

PARTY POLITICS IN AMERICA

FIFTH EDITION

SORAU

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
Boston Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Sorauf, Frank J. (Frank Joseph), 1928–
Party politics in America.

1. Political parties—United States. I. Title.
JK2265.S65 1984 324.273 83-24891
ISBN 0-316-80439-8

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 83-24891

ISBN 0-316-80439-8

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Published simultaneously in Canada
by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited

Printed in the United States of America

Acknowledgments begin on page 463.

For My Mother and Father

Preface

The purposes and outlooks of this book—even its eccentricities—will be apparent to readers without my alerting them in a lengthy preface. And what prefatory materials on the parties ought to be read I have included in the introductions to the six parts of the book, where they *will* be read.

The sins of commission of which I am guilty are on the pages of the book for everyone to see. I hope readers will not hesitate to call them to my attention. My sins of omission may, however, require a brief comment. With the scholarly literature on parties growing so rapidly, I have had to make difficult, even arbitrary, selections from it. In the interests of both brevity and logic, I have also resisted the temptation to dwell at length on interest groups and American voting behavior. This is a self-imposed limitation, but I think it can be defended on intellectual as well as practical grounds.

Readers familiar with earlier editions of this book will find that the basic approach and structure of the book remain the same, but there are a number of changes. I have thoroughly updated the book to reflect recent events and new developments in American politics and to draw on the scholarly literature of the last four years. I have also done some rewriting and recasting on many pages in the interest of greater clarity. Beyond these usual changes, I have more thoroughly reworked the chapters on the national parties and campaign finance. I hope the result is a clearer and more useful book.

Finally, I should like to acknowledge some of the debts I have incurred in putting this book into its fifth edition. This one bears enough similarity to the first four editions for the debts incurred in doing them to continue here. To the thanks I gave in the prefaces to those editions I should like to add a few more. Many students, friends, and colleagues continue to make useful comments about the book. I hope they will forgive such a brief and collective acknowledgment. I am especially indebted to Steven J. Rosenstone for his extended comments and observations and to Gerald R. Elliott for his help in locating materials. I am also grateful for the splendid work of my typist, Gloria Priem, and my research assistant, Stephen Ansolabehere. As usual, too, the people at Little, Brown were patient and helpful.

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I

Parties and Party Systems

The open and aggressive pursuit of personal advantage will probably never win the admiration of any society. It certainly has not won the admiration of ours. Yet the things men and women want for themselves and for others—status, security, justice, and wealth, for example—are in short supply. People compete for them by trying to influence government to recognize their claims rather than those of others. This striving to win the things we think desirable—a striving we call “politics”—is therefore as widespread as those desires are.

The pervasiveness of politics is a central fact of our times. We have seen in the twentieth century an enormous expansion of governmental activity. The demands of a complex, increasingly urbanized, industrialized society, and the dictates of a world beset by international tensions, do not easily permit a return to limited government. For the foreseeable future, a substantial proportion of the important conflicts over the desirable things in American society will be settled within the political system. The really meaningful issues of our time will surely be how influence and power are organized within the political system, who wins the rewards and successes of that political activity, and to whom the people who make the decisions are responsible. It will increasingly be within the political system that we will decide, in the candid phrase of Harold Lasswell, “who gets what, when, how.”¹

In the United States, these political contestings are directed largely at the regular institutions of government. Few political scientists believe that the real and important political decisions are made clandestinely by murky, semivisible elites and merely ratified by the governmental bodies they con-

¹The phrase comes from the title of Harold Lasswell's pioneering book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936).

trol.² It may happen, to be sure, that political decisions in a local community are made by a group of influential local citizens rather than by a city council or a mayor or a school board. Nonetheless, one is reasonably safe in looking for the substance of American politics in the legislatures, executives, and courts of the nation, the fifty states, and localities. The politics of which we have been talking consists, therefore, of the attempts to influence either the making of decisions within these governmental bodies or the selecting of the men and women who will make them.

This struggle for influence, this "politics," is not unorganized, however confusing it may seem to be. Large political organizations attempt to mobilize influence on behalf of aggregates of individuals. In the Western democracies the political party is unquestionably the most important and pervasive of these political organizations. It is not, however, the only one. Interest groups such as the American Farm Bureau Federation and the AFL-CIO also mobilize influence. So do smaller factions and cliques, charismatic individuals, and nonparty political organizations such as Americans for Democratic Action and the American Conservative Union. And so do the political action committees (PACs) that pay a substantial part of the costs of American campaigning. We cannot, therefore, use the term *politics* to refer only to the activities of the political parties. Even though a substantial portion of American politics goes on within and through the political parties, a substantial portion also goes on outside them. Interest groups rather than parties, for example, bring certain issues and policy questions to legislatures and administrative agencies. Nonparty organizations also support candidates for office with money and manpower, sometimes even more effectively than the parties do. Thus, the terms *politics* and *political* include not only the activity of the political parties but also that of other political organizers.

