

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Parties and the US Political System

Lecture 21 (April 30, 2013)

1 Party Systems and Realignment

2 Parties and Representation

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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:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PresidentialCounty1840.gif>.

4th Party System (1896–1932): Democrats vs. GOP

pro-industrialization business & labor vs. farmers, religious minorities & white South

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To see a map illustrating the 1916 Presidential Election Results by County, go to:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PresidentialCounty1916Colorbrewer.gif>.

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:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1944prescountymap2.png>.

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>.

2012: Obama vs. Romney, Congressional Districts

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

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

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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.
- **Spatial**: Are taxes too high? Environmental regulation too strict? Prison terms too short? Moral standards too low? Then vote Republican.
- **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.

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