Parties

1. **Functions of Parties**

Political parties serve as links between citizens and government as a means to input citizens' demands into the political process.

**1.1 A Bridge Between People and Government**

One of the most important is to serve as a bridge between citizens and government by serving as inputting devices that allow the interests of citizens to be heard and acted upon by government.

In doing so, citizens feel that they have a mechanism for affecting policy.

It also gives citizens the feeling that they have some power, which increases efficacy.

It also serves to increase the legitimacy of government because it connects citizens to their government, which is at the core of democratic politics.

**1.2 Aggregation of Interests**

Political parties serve to aggregate diverse interests in society into larger interests.

If politics were just interest groups in competition, there would be chaos as there would be no articulation of broad interests that would guide the general direction of policy.

Contemporary parties are effectively loose coalitions of interest groups that have coalesced.

The Democratic Party, for example, is a broad coalition of interests ranging from the centre to the far left of American politics

**1.3 Integration In the Political System**

Political parties also help new groups integrate into the political system. This helps give new groups both a pragmatic and psychological stake in the system.

It can also help increase the loyalty of these new groups to the political system. It can also help prevent groups from becoming radicalized and violent

**1.4 Political Socialization**

Parties also serve as agents of socialization by helping members learn to play the political game and acquiring political competence.

This deepens their sense of trust in the system and it also can serve as a training ground for future leaders.

**1.5 Mobilization of Voters**

Parties also help to mobilize citizens to engage with politics.

Parties are key players in helping citizens turn out to vote on election day, and there is a strong correlation between party strength and voter turnout.

Parties produce a great deal of propaganda and some argue that this has the effect of turning citizens off of politics, but this propaganda serves the critical role of simplifying complex issues for citizens, making election choices clearer.

* 1. **Organization of Government**

Parties are also the agents that organize government and the winning party has a great deal of latitude in not only setting government policy, but also in distributing government jobs.

They also gain power in government itself.

Some states, such as Britain, have more effective party control of government due to strength of their party.

No party can ever totally control government, if they did it would be a dictatorship.

1. **Parties in Democracies**

Parties can be described based on three criteria:

* degree of centralization (*control exercised by national headquarters*)
* the extent to which a party participates in policy
* how the party finances itself
  1. **Centralization**

The level of centralization affects the amount of control that the party leadership can exercise over its members.

States such as Israel have highly centralized parties that control the election lists and place loyal party members at the top of the list to ensure their election to parliament.

The UK is also centralized but less so, and candidate selection is a process of negotiating between the national party and local constituency offices.

Germany has decentralized national party control.

Parties that have high levels of centralization are much more coherent, ideologically consistent, and disciplined.

The United States has a history of decentralized parties, which means that American parties are much less coherent. In addition, the candidates are much more independent of the parties.

This has contributed to rifts and splits in U.S. political parties.

* 1. **Settling Government Policy**

When thinking about setting government policy, the question is how successful is the majority in enacting its legislative agenda?

Parliamentary systems are far more successful at this than presidential systems because the government is the majority and the majority must resign if they cannot muster enough votes to pass their agenda.

The high levels of decentralization in the United States make this very difficult.

Ex. Blue Dog (conservative) Democrats often vote against their own party and there is little the leadership can do to stop it.

* 1. **Party Participation in Government**

European systems are much more conducive to responsible party government (*voters electorally reward or punish governing party for its policies*), which is when the majority presents a clear legislative proposal and then acts to pass it.

In the United States, this can occur when there is a strong president whose party controls both houses of Congress, such as Johnson, but it is difficult.

* 1. **Financing the Party**

American campaigns have become very expensive and as a result parties are heavily dependent on wealthy donors for their operating budgets.

There is a great deal of concern about the lack of transparency in these relationships and the appearance of corruption.

Many democratic states have tried to limit the amount of campaign donations.

The United States allows taxpayers to designate a small portion of their federal tax returns for the presidential election fund as a method to publicly fund presidential elections, but few Americans choose to donate. PACs have stepped in and filled in the gap.

1. **Classifying Political Parties**

A useful way to classify parties is by placing them on the ideological spectrum from left to right. Their placement is the sum of various policy positions held by the party.

