

Lecture seven: Political parties

The functions of parties

Much party activity is concerned with the election period, but parties offer other opportunities for participation and involvement over a continuous period.

Among their specific functions, they:

- contest elections in order to compete with other parties for elective office;
- select candidates who would have little chance of success but for their party label;
- coordinate political campaigns;
- put together coalitions of different interests, for a variety of groups and individuals can come together under one broad umbrella, so that any government which emerges is likely to have widespread support in the community;
- organise opinion, providing voters with cues for voting, because most of them can identify in some way with the image of the main parties; they can therefore be a basis for making their political choices;
- articulate policies, educating the voters and providing them with a choice of alternatives;
- activate voters by mobilising their support via campaigning, rallies and emblems of identification varying from banners to lapel badges, giving them an opportunity for political involvement;
- incorporate policy ideas from individuals and groups which are outside the political mainstream, responding to changes suggested by third parties and protest movements.

American elections are much more candidate-centred than European ones, so that some of the above functions do not apply or apply with less force in Britain and other Western democracies. The choice of candidates is made in primary elections and the financing and organising of campaigns is carried out by Political Action Committees (PACs) and the candidate's array of advisers.

Parties have a more 'supportive' role in recent years, with the downgrading of party machines in the twentieth century.

The two-party systems of Britain and America

The American experience is not straightforward. The system allows one party to capture the White House (the presidency) and the other to dominate on Capitol Hill (the legislature), so that a British-style divide between government and opposition is absent. Also, some writers have quibbled about applying the term 'two-party system' to one in which there are really 51 party systems: one national and one for each of the fifty states. The national parties are a loose aggregation of the state parties, which are themselves 'a fluid association of individuals, groups and local organisations' There is a variety of forms of party competition throughout the country, with no two states being exactly alike. In some, parties are weak, in others rather stronger. By contrast, Pennsylvania has well-organised parties, with sizeable staffs and plenty of money to spend. In some states, there is a genuine competition for power, with both parties having a chance of capturing the governorship or control of the legislature. In others, only one party ever wins and there is no little or no prospect of a change of political control. Yet in spite of such difficulties, most observers think of America as having a two-party system. When they think about American parties, they think in terms of the Democrat and Republicans, which between them possess almost every congressional seat and almost every state governorship.

Britain has in the past often been portrayed as having a model two-party system. In reality, there have been periods when this was not the case, most notably in the interwar years and from the mid-1970s onwards. The years 1945–1970 saw a classic two-party confrontation. Each of the main parties won four elections and between them Labour and the Conservatives monopolized the votes cast and seats won in any election. In 1951, this domination reached its zenith when, in combination, they attracted 96.8 per cent of the votes and 98.6 per cent of the seats. Then and in other elections, the third-party Liberals played

an insignificant role. But from 1974 onwards, the third force (as represented either by the Liberals, the Alliance or the Liberal Democrats) has been a sizeable one, regularly commanding about 15–20 per cent of the votes and in 1997 and 2001 winning 46 and 52 seats respectively. The nationalists in Scotland and Wales have also often performed well, so that the British political arrangements can be described as a two-party system but three- or four-party politics.

Why Britain and the United States have two-party systems

Some writers stress **the natural tendency for opinion on issues to divide into a ‘for’ and ‘against’ position** which often follows the basic distinction between people who generally favour retaining the status quo (the conservatives) and those who wish to see innovation and a quicker pace of change (the progressives). In his famous analysis of political parties, Duverger long ago argued that a two-party system conformed to the basic division in society between those who wish to keep society broadly unchanged, and those who wish to see improvement and reform.⁸ The liberal–conservative, progressive–stand-pat distinction has not always been clear-cut, for the main parties in either country have at times had their more forward-looking members as well as those who oppose social advance.

Institutional factors also make a difference. The nature of the presidency is one. It is the focal point of all political aspiration, but it is a single executive whose leadership cannot be shared. In Britain, the requirements of the parliamentary system promote two-partyism. The nature of the House of Commons makes it necessary for elected members to decide whether they are on the government side or that of the Opposition. There is no in-between. The confrontational Westminster system has always attached a high priority to firm government and strong opposition. The electorate seems to prefer a strong executive and is unconvinced about the merits of coalitions which are often seen as weak and unstable.

