Parties and the US Political System
Lecture 21 (April 30, 2013)
Outline

1. Party Systems and Realignment

2. Parties and Representation
1. Party Systems and Realignment

2. Parties and Representation
Why Only Two Parties?

- **Duverger’s Law**: Single-member district-plurality elections strongly favor two-party (as opposed to multi-party) competition
  - No representation in government unless win most votes
  - Third party very unlikely to win
  - Voters and politicians coordinate on “least bad” option

- Electoral College creates additional incentives for parties to create a broad geographic base (competitive in many states)
Consequences of the Two-Party System

- Two diverse, geographically dispersed (of a sort) coalitions
- Dimension-reduction: choice between bundles of (possibly incongruent) policy positions
- Some conflicts “organized out” of politics
Realignment Theory

- US political history can be organized into a series of “party systems”
- In a given party system, the party coalitions and the issue cleavages that separate them are roughly stable
- **Realignment**: durable shift in the coalitional bases of the parties
- **Conflict displacement**: one axis of conflict is (partially) replaced by another
2nd Party System (1828–54): Democrats vs. Whigs
small gov’t & territorial expansion vs. economic & moral “improvement” (ignore slavery)

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To see a map illustrating the 1840 Presidential Election Results by County, go to:
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To see a map illustrating the 1916 Presidential Election Results by County, go to:
5th Party System (1932–1960s): The New Deal Order

cities, unions, minorities & white South vs. business; small-town, middle-class WASPs

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To see a map illustrating the 1944 Presidential Election Results by County, go to:
2012: Obama vs. Romney, Counties

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To see a map illustrating the 2012 Presidential Election Results by County, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:2012nationwidecountymapshadedbypercentagewon.svg.
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To see a map illustrating the 2012 Presidential Election Results by Congressional District, go to:
Partisan Balance

Mayhew: Despite potential for distortion, parties are roughly balanced because:

- Parties adapt to the system as it exists.
- If one party is too disgruntled, structural (even constitutional) change is at least possible.
1 Party Systems and Realignment

2 Parties and Representation
Collective Responsibility

For the most part, we care about the collective performance of the government, but we only have the opportunity to vote for individuals.

How can we hold individuals accountable for collective outcomes? → collective responsibility

Parties make collective responsibility possible:

- Clarify politics: Who is in charge? What will candidates do if elected?
- Collective reputation → personal stake in collective performance
- Incentives to think and act collectively
A Blunt Tool of Accountability

- Accountability on both **spatial** and **valence** issues.


  - **Valence**: Is the economy in bad shape? Are we stuck in a costly war? Then vote against the incumbent party.

- **Problems**:
  - Policy changes are grouped together.
  - Retrospective voting may be irrational.

- Collective responsibility is a very blunt tool, but it may be the best one we have.
17.20 Introduction to American Politics
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