

Chapter 5: Political Parties

Section 1

Lecture Notes

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

PEARSON

► Objectives

1. Define a *political party*.
2. Describe the major functions of political parties.
3. Identify the reasons why the United States has a two-party system.
4. Understand multiparty and one-party systems and how they affect the functioning of a political system.

▶ Key Terms

- **political party:** a group of persons who seek to control government by winning elections and holding public office
- **political spectrum:** the range of political views, from the so-called left to the right
- **partisanship:** strong support for a specific political party and its policies
- **single-member districts:** a voting district in which only one candidate is elected to each office on the ballot

▶ Key Terms, cont.

- **plurality:** the largest number of votes cast for an elected office; this number does not have to be a majority of *all* votes cast
- **bipartisan:** an approach to policy making in which the two major parties find common ground on an issue
- **consensus:** general agreement among different groups on an issue
- **coalition:** a temporary alliance of several groups who join to form a working majority in a multiparty system

► Introduction

- What are political parties, and how do they function in our two-party system?
 - A party is a group of people who try to control government by winning elections and holding public office.
 - Political Parties:
 - Nominate candidates
 - Inform and inspire supporters
 - Encourage good behavior among members
 - Govern once in office
 - Perform oversight on government actions

► What is a Party?

- Checkpoint: What are the three elements that make up a political party?
 - The **party organization** is the party professionals who run the party at all levels by contributing time, money, and skill.
 - The **party in government** includes the candidates and officeholders who serve at all levels of government.
 - The **party in the electorate** are the millions of voters who identify strongly with a particular party and support its policies.

▶ What Parties Do

- Parties express the will of the people in government. They can also encourage unity by modifying conflicting views and encouraging compromise.
- Parties nominate—find, recruit, prepare, and gather public support for—qualified political candidates.
- Parties inform the public and try to shape public opinion, using all forms of media to campaign for or against opposing candidates and policy issues.

► Roles of Parties

- Parties act as a “bonding agent” to encourage accountability among their candidates and office holders.
- Parties play a key roles in governing at all levels.
 - Legislatures are organized along party lines and parties shape the electoral process.
 - Partisanship guides many legislative votes and appointments to public office.
 - Parties provide channels of communication between the branches of government.

▶ Parties as “Watchdogs”

- Checkpoint: How do parties perform the watchdog function?
 - In particular, the minority party keeps a close eye on the actions of the party that controls the executive branch to make sure that it does not abuse its power or violate the public trust.

▶ The Two-Party System

- The Republican and Democratic parties dominate American politics.
 - Only the candidates from the two major parties have a chance to win most elections.
- Why is this the case?
 - The Framers opposed political parties.
 - They saw parties as “factions” that caused disunity and conflict. George Washington warned against the dangers of parties.

- Once established, parties became part of tradition.
- The nature of the election process supports the two-party system.
 - Nearly all American elections take place in single-member districts--only the one candidate who wins the largest number of votes gets elected to office.
 - This works against third-party candidates, who have little chance of finishing in the top two.

▶ Tradition, cont.

- The two major parties write election rules that discourage non-major parties.
- For example, it is very difficult for a third party candidate to get on the ballot in all 50 states.

► Ideological Consensus

- Americans tend to share a broad ideological consensus.
 - The United States is made up of many different cultural groups.
 - While Americans don't agree on every issue, they do support the same basic freedoms.
 - Strongly divisive issues have tended not to last for generations.



▶ Building Consensus

- Both major parties try to be moderate and build consensus.
 - Both parties tend to have a few major areas of policy differences while being rather similar in other areas.
 - The similarities between parties arises because both parties are after a majority of voters in any given election. Both parties must compete for the many voters in the middle of the political spectrum.

