parties organize Congress (see Chapter 11 on committee organization), affect how the president selects individuals to serve in the executive branch (see Chapters 12 and 13) and how the president nominates federal judges (see Chapter 14 on the nomination process). Parties also perform the same functions at the state and local levels of government.

- Providing organized opposition to the party in power is an essential role for a party that does not control one or another branch of the government.

II. A HISTORY OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Political parties did not exist when the Constitution was drafted and are not mentioned anywhere in the Constitution. Yet, it was the debate on the ratification of the Constitution that helped give rise to the first political organization. Generally, the development of parties can be divided into seven time periods.

A. The Formative Years: Federalists and Anti-Federalists

The two-party system can be said to have originated in the debate between supporters of the Constitution (the Federalists) and those who thought the states should be the locus of authority and advocated a Bill of Rights (the Anti-
Federalists). Under George Washington and John Adams, the Federalist Party was the first party to control the national government. By 1796, however, another party came into the political process. This party was headed by Thomas Jefferson and was called the Republicans. (Do not confuse this party with the later party of Lincoln.) While Jefferson’s party supported the Constitution, it was clearly the heir of the pre-revolutionary republican movement and the later Anti-Federalists.

B. **The Era of Good Feelings**

The Federalist Party began to erode as a viable party after 1800. (It was fatally identified with aristocratic tendencies.) By 1820 it was unable to field a presidential candidate and was essentially extinct. Only the Republicans were left to control the government. This period, sometimes called the **Era of Good Feelings**, is perhaps the only time in which the United States did not have a two-party system. Given the relative insignificance of parties, it is also referred to as the era of personal politics.

C. **National Two-Party Rule: Democrats and Whigs**

With the fiercely contested election of 1824, the Republican Party split into the Democrats (Jackson supporters) and the National Republicans (Adams supporters). The National Republicans soon renamed themselves the Whigs.

D. **The Civil War Crisis**

The argument over slavery first split the Whigs and then the Democrats along North/South lines. Northern Whigs formed the largest element in the new anti-slavery Republican Party.

E. **The Post-Civil War Period**

The abolition of the “three-fifths” rule meant counting all former slaves in allocating House seats and electoral votes. With this addition, and after the readmission of all Confederate states, the reunited Democratic Party was now about as strong as the Republicans.

1. **“Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion.”** Cultural factors divided the parties. The Republican ranks contained an aggressive Evangelical Protestant element that was hostile to Catholicism and favored moralistic initiatives such as banning the sale of liquor. Democrats opposed a strong national government that could impose coercive moralistic measures in the North and protect the rights of the “freedmen” in the South.

2. **The Triumph of the Republicans.** The Republicans did not gain a decisive edge until 1896, when at the bottom of an economic depression, the Democrats endorsed a pro-debtor populist platform that frightened Eastern workers. The Republicans won just in time to benefit from the
end of the depression, and thus sealed their reputation as the party of prosperity.

F. The Progressive Interlude
A temporary split in the Republican ranks allowed the Democrats to gain control of the government under President Woodrow Wilson from 1912 to 1920. This period is significant because under Wilson, the Democrats began to move away from their former hostility to government action in the economy.

G. The New Deal Era
The Great Depression shattered the working-class belief in Republican economic competence. President Franklin Roosevelt completed the evolution of the Democrats into a party of active government. (One characterization by a sympathetic professor was, “Hamiltonian means, Jeffersonian ends.”) Roosevelt’s “big tent” was big enough to welcome African Americans, an unprecedented development.

H. An Era of Divided Government
Northern Democratic support for the civil rights movement tended to push Southern conservatives out of the party. The unrest of the late 1960s (i.e., urban riots, anti-Vietnam War protests) alienated other cultural conservatives from the Democrats. These voters largely became Republicans, though the process was a slow one lasting decades, not an overnight revolution such as was seen in 1896 and 1932.

1. The Parties in Balance. In any event, the result has been a nation very evenly divided between the two major parties. In the years after 1968, the pattern was often a Republican president and a Democratic Congress. Under Democratic President Clinton, the pattern was reversed.

2. Red State, Blue State. The extraordinarily close presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 focused attention on the supposed differences between Democratic “blue states” and Republican “red states,” in particular cultural differences. The geographic pattern of state support for the parties is the reverse of the pattern of 1896, neatly exemplifying the reversal of Democratic Party ideology and support.

III. THE TWO MAJOR U.S. PARTIES TODAY
A. The Parties’ Core Constituents
These constituencies were set forth in Chapter 6 of the text. Democrats receive disproportionate support from the least well-educated but also from those with advanced degrees. Upper-income citizens and businesspersons are generally more Republican. Jewish, African Americans, and Hispanics are heavily Democratic. White evangelical Christians, who are regular churchgoers, tend to be Republicans. Women are somewhat more Democratic than men. City dwellers
tend to be Democrats; rural people tend to be Republicans. In presidential elections, the South, the Rocky Mountain states, and the Great Plains states typically vote Republican; the West Coast and the Northeast are more likely to vote Democratic. Generally, partisan tendencies represent influences of economic interests and cultural values, which are often at odds.