At this point, it may help to step back and survey the entire political system in order to understand the place of parties and other political organizations in it (Figure I.1). All these political organizations work as intermediaries between the millions of political individuals and the distant policymakers in government. They build influence into large aggregates in order to have a greater effect on the selection of policymakers and the policies they will make. At the same time, they codify and simplify information about government and politics as it moves back to the individual. In a very real sense, therefore, these political organizers are the informal agents by which individuals are represented in the complex democracies of our time. They are both the builders and the agents of majorities.

In any political system, the political organizations develop an informal

²C. Wright Mills, in *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), offers the best-known example of such interpretations of American politics.

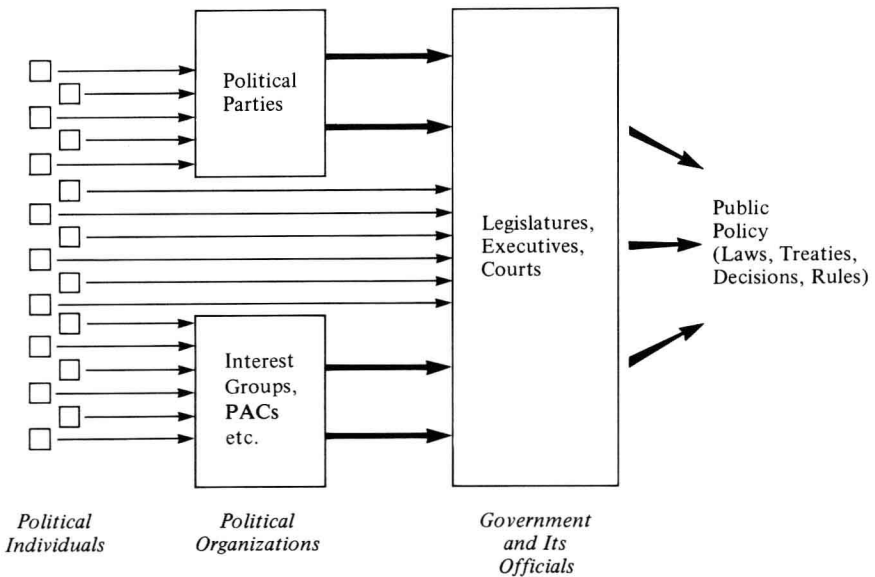


FIGURE 1.1 *Political Organizations as Organizing Intermediaries in the Political System*

division of labor. The political parties concentrate on contesting elections as a way of aggregating influence. Others, especially the interest groups, pursue the avenues of direct influence on legislators or administrators. Still others seek mainly to propagate ideologies or build support on specific issues of foreign or domestic policy. Indeed, the nature of the division of labor among the various political organizations says a great deal about any political system and about the general processes of mobilizing influence within it. The division also speaks meaningfully about the political parties. It is a commonplace, for example, that among the parties of the democracies, the American political parties are occupied to an unusual extent with the single activity of contesting elections. The parties of Western Europe, on the other hand, have been more committed to spreading ideologies and disciplining legislators. And those of countries such as India have been more involved with transmitting political values and information to a citizenry that lacks other avenues of political socialization and communication.

The division of labor among political organizations is, however, neither clear nor permanent. There is always an overlapping—and hence a competition—among political organizations over the performance of their activities. That competition is most obvious when it takes place within the party system, the competition of one party against another. It also takes

place, however, between parties and other political organizations—for example, in the competition of parties and powerful interest groups for the attention and support of legislators or for the right to name a candidate in a primary election. Furthermore, the extent to which any one kind of political organization controls or participates in any one kind of organizing activity may change radically over time. Certainly, no one would argue that the American political parties today control as much of the business of campaigning as they did 70 or 80 years ago.

All of this competing for a role in American politics implies another kind of competition. The political organizations compete among themselves for political resources: money, skills, expertise, the efforts of men and women. All of these resources are necessary for the fueling of organizational activity, but none of them is in particularly abundant supply in the American society. Then, with those resources at hand, they compete for the support of individual citizens—that is, they seek their support for the goals and leadership of the organization. In sum, the parties and other political organizations compete for scarce resources with which to mobilize the political influence necessary to capture the scarce rewards the political system allocates. They compete first for the capacity to organize influence and then for the influence itself.