There are more important and fundamental reasons for two-party dominance. Both countries use the same **First Past the Post electoral system**, under which whoever gets the most votes wins the election. In this way, third-party activity is discouraged, for unless a party wins there is no reward for the votes it receives: the ‘winner takes all’. Also, most Britons and Americans have **a broad consensus** about basic matters in society, so that large and generally moderate parties can provide adequate avenues for political expression. There has often been substantial agreement on the desirability of present constitutional arrangements and the broad objectives of party policy, in addition to **a spirit of compromise** which makes it possible for one party to accept the innovations initiated by the other.

Finally, there are the **difficulties which affect any third party which tries to break through the system**. In America, there may be real barriers in getting on the ballot paper in a number of states, but in both countries, lack of money, staffing and organisation are a problem. Moreover, there is also the argument used by their opponents, that under the voting system used a vote for a third party is a wasted vote. Most voters prefer to opt for a party which has a meaningful chance of victory.

The Labour and Conservative, Democrat and Republican Parties: ideas, attitudes and approaches

In Britain, Labour has traditionally been an ideological party, its members often engaging in internal dispute over some aspect of party thinking. It used to believe that a large percentage of public ownership, and control of industry and government planning were necessary to achieve its socialist ends. The Conservatives were always the party which carried little ideological baggage and some of their electoral success was often attributed to their capacity for adapting to changed circumstances.

Unlike British or European parties, American ones have never been ideological or class-based. There has never been a conflict of capitalism versus

socialism. The emphasis of politics under successive Presidents has overwhelmingly been on pragmatism and consensus, sometimes the centre of gravity moving to the left as in the 1930s and sometimes to the right as in the Reagan years. Only very rarely has that broad consensus on foreign or domestic policy been seriously under pressure.

The two main parties in both the USA and the UK are sometimes considered to be **broker parties**, especially the American ones. Broker parties are not founded on strong ideological or social foundations; their doctrines are heterogeneous. The two parties in each country are coalitions of sometimes conflicting groups, which are able to co-exist under the same umbrella. Sometimes, British parties are seen as more governed by ideas and principles than American ones, but in all four main parties there is a wide range of views, gradations between left and right.

Today, both parties still seek to appeal as widely as possible, but neither can count on the support of key groups. As in Britain, party identification has been in decline. Fewer Americans now see themselves as supporters of either party ('partisan **dealignment**'), and the trend is more evident among the better-off and better-educated, and also among the young. The number of Americans who now view themselves as 'strong' or 'weak' Democrats or 'strong' or 'weak' Republicans is less than it was, and more electors are now interested in issues than was once the case. They tend to be the better-educated and upper-income voters.

- *Policy attitudes: similarities and differences between the Democrats and the Republicans today*

Both parties agree about far more things than they disagree about. Both attach great importance to the Constitution and are committed to maintaining America's present form of government. Both accept the pioneering American values of free enterprise and individualism, on which there is little discord in society. Neither favours root-and-branch change in the economic system.

There is certainly no deep ideological divide, and in particular no contest between socialism in its various Western European forms and those who oppose it.

However there are differences of emphasis and style, degree and method between American parties, and distinct bases of support. Moreover, in their attitudes on issues ranging from abortion to affirmative action and taxation to the role of government, it is not usually difficult to spot a Democrat and a Republican. Americans still recognise the Democrats as the more reform-minded of the two parties, the one whose party platforms in the twentieth century often involved the ideas of moving forward and creating greater social justice for the disadvantaged – Wilson’s New Freedom, Roosevelt’s New Deal, Truman’s Fair Deal, Kennedy’s New Frontiers and Clinton’s New Covenant.

‘Clintonisation’ of the Democrats and Labour: New Democrats and New Labour

Labour and the Democrats have traditionally been seen as the two left-wing parties in Britain and the United States. There are clear parallels between the position and fortunes of the Democratic Party of the early 1990s and those of the British Labour Party after 1979. Both had experienced prolonged electoral disappointment, had lost the support of many of their traditional voters and had become embroiled in fratricidal warfare as radical groups sought to foist their own agenda on the bulk of the party. They both needed to find a new identity which would appeal to the electorate, and found that their traditional policies were no longer seen as necessary or relevant to today’s generation. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair led their party in similar directions. Both turned their backs on the old attitudes of tax-and-spend and wanted to carve out a new role for government. Both were strong supporters of the ‘third way’.