B. Economic Beliefs

Labor and minorities have been Democratic core constituents since the New Deal era, and their social and economic positions tend to reflect this. “Republicans are more supportive of the private marketplace, and believe more strongly in an ethic of self-reliance and limited government.”

1. Economic Directions. Although political rhetoric in recent years suggests that both parties favor limited government, some observers argue that both parties, in practice, favor big government. In particular, budget deficits rose under Republicans Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and declined under Democrat Bill Clinton.

2. Republican and Democratic Budgets. Democrats have the reputation of supporting the less-well-off, and Republicans have the reputation of supporting the prosperous.

C. Cultural Politics

Cultural politics have become more important in recent years as a reason why people support one of the major parties.

1. Cultural Politics and Socioeconomic Status. In cultural politics, the upper classes tend to be more liberal than the lower ones, a reversal of the pattern seen in economic politics.

2. The Regional Factor in Cultural Politics. Wealthy states and regions now appear more supportive of the Democrats, and less-well-off ones more supportive of the Republicans.

D. The 2008 Elections: Economics and National Security

Voters grew tired of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and grew more worried about the economic recession. In both cases, they blamed Republicans more than Democrats for the country’s problems.

IV. THE THREE FACES OF A PARTY

Political parties in the United States can be said to be comprised of three components. The party-in-the-electorate is comprised of the people who identify with the party or who regularly vote for the candidates of the party in general elections. Without the party-in-the-electorate, it would not be possible for the party to have electoral success. The party organization is the second element. The function of the party organization is to provide leadership and structure for the party. The last element is the party-in-
**government.** This includes the elected and appointed officials who gained office under the label of the party. Once in office these leaders organize to influence governmental policy toward the platform of the party.

**A. Party Organization**

In theory, each party has a pyramid-shaped organization. This structure, however, does not accurately reflect the relative power of the individual components of the party organization. In reality, the political parties have a confederal structure, in which each unit has significant autonomy and is linked only loosely to the other units.

**B. The National Party Organization**

While the parties have the appearance of a pyramid with the national organization at the top and the local **party organization** serving as the base, this theoretical structure is not realistic. Rather, American political parties tend to operate like a confederacy, where the state parties act autonomously and have loose connections to each other and to the National Committee.

1. **Convention Delegates.** The national party organization receives the most publicity during the national convention. Members of the party who have been selected to attend the convention meet to nominate the presidential candidate, approve the **party platform** and approve the presidential candidate’s selection of a vice-presidential candidate. This convention is held once every four years. Convention delegates typically have political views further from the center than the supporters of the party in the electorate.

2. **The National Committee.** Elected by the national convention, the **National Committee** serves as the party’s governing body until the next convention.

3. **Picking a National Chairperson.** This person is picked or approved by the party’s presidential candidate. If the candidate loses, however, the National Committee may choose a different chairperson.

**C. The State Party Organization**

Each state also has a party organization. There is a state chairperson and a **state central committee.** Like the national party, each state party holds a state convention, which may endorse some candidates, depending on state law. A state party platform is drafted that focuses on state-level issues.

**D. Local Party Machinery: The Grassroots**

1. **Patronage and City Machines.** In the 1800s and early 1900s, major cities typically had powerful political “machines” that supplied welfare services and jobs to an immigrant-based clientele in return for votes. Such machines no longer exist. Welfare services are now provided by a
nonpartisan bureaucracy and government jobs are assigned through competitive examinations.

2. **Local Party Organizations Today.** Local organizations have important functions, such as getting out the vote. The local party organization differs in different regions of the country. In some areas the party has little local organization. In other areas there may be a very strong local organization that controls the local governmental process. The national party has little control over local organizations.

E. **The Party-in-Government**

For the parties, winning elections is important for a number of reasons. The majority party can dominate committees in legislatures, decide appointments in the executive branch, and set the political agenda.

1. **Divided Government.** Given the system of checks and balances, it is important to note that gaining a partisan majority does not mean absolute power. Indeed, in the era of ticket splitting and divided government, majority partisan advantage is almost always tempered by the opposition.

2. **The Limits of Party Unity.** Legislation often does not pass on party-line votes. The reason, in part, is that candidates for the House and Senate are not dependent on their party, but put together personal campaign organizations deemed to result in candidate-centered elections. However, Democrats in the 111th Congress won a number of votes in favor of Obama initiatives like health care reform and energy with strict party-line votes. Obama’s appeal for a post-partisan Washington persuaded few, if any, Republicans to cross over and vote with Democrats.

3. **Party Polarization.** Still, partisanship appears to have increased in recent years, and parties have become more cohesive. Incumbents from both parties holding safe seats face little risk of general-election competition, so members of the House can be more partisan. Also, various elements of the media have discovered that “stridency sells,” and therefore promote polarization. Some commentators, though, do not believe that partisan polarization extends very far into the general electorate.

V. **WHY HAS THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM ENDURED?**

A. **The Historical Foundations of the Two-Party System**

With great frequency throughout our history, major issues confronting the country have produced two clear sides. This duality helped to initiate a two-party system and has maintained this system to the present.

