

# Political Science 17.20

## Introduction to American Politics

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**Parties and Partisanship**  
Lecture 14 (March 2, 2013)

# Outline

**1** What Are Parties?

**2** Why Do Parties Exist?

**3** How Do Parties Influence American Politics?

**1** What Are Parties?

2 Why Do Parties Exist?

3 How Do Parties Influence American Politics?

# Definition

**Political Party:** A coalition of citizens who cooperate in order to control the government by winning elections.

# Key Features of Parties

- Parties are **coalitions** of actors with different goals:
  - benefit seekers (of various sorts) → examples?
  - office seekers (i.e., politicians)
- Parties must develop institutional mechanisms of **cooperation** and coordination.
- Parties want to **control government** so they can both enjoy holding office and make the government do (or not do) certain things.
- To achieve office, parties must win **elections**, which requires that they cultivate the loyalty and support of voters.

# Three Aspects of Parties

## Party-in-the-Electorate:

- Ordinary citizens' **behavioral** support and **psychological** identification, not formal membership.
- Parties  $\neq$  partisans

## Party-in-Government:

- Incumbent and aspiring **politicians**, whose actions in office are highly structured by their partisanship.

## Party-as-Organization:

- Leaders and institutions that regulate and coordinate party activities (primary elections, presidential conventions, fundraisers, pollsters, . . .)

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# Parties As Endogenous Institutions

- Some institutions (e.g., federalism) are “exogenous”—that is, they originate outside of normal politics.
- By contrast, political parties are **endogenous** institutions: they were created as part of the political process and have evolved substantially over American history.
- Parties were intentionally **created** by strategic political actors as **solutions to fundamental political problems**.

# Three Functions of Political Parties

Parties help office seekers and benefit seekers solve three fundamental **problems**:

## 1 Social Choice

- Legislators can achieve more favorable and more stable outcomes if they can agree to cooperate → logroll.

## 2 Coordination

- Too many ambitious politicians → split the vote
- Parties regulate access to office, helping like-minded activists and voters coordinate on candidates.

## 3 Collective Action

- Shared partisan resources (GOTV, party reputation) are **collective goods** → need party organization to provide

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# Parties and Democracy

- Democracy is “unworkable” without parties.
- Parties simplify the multitude of potential issues and candidates down to a single simple choice.
- This makes it radically easier for ordinary citizens to participate in politics.
- But it comes at the cost of closing off certain choices
  - no pro-choice, anti-gay marriage, pro-gun, pro-union, anti-war, anti-regulation, and pro-environment candidates

# Divergence and Convergence

- At some fundamental level, the very point of parties is to skew political outcomes towards those preferred by the party → **divergence**.
- Nevertheless, Downs (citing Hotelling) notes that under certain conditions, there will be very strong pressures to **converge** to the median voter.

# Rationality and Bias

- **Downs:** Voters are rational actors
  - implications?
- **Bartels:** Partisanship colors citizens' very perception of reality, so they don't even approximate rationality.

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