Outline

1. What Are Parties?

2. Why Do Parties Exist?

3. How Do Parties Influence American Politics?
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3. How Do Parties Influence American Politics?
Definition

**Political Party:** A *coalition* of citizens who *cooperate* in order to control the *government* by winning *elections.*
Key Features of Parties

- Parties are **coalitions** of actors with different goals:
  - benefit seekers (of various sorts) → examples?
  - office seekers (i.e., politicians)
- Parties must develop institutional mechanisms of **cooperation** and coordination.
- Parties want to **control government** so they can both enjoy holding office and make the government do (or not do) certain things.
- To achieve office, parties must win **elections**, which requires that they cultivate the loyalty and support of voters.
Three Aspects of Parties

Party-in-the-Electorate:
- Ordinary citizens’ behavioral support and psychological identification, not formal membership.
- Parties ≠ partisans

Party-in-Government:
- Incumbent and aspiring politicians, whose actions in office are highly structured by their partisanship.

Party-as-Organization:
- Leaders and institutions that regulate and coordinate party activities (primary elections, presidential conventions, fundraisers, pollsters, . . . )
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Parties As Endogenous Institutions

- Some institutions (e.g., federalism) are “exogenous”—that is, they originate outside of normal politics.
- By contrast, political parties are endogenous institutions: they were created as part of the political process and have evolved substantially over American history.
- Parties were intentionally created by strategic political actors as solutions to fundamental political problems.
Three Functions of Political Parties

Parties help office seekers and benefit seekers solve three fundamental problems:

1. **Social Choice**
   - Legislators can achieve more favorable and more stable outcomes if they can agree to cooperate → logroll.

2. **Coordination**
   - Too many ambitious politicians → split the vote
   - Parties regulate access to office, helping like-minded activists and voters coordinate on candidates.

3. **Collective Action**
   - Shared partisan resources (GOTV, party reputation) are collective goods → need party organization to provide
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3 How Do Parties Influence American Politics?
Democracy is “unworkable” without parties.

Parties simplify the multitude of potential issues and candidates down to a single simple choice.

This makes it radically easier for ordinary citizens to participate in politics.

But it comes at the cost of closing off certain choices

→ no pro-choice, anti–gay marriage, pro-gun, pro-union, anti-war, anti-regulation, and pro-environment candidates
At some fundamental level, the very point of parties is to skew political outcomes towards those preferred by the party → divergence.

Nevertheless, Downs (citing Hotelling) notes that under certain conditions, there will be very strong pressures to converge to the median voter.
Rationality and Bias

- **Downs**: Voters are rational actors → implications?
- **Bartels**: Partisanship colors citizens’ very perception of reality, so they don’t even approximate rationality.
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