

35 Political Parties

Political parties defined Political parties are associations of like-minded individuals who come together to promote and articulate philosophically consistent positions on public policy issues based on a set of ideas or values. Political parties propose courses of action (policies) regarding public issues, problems, and concerns. They support candidates for election to public office during election campaigns. Political parties are organizations that seek through electoral contests to gain and exercise political power. Some students of politics place political parties at the center of democracy itself. In this view, modern democracy revolves around the competitive electoral struggle for power among parties; a polity with only one legal party cannot be a democracy.

Political parties can be viewed in three different ways. Parties can be viewed as they exist and are organized in legislatures. A second view is parties as formal organizational structures as they exist in society as a whole, beyond legislatures. A third view is that parties are composed of the mass of citizens who identify themselves as party members among the public at large.

- **Functions of political parties** Political parties are essential components of modern democratic political systems. Without parties, it is difficult to see how democracies composed of millions of citizens, inhabiting substantial, in some cases immense, territories could effectively organize themselves. Examples of the functions of political parties in democratic political systems include the following, of which parties may perform some, many, or all.
 - ▶ *Aggregate public opinion*: giving members of the electorate a coherent public expression of views on a range of public issues and generating a community of interest that can serve as a basis for a coalition of diverse individuals and groups
 - ▶ *Assist in formulating the "public agenda"*: defined as the public policy issues at the forefront of public attention at any particular time and for which varying courses of action are proposed
 - ▶ *Recruit political leaders* by offering opportunities for holding public office
 - ▶ *Nominate candidates for public office*: in some electoral systems presenting slates (formal groupings) of candidates for voter consideration
 - ▶ *Conduct election campaigns* that set forth programs for addressing public issues, problems, and concerns
 - ▶ *Assist voters in judging which candidates most closely approximate voter political views, thus facilitating representation of constituent will and opinion*, as shown in election results
 - ▶ *Act as a link between the government and the public*, thereby providing a means of increasing accountability in elections and government

- ▶ *Provide a means of organizing government* and providing cohesion among the different branches of government
 - ▶ *Control the executive branch of government* through elected officials
 - ▶ *Formulate legislative programs* to implement the public policies that parties propose. Such programs present information to voters about whether they wish to support a party at election time and make the public arena coherent to citizens
 - ▶ *Provide a framework for legislative members* to carry on their work and to present their programs to the public
 - ▶ *Provide members with a feeling of belonging and solidarity* with those who are like-minded
 - ▶ *Provide practical assistance* to members in need
- **Kinds of political parties** Political parties often differ significantly from each other. Parties can take the three forms: each political party may have a legislative party, a formal organizational party structure, and mass membership among the public. No two political parties are necessarily alike with respect to their characteristics. For example:
 - ▶ Some parties are relatively tightly organized "*membership parties*," which provide certain tangible social benefits to members apart from articulating issues, fielding candidates, and running election campaigns.
 - These parties provide facilities where members can meet and socialize and generally offer much closer association among members.
 - Such parties are generally based on strong ideological bonds among members. Members may carry party membership cards.
 - ▶ Others are more *loosely organized parties* and consist of one or more core groups of adherents and spokespersons whose views represent the most elemental political beliefs and orientation of the party. Followers are unorganized and may shift from party to party according to issues or opinion change. Such parties are sometimes formed from coalitions of diverse groups that share particular beliefs or issues.
 - **Party systems** Parties generally exist as part of a "party system." The nature of party systems depends on the type of electoral system a polity has.
 - ▶ Thus *parliamentary systems* tend to have more closely bound parties; legislative members are said to be "disciplined," in that their membership can be revoked if they fail to vote with the party leadership on key issues. In that case leaders will not choose them to represent their party in the next election, and they will lose their legislative seats. Adherence to party is important in parliamentary systems because in its absence governments will fall and political instability result.

- ▶ “*Shared powers*” systems (sometimes misleadingly called “presidential” systems), especially those of large, heterogeneous polities such as the United States, foster party systems composed of looser, “undisciplined” parties since political stability does not depend on party members voting together in legislatures. Thus governments do not “fall” if party members do not vote as a single—“disciplined”—bloc. Also, in large heterogeneous societies parties must be more loosely organized to attract support from a wide range of social groups.

What do you think?

- 1 What is a political party?
- 2 What are the principal roles that political parties play in democratic government?
- 3 Are there any dangers associated with the rule of political parties? If so, what are they?
- 4 How do party systems vary by type of democratic government, such as the differences between parliamentary and “shared powers” systems?