

## U6 Text #3; Political Parties; Organization, Roles, and Constituencies

### Political Party

A **political party** is a group of people with broad political interest who organize to the nominate candidates for office to win elections for the purpose of controlling government and determining **public policy**, which is the actions the government will or will not take. Both major parties have full time paid staffs in permanent party offices at the local, state, and federal levels. Parties also use many volunteers to carry out a wide range of tasks. Volunteers collect campaign contributions, promote their parties candidates, send out campaign literature, call on voters, and watch at the polls on election-day. Political Parties also seek the help of various professionals such as media experts to prepare campaign materials and pollsters to research public opinion.

### Membership and Organization

While Democrats and Republicans have a national party organization, they are also organized into 50 state parties, and thousands of local parties at the city and county levels. Local, state, and national parties choose their own leaders, raise their own funds and look for people to run as candidates for local offices. In many states, citizens declare their party preference when they register to vote or when they vote in certain kinds of elections. A voter may declare that he or she is **independent**, which means they do not support any particular party. People who belong to a party generally support most of its ideas and candidates. Party membership involves no duties or obligations beyond voting. Some citizens may contribute money or just do volunteer work for the party.

### Local Party Organization

The basic local unit is a **precinct**, a voting district that ranges in size from just a few voters to thousands. All these voters cast their ballots at the same polling place. The precinct captain volunteers to organize party workers to distribute information about the party and its candidates to get voters to the polls. Several precincts make up a **ward**. Wards select party members to represent the ward at county committee level. The county committee chooses a chairperson to handle the county party's daily affairs. The county party chair is often the key figure in determining which candidate receives the party's support. If the state's governor or senator is from the same party, they may ask the chair for advice on some issues and appointments.

### State Party Organization

In each state the most important part of a party is the **state central committee** it is composed of representatives from the county organizations. The state central committee chooses state chairperson. A main job of the state central committee is to help elect the party's candidates for state wide offices.

### National Party Organization

The national party organization is responsible for the national convention and the national committee. The **national convention** is a gathering of local and state party officials. It meets every four years to nominate the party's presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Between the conventions the **national committee** are the people who run the national party. This committee is a large group made up mostly of representatives from the 50 state organizations. The national committee elects a national chairperson. The chair manages the daily operations of the national party. Both parties also have independent campaign committees for Congress. These committees help elect U.S. senators and House representatives.

### Political Party Functions

One of the main functions of a political party is to recruit candidates to run for political office. Another is educating the public the important issues of the day, making it understandable to the average person. Doing this, helps explain what the party believes and what their candidates stand for. When the elected members of the political party are in the majority they get to act on the issues the party believes in. When the majority, **Patronage**, is the power to control appointments to government offices and jobs, Parties out of power act as the "Loyal Opposition" assuming the role of "watchdog" over government. It observes the party in power, criticizes it, and offers their solutions to political problems the majority party will decide.

### Constituencies of Political Parties

**Constituencies** are the body of voters in a specified area who can vote for or against representatives to a legislative bodies. They are also the people who the political party say they represents based on their core beliefs: The Democratic Party; (established in 1828) looks to provide a strong central government that

support the rights of the average working person, the poor and minorities, with more taxes for the wealthy and businesses. The Republican Party (established in 1854) supports a smaller central government with more state and local control that supports businesses, with less taxes for the wealthy and businesses.

### How Candidates Are Selected

Choosing candidates for office is often a difficult task. The party needs to find appealing candidates and money to win elections. Individuals are nominated for public office in the following ways: Early on nearly all candidates are chosen by **Caucus**, private meetings of party leaders and other members. Only 19 states use caucuses. Often Nominating Conventions, an official public meeting of a party, are used to choose candidates for office. The convention system was supposed to be more democratic than caucuses as it drew a bigger crowd of party members. In the past powerful party leaders called **Bosses** often controlled the convention and chose the candidates. Today Primary Elections are the main way of determining who the candidate will be for a political party by holding a series of public votes. The direct primary is the method most often used today to select candidates where an election is held to select a candidate. There are two types of primaries: In an **open primary**, anyone can vote for a candidate for office, even if they do not belong to the party. A **closed primary** means only members of the political party can vote for a candidate. In some states a primary candidate needs only a **plurality**, or more vote than the second place for a candidate to win. Some states like Georgia say if no candidate receives a majority, more than 50% of the votes cast, a **runoff** election of the top two candidates is held. Two get on the ballot for a primary in most states require a petition, which is a signature list of citizens who say they believe this candidate should run for office.

### Presidential Convention and Nominations

Every four years, each major party holds a national convention in July or August. Delegates from 50 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the District of Columbia will attend the convention. Their job is to select a **ticket**, the candidates of the party for president and vice president. At the convention the party votes on its **platform**, which is a statement of the party's principles, beliefs, and positions on important issues. Then the convention holds a roll call ballot by states which is read by each State Party Chair. The Candidate who receives the majority of the votes is declared the nominee. The nominee selects a Vice Presidential running mate and when approved the two become the party's ticket. The Presidential candidates then make acceptance speech which is supposed to bring the party together, highlight the opposition party's failures, to sound a theme for the upcoming campaign. The convention then adjourns.

### **Presidential Campaigns**

Running for president is expensive. Candidates for president begin organizing their campaign about a year before the election. Candidates must have organization and money to get them through the primary races, the national conventions, and the campaigns which end on Election Day. A **campaign manager** is appointed to plan and carry out overall strategy they believe will get the candidate elected. The national campaign office has workers to handle relations with television, radio, and newspapers; manage finances, advertising, and campaign materials; and conduct opinion polls. The state political party chair helps runs the candidates state wide campaign. Local party officials and field workers contact voters, hold local rallies, and distribute campaign literature. The most important communication tool for a presidential candidate is television. Candidates use television for political commercials, debates, and to attack their opponent. Debates between the candidates are effective in getting voters who are undecided to vote for one candidate or the other. Candidates also routinely use the technology and social media to get their ideas to the voters.

### **Financing Campaigns**

Running for political office is very expensive. Money can give candidates the chance to broadcast their views to voters. To get a lot of money candidates are expected to give special favors to contributors rather than represent all voters. To lessen this, rules were established like the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1977 which required public disclosure of each candidate's spending. Presidential candidates have the choice of accepting federal funding for their campaigns. If they do accept, they are limited in how much they can spend. Political action committees, or PACs, are organizations established by interest groups to provide financial support to favored candidates or parties. PACs are also limited by FECA in how much they may donate. Most campaign finance reform was greatly affected by the Supreme Court decision in *Citizen's United v. The U.S.* which allows corporations to use as much money as they want to simultaneously support one candidate and oppose their opponent.