❖ Blair, Clinton and the third way

The third way is a strategy for reshaping politics and society. It is also a strategy about creating a new left-of-centre progressive consensus, in Britain

and elsewhere. In April 1999, Bill Clinton (President of the USA), Gerhard Schroder (Chancellor of Germany), Wim Kok (Netherlands Prime Minister) and Massano D'Alence (Italian Prime Minister) attended a conference in Washington specifically about third way politics. In July 2003, leaders from Europe, Latin America and, for the first time, Africa, met to discuss a programme for 'progressive governance'.

Tony Blair and Bill Clinton have been widely recognised as the two main supporters of the third way. The British Prime Minister has embraced the concept to describe New Labour's ideology. In Britain this concept is most closely associated in academic circles with Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Essentially the third way is an attempt to find a middle way between left and right, between state socialist planning and free market capitalism. It appeals to centre-left progressives and moderate social democrats. Giddens uses the term to refer to social democratic renewal. For renewal was necessary in the late 1990s to adapt to the probably irreversible transformation of Britain by Thatcherism, the revival of free-market capitalism and the realities of globalisation.

Under the 'third way':

1. The role of the state will be far more flexible, working in new ways. It will be pro-active, devising new policy instruments to produce essential outcomes. It will be a facilitator and a regulator, more than a provider of services. For example, a new hospital may be desperately needed in a town; the state may work here as both facilitator and part provider in a public-private partnership.
2. The need for a competitive and dynamic market is recognised, and Labour has accepted that nationalisation is dead. It argues that it is possible to combine social justice with economic efficiency in a market economy. Both markets and state should be disciplined by a public interest test.

Legislation should provide redress for consumers and monitor the quality of state services – for example, the Blair government’s introduction of a minimum wage and measures against failing schools.

3. There will be ‘inclusion’. The ‘New Politics’ of the third way defines equality as ‘inclusion’ and inequality as ‘exclusion’. Social inclusion refers in its broadest sense to citizenship with its civil and political rights, its obligations and its opportunities for self-fulfilment and to make a contribution to society.
4. The rights of citizens are accompanied by reciprocal duties and it is vital that there is mutual responsibility between individuals and institutions. For example, parents have the right to send their children to school but parents also are responsible for encouraging their children and supporting their school.
5. Expenditure on welfare should come from the state, but from other agencies too. The choice of language here is important. In the past, the money for the welfare state was called public spending; now, as we hear so much from Tony Blair, it is called ‘investment’.
6. The slogan ‘what matters is what works’ sums up the approach to policy-making.

The decline of political parties

They function in an era of partisan and class de-alignment which has led to a far greater volatility in voting behaviour than ever before. Voting is no longer ‘habitual and ingrained’, as Punnet described it back in the 1970s, and parties can no longer count on the degree of support which they once could almost take for granted. American parties had by the 1970s become weaker than they were at the turn of the twentieth century for various reasons, including: The growth of the system of primary elections which took power away from the party bosses.

- The erosion of the North–South divide, so that the traditional attachment

of the South to the Democratic cause was seriously undermined.

- The development of the mass media, which placed more emphasis on the merits of individual candidates; electioneering has become more candidate-centred.
- The arrival of new issues on the agenda in the 1960s and 1970s, such as feminism, environmentalism, civil rights and Vietnam; on occasion, these issues cut across the party divide, and divided some members of the party from others.
- The increasing importance of pressure groups and Political Action Committees which meant that there were more causes in which Americans could participate and alternative bodies for fund-raising for candidates.
- Changes in voting behaviour associated with changing attitudes among key groups of voters. Party loyalty has declined in an age of increasing dealignment.

For all of their weaknesses, American parties have not been displaced. They:

- still serve as a reference point for the electorate which – as many surveys confirm – still think in terms of Republicans and Democrats;
- remain a reference point for congressmen, almost every one of whom belongs to one of the major parties;
- have regained some importance in the last generation as the ‘new issues’ have lost much of their earlier impact;
- have become more organised at the federal level;
- have shown a greater ability in recent years to raise money by new techniques of fund-raising.