

CHAPTER 8 **POLITICAL PARTIES**

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
- Describe the four most important functions of political parties.
- Trace the history of the major political parties in the United States.
- List the functions performed by minor parties.
- Account for the emergence of a two-party system in the United States.
- Assess the extent of party identification in the United States and its influence on voters' choices.
- Summarize the ideological and organizational differences between Republicans and Democrats.
- Decide whether the American system is more pluralist or majoritarian in its operation.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

On the surface, the U.S. two-party system seems tailor-made for majoritarian democracy. Every election has two broad categories for voters to choose from, so opportunities for narrowly focused small groups to gain control of the government apparatus are reduced. At the same time, the party system reduces the amount of information voters need to make rational choices. However, even this seemingly majoritarian device does not fully realize its majoritarian potential.

Majority parties are not always able to implement the policies they favor, due mainly to the lack of effective party discipline. That deficiency, in turn, is related to the decentralized structure of U.S. parties. In a sense, the United States has not 2 but 102 parties—2 national organizations and 2 major parties in each of the 50 states.

On the whole, Democrats and Republicans differ with respect to their political ideologies. The Democrats are more liberal and tend to place a high value on political and social equality. They are willing to use the government to achieve a more egalitarian economy and society, but they do not wish to use the government to restrict individual freedom (in matters related to lifestyles, reproductive choices, or freedom of expression, for example) to protect the social order. Republicans, on the other hand, are more likely to prefer order and freedom to equality; they prefer limited government when issues of equality are at stake, but they are often willing to use government power to support a particular vision of social order, even at the cost of individual freedom.

However, these general statements of ideological differences *between* the parties tend to obscure the fact that there are ideological differences *within* the parties as well. Nonetheless, the difficulties U.S. parties have in maintaining discipline and coordinating the actions of government officials make it hard for them to fulfill the ideals of the majoritarian model. Even though U.S. politics is dominated by two parties, third-party candidates are always striving to advance their agenda, even if it ruins a victory for the candidate of one of the two major parties.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Political Parties and Their Functions

A political party is an organization that sponsors candidates for office under the organization's name. The link between political parties and democracy is so close that many democratic theorists believe democracy would be impossible in modern nation-states without parties. Parties perform several important functions in a political system, including the following:

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Mark Steyvers



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