* Left-Wing parties generally want to nationalize major industries.
* Centre-Left parties favour welfare states.
* Centrist parties are generally liberal on social issues but conservative on economics.
* Centre-Right parties want to rein in the welfare state in favour of free enterprise.
* Right-Wing parties want to dismantle the welfare state and break the power of labour unions.
* Far-Right parties are generally nationalistic and anti-immigrant.
  1. **Communist Parties**

The classical Communist party structure of Lenin featured the interlocking of a single party with the economic system of the state. The economy was not directly ruled by the party, though.

Under the Soviet system, the Central Committee of the Politburo (*Russian for “political bureau”, the ruling committee of a communist party*) was the heart of the system and made all the decisions that directed the economy and the state.

Gorbachev worked to change the party system of the Soviet State because a single party that attempts to control everything develops problems over time.

The Soviet system was rife with corruption and highly resistant to change.

The Soviet experience serves as a lesson to other single-party states that single-party systems that monopolize power are unworkable over time.

Communist-type systems are inflexible and cannot adapt well to changing conditions.

China has tried to avoid some of the Soviet problems by allowing private ownership of much of the economy.

1. **Party System**

DEF: *party system is how parties interact with each other*

Party systems are not the same as parties.

Parties seek power; party systems are about the interactions of several parties with each other.

Party systems have an effect on the overall health of the political system of a state.

System stability is affected by the number of parties in the system.

System stability is affected by whether parties in the system are centre-seeking or centre-fleeing.

* 1. **Classifying Party Systems**

Party systems can also be classified based on the number of parties that exist within the system.

ONE-PARTY SYSTEMS:

They are associated with totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. A single party controls everything and is the only legal party. When allowed, citizens repudiate one-party systems

DOMINANT-PARTY SYSTEMS:

Opposition parties contest elections, but the deck is stacked against them. Dominant party can offer lots of incentives to supporters. Dominant party controls television an opposition parties are deliberately kept weak

Ex. India's Congress Party, Japan's Liberal Democrats, Mexico's PRI

TWO-PARTY SYSTEMS:

Two parties each have a fair chance of winning, third parties exist but aren't competitive, they only remind the major parties of voter discontent.

MULTIPARTY SYSTEMS:

There are several political parties that compete. They can be unstable but not always.

TWO-PLUS PARTY SYSTEM:

There are two major parties plus a third party that is competitive and relevant

FLUID PARTY SYSTEMS:

Usually found in new and unstable democracies, that are fluid and inchoate, in which parties rise and fall quickly.

Often personalistic parties that have no overarching program or ideology.

* 1. **The Party System and the Electoral System**

Competitive party systems are party systems that have at least two political parties in competition for power (Sartori).

The development of a party system is a complicated process that is heavily affected by each state's individual political history.

Some very different states have similar party systems.

Japan and India are culturally different but both developed dominant-party systems. The political science question is why?

The single most important factor in determining a party system is the electoral system of the country.

Single-member district systems tend to produce two-party or two-plus party systems.

Only a plurality is needed to win

Small parties cannot compete

Encourages parties to avoid fragmentation

The single most important factor in determining a party system is the electoral system of the country.

Proportional representation systems

Uses multimember districts and awards seats based on the proportion of the party vote

Encourages parties to fragment and split as they can still win seats in parliament

Changing a country's election laws can change the party system.

The Future of Parties

Political parties are not what they used to be and are facing serious challenges.

Membership in parties has been steadily declining over the years.

Voters are considerably less loyal to political parties.

Most parties have become mainstream, centrist, and similar.

Political parties are not what they used to be and are facing serious challenges.

As a consequence, other actors have assumed some of the major functions of political parities.

These actors include the mass media, interest groups, and think tanks.

This may not be a good thing overall.

The highly decentralized nature of U.S. political parties may foreshadow the future of other political parties around the world.

U.S. political parties tend to be money-poor and heavily dependent on interest groups.

The parties are highly decentralized and candidates are independent of the party and party leadership, often running against the party's leaders, depending on the district.

The highly decentralized nature of U.S. political parties may foreshadow the future of other political parties around the world.

U.S. parties are extremely centrist and many voters feel as if they have little choice.

Can anything be done to stop the decline of parties?

Realistically we can expect no change to the U.S. two-party system

Can anything be done to stop the decline of parties?

There are advantages to decentralized parties.

Flexible, big-tent parties may be better able to process the demands of citizens.

They are less likely to fall into the hands of ideologues.

They may attract a broader variety of voters.