Despite these excursions beyond the subject of political parties, however, this is a book about political parties. The broader survey of politics and political organizations has merely been background for two themes that will recur throughout the remainder of the book. The first is that the political party is not the unique political organization we have conventionally thought it to be. On the contrary, it is frequently similar to other political organizations, and the difficulty of coming to a clear, agreed-on definition of a political party illustrates that point only too well. When one undertakes any exercise in definition, as we do for the parties in the first chapter, the temptation is always to err on the side of the distinctiveness, even the uniqueness, of the phenomenon one is trying to define. It may well be that the distinctions between parties and other political organizations are not, after all, so great as one might imagine. Parties do have their distinctive qualities—and it is important to know them—but there is little point in denying their similarity to many other political organizations.

Second, the broad perspective is essential background for assessing the role and position of the political parties in the American democracy. American writers about the political parties have not been modest in their claims for them. They have celebrated the parties as agents of democracy and even as the chosen instruments through which a democratic citizenry governs itself. Some have gone a step further to proclaim them the originators of the democratic processes that they now serve. E. E. Schattschneider opened his classic study of the American parties this way in 1942:

The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as *makers* of governments, more especially they have been the makers of democratic government. It should be stated flatly at the outset that this volume is devoted to the thesis that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.³

Other scholars, and many thoughtful Americans, too, agree that the American democracy presumes the two-party system of today.

Yet the major American parties have changed and continue to change—both in the form of their organization and in the pattern and style of their activities. Political parties as they existed a century ago scarcely exist today, and the political parties we know today may not exist even a half-century from now. In this book, a vigorous case will be made for the proposition that the political parties have lost their preeminent position as political organizations and that competing political organizations now perform many of the activities traditionally regarded as the parties' exclusive prerogatives.⁴ If this is indeed the case, we must face the question of whether political parties are indeed indispensable and inevitable shapers of our democratic politics.

These two suspicions—that the parties may be less distinctive and their activities less pervasive than we have thought—add up, perhaps, to no more than a plea for modesty in the study of the American political parties. It is perfectly natural for both young and experienced scholars to identify with the objects of their study and thus to exaggerate their importance. Medievalists often find the late Middle Ages to be the high point of Western civilization, and most scholars of hitherto obscure painters and philosophers find the objects of their study to have been sadly neglected or tragically underestimated. So, too, has it been with the study of political parties.

All of this is not to suggest, out of hand, that the American political parties are or have been of little importance. Their long life and their role in the politics of the world's oldest representative democracy scarcely lead to that conclusion. The plea here is merely for a careful assessment, for an abandoning of preconceptions, old judgments, and "great general truths." Assertions that political parties are essential to or the keystone of American democracy may or may not be true, but simply as assertions they advance our understanding of politics and parties very little. The proof is in the evidence, and the evidence is in a detailed knowledge of what the political parties are and what they do.

³E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Rinehart, 1942), p. 1.

⁴See also Anthony King, "Political Parties in Western Democracies," *Polity* 2 (1969): 111-41.

1

IN SEARCH OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

Consider the American adults who insist, "I'm a strong Republican," and "I've been a Democrat all my life." It is unlikely that they ever worked within the party organization of their choice, much less made a financial contribution to it. They would be hard-pressed to recall its recent platform commitments, and if they did, they would not necessarily feel any loyalty to them. Furthermore, they probably never meet with the other Americans who express the same party preferences, and they would likely find it difficult to name the local officials of their party. In fact, their loyalty to the party of which they consider themselves "members" may be little more than a disposition to support its candidates at elections if all other considerations are fairly equal. Yet when the interviewers of polling organizations come to their doors, they hesitate not at all to attach themselves to that political party. And we do not hesitate to credit their word, for it is in the nature of the American parties to consider people Democrats or Republicans merely because they say they are.

Are the major American parties, then, nothing more than great, formless aggregates of people who say they are Democrats and Republicans? Are they nothing more than vague political labels that people attach themselves to? It is perilously easy to conclude so, but the American political parties are also organizations. It is possible to join them, to work within them, to become officers in them, to participate in setting their goals and strategies—much as one would within a local fraternal organization or a machinists' union. They have characteristics that we associate with social organizations: stable, patterned personal relationships and common goals. In other words, they are more than aggregates of people clinging in various degrees of intensity to a party label.

