

5.3 Political Parties

Describe linkage institutions.

Explain the function and impact of political parties on the electorate and government.

Numerous institutions link the people to their government. Linkage institutions are channels that allow individuals to communicate their preferences to policy-makers. The leading linkage institutions in our democracy are political parties, interest groups, elections and media. **Political parties, interest groups and social movements provide opportunities for participation and influence how people relate to government.**

Political parties form for the expressed purpose of winning elections. In this way, when our political party candidates win elections “we the people” feel connected to our government. When party leaders pass critical pieces of legislation, or when our president follows through on campaign promises or even when courts rule favorably to our ideological liking we feel linked to the government. In doing so political parties live up to their calling. Political parties provide labels; issue platforms and most importantly choose candidates that represent our wishes. It is difficult to change government on our own but by joining political parties we can, or at least we feel we can.

Interest groups form for the expressed purpose of impacting the policy-making process. In this way, when interest groups that we have joined help to pass or block pieces of legislation, influence presidential decision-making or even affect court outcomes we feel linked to the government. In doing so interest groups live up to their calling. Interest groups provide us a way to focus our political attention on single issues or policy priorities. There is strength in numbers. Interest groups are an important linkage institution to our democracy. They are vital in building any civil society.

Elections are another form of linkage institution. Elections give “we the people” the most direct way to influence our government and its decisions. When our candidates win elections we feel that our interests will be represented. In this way we are connected to our government. Here in America we are election crazy. No democracy has as many elected positions to fill as we do. Seemingly there are elections all of the time. Elections at the national, state and local levels fulfill an important function – they link us to the government. We are after all “a government of the people, by the people and for the people.”

Media is another critical linkage institution. The role of the media is to inform us about our government. They are gatekeepers, scorekeepers and watchdogs. Media sets priorities and helps to become agenda setters when deciding what to cover. Media tells us who is winning and losing in the political process at any given time. But perhaps most importantly the media holds our government accountable. They police the government for us. With the help of media we feel connected to our government.

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Political parties play an important function in our democracy even though our Founders were afraid of their baneful effects. Political parties link the people to government. Political parties educate us and most importantly they help recruit and choose our candidates. Political party operatives also manage campaigns. Party leaders help to raise money and provide media strategies. Political scientists, however, tell us that political parties have grown weaker as mass media has given greater power to personal followings.

Political parties have one primary goal and that is to win elections. By winning elections political parties and their voters get to act upon their wishes because they now run the government. The more successful political parties are the more likely it is for their issues to become public policy. Despite not being mentioned in the U.S. Constitution and feared by the likes of George Washington and James Madison, American democracy is unthinkable without political parties.

Political parties in America play an important role not only in winning elections but in governing as well. The United States Congress is structured around political parties. The political party that holds the majority of the House and Senate respectively controls the chamber. For example, if Democrats make up the majority of the House of Representatives they hold the primary leadership positions including the Speaker role and all of the committee chairs. This means that political party platforms, the issues they fight for, become more likely to pass when parties hold majorities in both the House and the Senate. Sitting presidents as well are considered the Chief of their Party. They are expected to advocate for party platforms, candidates and fundraising efforts. Political parties through governing help deliver on the promises made during their campaigns.

In addition to winning elections and staffing the government political parties hope to educate the public. Political parties try to raise money to support candidates. They nominate candidates. In this way political parties play an important function as a filter in our electoral process. By nominating candidates political party prestige provides an important stamp of credibility. Political parties also provide a simple label for a broad based coalition of voters. For this reason we have in America a two-party system.

There are two major political parties in the United States – Democrats and Republicans. Both are broad based coalitions with the expressed purpose of attracting enough voters to win elections. Partisan identification is the number one determining factor of a person's vote. Partisan ID, however, is not as strong as it once was. More and more Americans, now close to 40%, see themselves as independent voters. This is clear when looking at the rise of split ticket voting. Many Americans on any single ballot will vote for candidates from both parties.