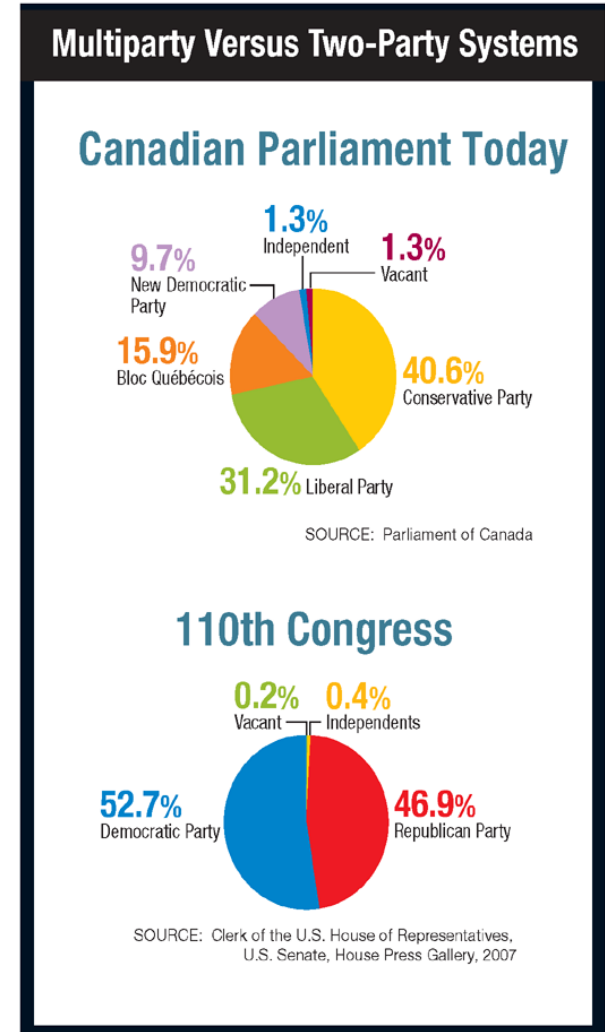
► Political Spectrum

Radical	Favors extreme change to create an altered or entirely new social system.
Liberal	Believes that government must take action to change economic, political, and ideological policies thought to be unfair.
Moderate	Holds beliefs that fall between liberal and conservative views, usually including some of each.
Conservative	Seeks to keep in place the economic, political, and social structures of society.
Reactionary	Favors extreme change to restore society to an earlier, more conservative state.



► Multiparty Systems

- Multiparty systems are used by many democracies.
 - They have several major and many smaller parties.
 - Each party is based on a particular interest.
 - These interests can include economic class, religion, or political ideology.

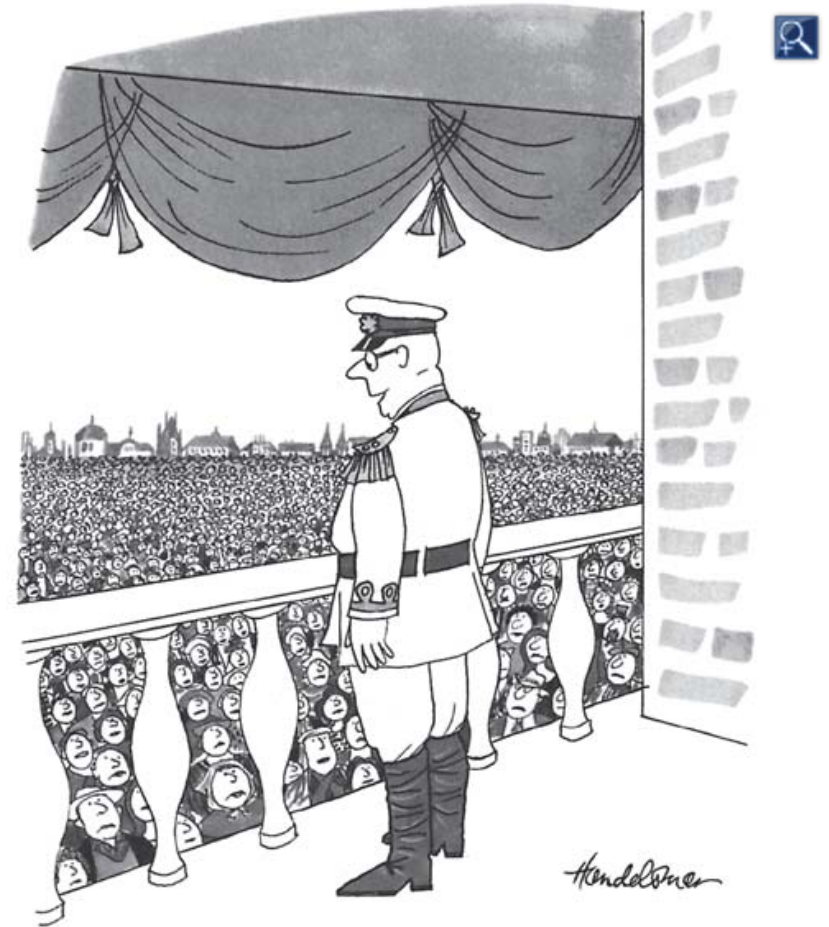


▶ Multiparty Systems, cont.

- Multiparty systems tend to represent a more diverse group of citizens.
 - Supporters admire this feature, arguing that it gives voters many more choices among candidates and policies.
 - However, this diversity often makes multiparty systems less stable. The power to govern must usually be shared by several parties who join in a coalition.

► One-Party Systems

- Only one political party exists, offering no real choice.
- Some U.S. states and districts are “modified one-party systems.”
 - In these places, one party repeatedly wins most of the elections and dominates government.



“My goodness, if I'd known how badly you wanted democracy I'd have given it to you ages ago.”

▶ Review

- Now that you have learned about political parties and how they function in our two-party system, go back and answer the Chapter Essential Question.
 - Does the two-party system help or harm democracy?