Political Parties

- Another type of faction
- Political organizations that seek to directly MAKE, not just influence, public policy
- Parties try to do this by getting their members (candidates) to get elected to public office
- Thus, parties, through elections and candidates, seek to actually be part of govt.
- Parties focus on a broad and wide array of issues – not just a narrow and limited scope of issues
- Parties convey their ideas and policy goals by way of the PARTY PLATFORM: The official document (program, manifesto, etc.) of the party
- The platform expresses and details the party’s official position, or viewpoint on every major issue
- The platform represents the ideological core (aka, political base) of the party
- The platform reflects the work of the core, ideologically driven party activists
- The platform is modified and updated every election cycle (two or four years, depends on the party organization
- The National organizations revise and modify their platform every four years; state party organizations vary – some modify every four years, other state organizations modify every two years (during mid-term, Congressional only elections)
- Do individual candidates comply and abide by their parties’ platform during their campaigns? Yes... and no
- Most candidates will abide by their parties’ platforms on most issues; however, on some high salient, high-profile issues, many candidates will deviate from the platform
- Candidates do this as a way to appeal to those moderate, “swing” voters they need for support
- In other words, those candidates that defect from the platform do so in an effort to be more electable and viable as candidates – especially if the constituency the candidate is trying get elected from (i.e., congressional House District or State) consists of a lot of “centrist”, “swing” voters
- The party hierarchy (natl. and state party organizations, Congressional party leaders, etc.) will grudgingly accept these candidate defections if it means the candidate winning the election campaign – Remember, this is the key goal for parties; to have their candidates win elections and, thus, put the party in a position to actually be part of the govt. policy making community and create policy that reflects most of the platform

Types of Party Membership

(1) Party “Professionals”

- Those people whose employment is tied with the party
- Or "professionals" can consist of citizen volunteers whose primary political/volunteer activities are with their state or county party organization.
- Those whose individual political fortunes and interest rise or fall with the how the party fares in elections
- "Professionals" make up the ideological core, or political base of the party
- "Professionals" are the core party activists
- "Professionals" help draft and revise the platform
- "Professionals" help organize party fund-raisers for both the party and candidates' campaign "war chests"
- "Professionals" help draft & recruit candidates for both Congressional and state legislative offices (this is done a lot within the State party organization)
- "Professionals" participate in "get-out-the-vote" drives during election campaigns – i.e., voter registration drives, working the phone banks, precinct walking, etc.

(2) Candidates

- Serve as the "vehicle" or "agents" for the party interests
- Again, their election to public office enables the party to formulate public policy, as part of the govt.

(3) Voters

- Voters are the most difficult member group to identify with regard to party loyalty. Why?
- This is so due to "split-ticket voting": This is the phenomenon of voters voting for candidates from different parties for different elected offices
- In recent election years, "split-ticket voting" has decreased. More ideological, core voters have turned out to vote, as opposed to "peripheral" voters, which have decreased in turn-out
- Still, "split-ticket" voting has increased from the last half-century and it is still much more common here in the U.S. than the party-based voting behavior in other Western democracies
- "Split-ticket" voting is an immediate cause of "Divided Govt": Different parties controlling different branches of the govt.
- So, what are some Root Causes of Divided Govt?

(A) Rise in Independent Voters

- Based on a statistical increase in officially registered non-partisan voters – thus, there is no pre-disposed inclination to vote for one party or the other

(B) "Madisonian Theory"

- Based on the idea that voters intentionally want divided govt. as a way to prevent one party from totally dominating the policy-making process
- Voters will strategically vote as a way to “moderate” policy making.
- If voters know that one party controls, or will control, the executive branch (presidency), then voters will strategically vote for another party during Congressional elections as a way to balance policy toward the center and enable the parties in both branches to “moderate” policy.

© “Candidate Professionalism”

- Attempts to explain why Democrats enjoyed Congressional majorities in the 1960’s, 70’s and ‘80’s and why the Republicans (GOP) enjoy a Congressional majority from the mid-1990’s to the present.
- In the earlier time period, Democrats were, simply, better candidates.
- How so? Democrats ran better, more organized campaigns, did a better job at getting their political/ideological voter base to turn out, presented themselves as more polished, statesman-like professionals.
- Democrats during this time period were able to draw from more political/campaign experience due to their time served in state legislatures.
- Same logic applies to GOP candidates in the 1990’s to the present.

(D) Voter Paradox Theory

- Voters have different expectations and different job functions for elected policy makers in different branches of govt.
- For President, voters want a candidate who will appeal to a national constituency (after all, the Pres. has to get supported from enough regions of the entire country to be elected).
- The overall, aggregate American political ideology of the American electorate is moderate-conservative. In other words, the American electorate’s place on the political spectrum is near the center to conservative part of the political spectrum.
- Thus, successful candidates for Pres. have to campaign as moderate-conservative candidates – i.e., cutting taxes, not raising taxes, cutting govt. spending, tough on crime, strong natl. defense, military, etc.)
- Thus, in recent history, GOP Pres. candidates have easily won over Democratic candidates.
- However, for Congress, voters want a candidate who will campaign on providing local “goodies” to their particular constituencies (especially House district constituencies).
- Winning Congressional candidates stress local constituent services; providing “pork-barrel goods” and more $ for more projects and services to that constituency and district.
- Thus, the successful Congressional candidate will advocate more govt. spending; this explains why Democratic candidates consistently won Congressional majorities in both houses of Congress during the 1960’s, ‘70’s and ‘80’s – especially in House elections.
PROBLEM: This does not explain the GOP Congressional take-over of both houses of Congress during the 1994 Congressional, mid-term elections; GOP Congressional candidates – especially House candidates – campaigned on the exact opposite of the “pork-barrel” constituency services theme

Other Possible Theories of Congressional Election Outcomes and Voting Behavior

(1) Realignment

- The permanent shift of one bloc of voters (ethnic, racial, socio-economic, geographic, etc.) from one party to the other
- A crisis (war, economic crises, etc.) will trigger the other party to offer an ideological alternative to that bloc of voters.
- Example: African-American voters, along with (to an extent) Jewish, Catholic, immigrant voters shifted from the GOP to the Democratic party due primarily to FDR’s New Deal, depression-era policies
- Recent Example: White, male Southern voters and White Southern voters, in general, shifted have shifted within the last 30 years, from the Democrats to the GOP, due to civil rights reforms and legislation initiated and embraced by Congressional Democrats that had alienated Southern whites.
- Southern realignment came to full reality during 1994 Cong. elections; GOP Southern candidates, in mainly open seats, disproportionally defeated Democratic candidates
- These Southern victories enabled the GOP to take an overall seat majority in both houses of Congress – again, due to the disproportional victories the Republicans scored in the realigned South

(2) National Themes Matter

- National conditions are as important a variable as local issues during Congressional races
- If the economy is perceived as poor and/or the President is unpopular, then voters are more likely to vote for the opposition party

(3) Turn out Matters

- Parties that do a better job at turning out their core, political base, constituency voters are more likely to win more Congressional race than the other party
- The parties’ ability to launch a grassroots effort at getting out the vote from their base voters, the parties’ ability to campaign and parties’ fundraising efforts all matter in determining whether or not the base will turn out and vote