B. **Political Socialization and Practical Considerations**
For generations, all that has existed is a two-party system. If individuals are not exposed to anything but a two-party system, they will not likely seek change to a different type of system.

C. The Winner-Take-All Electoral System

This system elects the candidate who receives a plurality of the votes. Candidates who finish second receive nothing. Assume a situation in which a party is able to gain 19 percent of the vote nationwide, but in no single district manages to attain a plurality. The party will elect no candidates.

1. Presidential Voting. The winner-take-all system also works in presidential voting. In all but two states, the presidential candidate with a plurality gets all the electoral votes of that state. This is the unit rule.

2. Popular Election of the Governors and President. In most democratic countries, the chief executive is a premier or prime minister elected by the legislature. If there are three or more parties, two or more can band together to elect a premier (see Beyond the Borders in Chapter 10). In America, however, governors are elected directly by the people and presidents are elected indirectly by the people. There is no opportunity for negotiation between parties.

3. Proportional Representation. Many countries use proportional representation in elections. Such a system allows a party to receive the number of legislators equal to the percentage of the vote the party received. If a party receives 19 percent of the vote, it would then receive 19 percent of the seats in the legislature. As long as the United States continues to use a winner-take-all electoral system, it is highly unlikely that a minor party will be successful.

D. State and Federal Laws Favoring the Two Parties

This occurs because the two major parties are in control of the policymaking process. As long as the Democrats and Republicans are in power at the state and national levels, they will continue to pass laws that favor the two-party system and will pass laws making it difficult for new parties to develop.

VI. THE ROLE OF MINOR PARTIES IN U.S. POLITICS

A. Ideological Third Parties

Many third parties are long-lived organizations with strong ideological foundations. A historical example is the Socialist Party, which existed from 1900 to 1972. Current examples include the Libertarian Party and the Green Party.

B. Splinter Parties

Not all minor parties have been based on a different ideology from the major parties. A few minor parties are formed when members of one of the two major
parties are dissatisfied with the leader of the major party, or the members are dissatisfied with the platform of the major party. These are usually referred to as spin-off parties. For example, the Bull-Moose Progressives were a spin-off of the Republican Party. The Progressives were those reform-minded Republicans who supported the candidacy of Theodore Roosevelt over that of William Howard Taft.

C. The Impact of Minor Parties

No presidential candidate has been elected from a minor party. Very few members of Congress have been elected on the label of a minor party. But minor parties have had an impact in that they raise issues that the two major parties must address. These parties also provide voters with another option.

1. Influencing the Major Parties. Minor parties can raise issues that major parties then adopt. The Populist Party was an example. Many of its policies were taken over by the Democrats in 1896 (which ironically hurt the Democrats rather than helping them). During its existence, the Socialist Party advanced many proposals that were picked up by liberals (and sometimes even by a bipartisan consensus).

2. Affecting the Outcome of an Election. Some claim that the candidacy of Ralph Nader on the Green Party ticket hurt Democrat Al Gore’s chances of winning the presidency, particularly given how close the election was. Nader may have taken votes from Gore, thus giving George W. Bush an edge.

VII. MECHANISMS OF POLITICAL CHANGE

A. Realignment

Key term: Realignment is a process in which a substantial group of voters switch party allegiance, thus producing a long-term change in the political landscape.

1. Realignment: The Myth of Dominance. Realignments do not have to result in a dominant party. The realignment associated with the creation of the modern Republicans eventually produced a country that was relatively evenly divided between the parties. The same is true of the most recent realignment in which conservative Democrats became Republicans.

2. Realignment: The Myth of Predictability. It is a happenstance that realignments have been relatively evenly spaced through American history.

3. Is Realignment Still Possible? Realignments followed from party coalitions that included contradictory elements—both slave owners and opponents of slavery (the Whigs), both workers and their employers (the Republicans after 1896), or both African Americans and segregationists
(the Democrats after 1932). It is almost inevitable that such coalitions will break up. Given the increasing cohesion of each of the parties today, however, a realignment is unlikely.

B. Dealignment

Some argue that realignment has been replaced by dealignment—a major drop-off in support for the parties.

1. Independent Voters. The number of independents has grown steadily since the 1930s. Split-ticket voting is more common.

2. Not-So-Independent Voters. But many “independents” really do prefer one or another of the two parties. The number of true independents may not exceed ten percent of the voters.

C. Tipping

Political transformation can also result from changes in the composition of the electorate.

1. Tipping in Massachusetts. If one ethnic group grows more rapidly than another, this may result in tipping a state from one party to the other. The famous example is Massachusetts, where in 1928 the Democratic Irish finally outnumbered the Republican Yankees.

2. Tipping in California? This state appears to have recently tipped to the Democrats as it became the third state in which non-Hispanic whites do not make up a majority of the population. Of course, Hispanics and African Americans both tend to vote Democratic.

D. On to the Future

Will cultural and economic conservatism draw more voters to the Republicans? Or will cultural liberalism and increased immigration help the Democrats? Time will tell.