The act of defining the political party, and the American parties in particular, is hampered by the fact that the nature of the political party,

like beauty, often rests in the eye of the beholder. The definition is often a personal perception; it seems to depend on what one is looking for, what one hopes to see, what consequences one wants parties to have. (See, for example, the range of definitions in the box.) Any one person's definition is likely to be rooted in a particular time and orientation and therefore is not likely to reflect the diversity that marks the parties. Whatever the rea-

A Variety of Definitions of the Political Party

Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.

Edmund Burke,
*Thoughts on the Cause
of the Present Discontents* (1770)

. . . Any group, however loosely organized, seeking to elect governmental office-holders under a given label.

Leon D. Epstein,
Political Parties in Western Democracies
(New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1979), p. 9.

"Party" or "political party" means any political organization which elects a state committee and officers of a state committee, by a state convention composed of delegates elected from each representative district in which the party has registered members and which nominates candidates for electors of President and Vice President, or nominates candidates for offices to be decided at the general election."

Delaware Statutes (15 Del. C. § 101)

"Established political party" for the state shall mean a political party which, at either of the last two general elections, polled for its candidate for any statewide office, more than two percent of the entire vote cast for the office. . . .

Missouri Statutes (V.A.M.S. § 115.013)

At the local level parties have degenerated in most parts of the country to the point where they are now simply legal conveniences by which ambitious people with independent financing gain access to a ballot line.

John B. Anderson,
independent candidate for president in 1980,
in *New York Times*, October 31, 1982.

son, however, neither political scientists nor politicians have achieved any consensus on what sets the political party apart from other political organizations.

Despite the absence of consensus, however, the most common definitions fall into three main categories. Those whose approach is ideological define the parties in terms of commonly held ideas, values, or stands on issues. That approach has not engaged many observers of the American political parties, for ideological homogeneity or purpose has not been a hallmark of the major American parties. Most of the attempts at definition vacillate between two other options. One of these views the political party as a hierarchical organization or structure that draws into its orbit large numbers of voters, candidates, and active party workers. The other approach sees the political parties largely in terms of what they do—their role, function, or activities in the American political systems. Proponents of this approach frequently identify American political parties with election campaigns. We now turn to these two approaches.

THE POLITICAL PARTY AS A SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Large organizations or social structures consist of people in various roles, responsibilities, patterns of activities, and reciprocal relationships. But which people, what activities, what relationships are we talking about when we speak of the two major American parties? The party leaders and officials, the hundreds of anonymous activists who work for candidates and party causes, the people who vote for the party's candidates, the actual dues-paying members, the people who have an emotional involvement in the fortunes of the party, the men and women elected to office on the party's label? All of them? Some of them?

The major American political parties are, in truth, three-headed political giants—tripartite systems of interactions that embrace all these individuals. As political structures, they include a party organization, a party in office, and a party in the electorate (Figure 1.1).

The Party Organization

In the party organization, one finds the formally chosen party leaders, the informally anointed ones, the legions of local captains and leaders, the ward and precinct workers, the members and activists of the party—that is, all those who give their time, money, and skills to the party, whether as leaders or as followers. These are the men and women who make the decisions of the party and who do its work. The organization operates in part through the formal machinery of committees and conventions set by

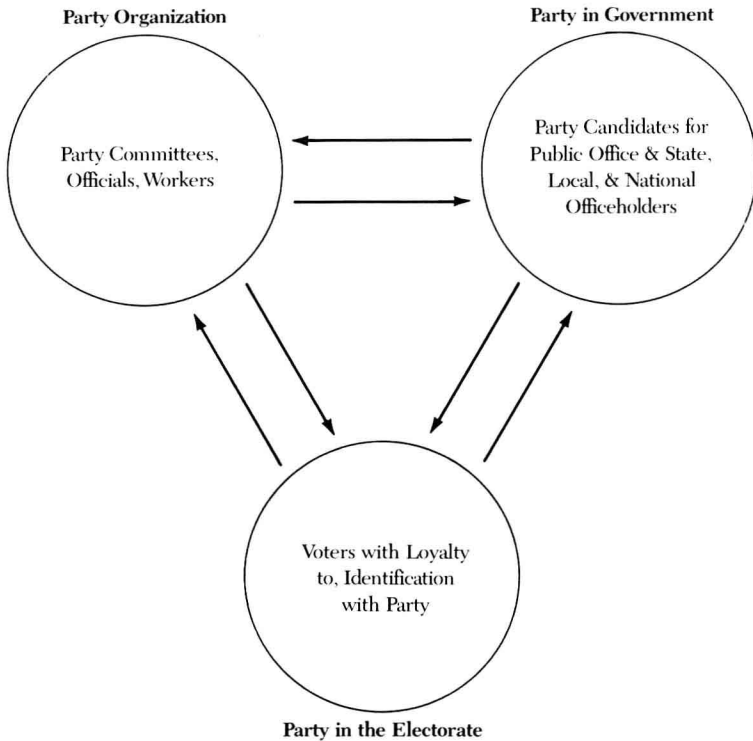


FIGURE 1.1 *The Three-Part Political Party*

the laws of the fifty states and in part through its own informal apparatus. Here one finds the centers of party authority and bureaucracy, and here one also observes the face-to-face contacts and interactions that bespeak organization of any kind.

