Objectives

1. Define a political party.
2. Describe the major functions of political parties.
3. Identify the reasons why the United States has a two-party system.
4. Understand multiparty and one-party systems and how they affect the functioning of a political system.
Key Terms

- **political party**: a group of persons who seek to control government by winning elections and holding public office
- **political spectrum**: the range of political views, from the so-called left to the right
- **partisanship**: strong support for a specific political party and its policies
- **single-member districts**: a voting district in which only one candidate is elected to each office on the ballot
• **plurality**: the largest number of votes cast for an elected office; this number does not have to be a majority of all votes cast

• **bipartisan**: an approach to policy making in which the two major parties find common ground on an issue

• **consensus**: general agreement among different groups on an issue

• **coalition**: a temporary alliance of several groups who join to form a working majority in a multiparty system
Introduction

• What are political parties, and how do they function in our two-party system?

– A party is a group of people who try to control government by winning elections and holding public office.

– Political Parties:
  • Nominate candidates
  • Inform and inspire supporters
  • Encourage good behavior among members
  • Govern once in office
  • Perform oversight on government actions
What is a Party?

• Checkpoint: What are the three elements that make up a political party?
  – The **party organization** is the party professionals who run the party at all levels by contributing time, money, and skill.

  – The **party in government** includes the candidates and officeholders who serve at all levels of government.

  – The **party in the electorate** are the millions of voters who identify strongly with a particular party and support its policies.
What Parties Do

• Parties express the will of the people in government. They can also encourage unity by modifying conflicting views and encouraging compromise.

• Parties nominate—find, recruit, prepare, and gather public support for—qualified political candidates.

• Parties inform the public and try to shape public opinion, using all forms of media to campaign for or against opposing candidates and policy issues.
Roles of Parties

- Parties act as a “bonding agent” to encourage accountability among their candidates and office holders.
- Parties play a key roles in governing at all levels.
  - Legislatures are organized along party lines and parties shape the electoral process.
  - Partisanship guides many legislative votes and appointments to public office.
  - Parties provide channels of communication between the branches of government.
Parties as “Watchdogs”

Checkpoint: How do parties perform the watchdog function?

– In particular, the minority party keeps a close eye on the actions of the party that controls the executive branch to make sure that it does not abuse its power or violate the public trust.
The Two-Party System

• The Republican and Democratic parties dominate American politics.
  – Only the candidates from the two major parties have a chance to win most elections.

• Why is this the case?
  – The Framers opposed political parties.
    • They saw parties as “factions” that caused disunity and conflict. George Washington warned against the dangers of parties.
• Once established, parties became part of tradition.

• The nature of the election process supports the two-party system.
  – Nearly all American elections take place in single-member districts--only the one candidate who wins the largest number of votes gets elected to office.
  – This works against third-party candidates, who have little chance of finishing in the top two.
• The two major parties write election rules that discourage non-major parties.

• For example, it is very difficult for a third party candidate to get on the ballot in all 50 states.
Americans tend to share a broad ideological consensus.

- The United States is made up of many different cultural groups.
- While Americans don’t agree on every issue, they do support the same basic freedoms.
- Strongly divisive issues have tended not to last for generations.
• Both major parties try to be moderate and build consensus.

  – Both parties tend to have a few major areas of policy differences while being rather similar in other areas.

  – The similarities between parties arises because both parties are after a majority of voters in any given election. Both parties must compete for the many voters in the middle of the political spectrum.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Spectrum</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Radical</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Liberal</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Moderate</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Conservative</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Reactionary</strong></td>
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Multiparty Systems

- Multiparty systems are used by many democracies.
  - They have several major and many smaller parties.
  - Each party is based on a particular interest.
- These interests can include economic class, religion, or political ideology.

![Multiparty Versus Two-Party Systems](chart.png)
• Multiparty systems tend to represent a more diverse group of citizens.

  – Supporters admire this feature, arguing that it gives voters many more choices among candidates and policies.

  – However, this diversity often makes multiparty systems less stable. The power to govern must usually be shared by several parties who join in a coalition.
• Only one political party exists, offering no real choice.
• Some U.S. states and districts are “modified one-party systems.”
  – In these places, one party repeatedly wins most of the elections and dominates government.
Review

• Now that you have learned about political parties and how they function in our two-party system, go back and answer the Chapter Essential Question.

  – Does the two-party system help or harm democracy?