The Party in Government

The party in government is made up of those who have captured office through the symbols of the party and of those who seek to do so. The chief executives and legislative parties of the nation and the states are its major components. Although in many ways they are not subject to the control or discipline of the party organization, they do, in the broadest sense, speak for the party. Their pronouncements are the most audible party statements and carry the greatest weight with the public. A party's president or leader in the Congress claims more attention than its national chairperson.

The Party in the Electorate

The party in the electorate is the party's least well defined part. It comprises the men and women who affiliate casually with it, show it some degree of loyalty, and even vote habitually for it, even though they do not participate in the party organization or interact with its leaders and activists. These individuals are not subject to the incentives and disciplines of the party organization. They are, in effect, the regular consumers of the party's candidates and appeals. As such, they make up the majorities necessary for effective political power in the American political system. Their association with the party is a passive one, however—accepting here, rejecting there, always threatening the party with the fickleness of their affections.

In their three-part structure, therefore, the major American parties include mixed, varied, and even contradictory components. Each party, for example, is a political organization with active, even disciplined participants. It is also an aggregate of unorganized partisans who may begrudge the party organization even the merest public gesture of support or loyalty. The party thus embraces the widest range of involvement and commitment. It is a reasonably well-defined, voluntary political organization and, at the same time, an open, public collection of loyalists.

Perhaps the most telling characteristic of the major American parties, therefore, is the relationship that their clientele—the party in the electorate—has to them. The other political organizations, such as interest groups and ad hoc campaign organizations, usually work to attract supporters beyond their members and workers; but this wider clientele remains outside the political organization. This is not so with the political party. The party in the electorate is more than an external group to be wooed and mobilized. State laws usually permit it a voice in the selection of the parties' candidates in the direct primary, and in many states it helps select local party officials such as ward and precinct committeepersons. Consequently, the major American party is an open, inclusive, semipublic political organization. It includes both a tangible political organization and its own political clientele (as well as the party in government, of course). In this combination of exclusive organization and inclusive clientele, of organization and electorate, the political party stands apart from the other political organizations on the American scene and apart from parties elsewhere.

Finally, each major party differs from state to state in the relationships and interactions among its three sectors. The Republicans and the Democrats are so decentralized and so diverse that virtually every state party has its own distinctive mix of the three. Party organizations, for example, differ in form from state to state; in some the party organization dominates

the party in government, whereas in others the reverse is the case. Also, party electorates differ in composition and in the bases of their loyalties; in some states the two parties in the electorate divide roughly along social class lines, but in others they do not. Indeed, much of the distinctive quality of a state party is a reflection of the form and composition of each of the party sectors and of their relationships with each other.

THE PARTY AS A CLUSTER OF ACTIVITIES

From a discussion of the political parties as social structures, we move to a definition of them in terms of activities. We move from what they are to what they do. In varying degrees, the competitive political parties of every democracy perform three sets of activities: they select candidates and contest elections, they propagandize on behalf of a party ideology or program, and they attempt to guide the elected officeholders of government. The degree of emphasis that any particular political party puts on each of these individual activities varies within and between countries, but no party completely escapes the necessity of any of them.

Parties as Electors

It often appears that the American parties are little more than regular attempts to capture public office. Electoral activity so dominates the life of the American party that its metabolism follows almost exactly the cycles of the election calendar. Party activity and vitality reach a peak at the elections; between elections, the parties go into a recuperative hibernation. Party activity is goal oriented, and in American politics most of the general goals as well as the goals of the individual sectors depend ultimately on electoral victory. It is, in fact, chiefly in the attempt to achieve their often separate goals through winning public office that the three sectors of the party are brought together in unified action.

Parties as Propagandizers

Second, the American parties carry on a series of loosely related activities that perhaps can best be called education or propagandization. There is, of course, a school of thought that argues that the American parties fail almost completely to function on behalf of ideas or ideologies. The Democrats and Republicans, to be sure, do not espouse the all-inclusive ideologies of a European Marxist or proletarian party. They do, however, represent the interests of and the issue stands congenial to the groups that identify with them and support them. In this sense, they become parties