

## Summary

### 10.1 What Are Parties and How Did They Form?

Political parties are vital to the operation of any democracy. Early U.S. political parties were formed by national elites who disagreed over how to divide power between the national and state governments. The system we have today, divided between Republicans and Democrats, had consolidated by 1860. A number of minor parties have attempted to challenge the status quo, but they have largely failed to gain traction despite having an occasional impact on the national political scene.

### 10.2 The Two-Party System

Electoral rules, such as the use of plurality voting, have helped turn the United States into a two-party system dominated by the Republicans and the Democrats. Several minor parties have attempted to challenge the status quo, but usually they have only been spoilers that served to divide party coalitions. But this doesn't mean the party system has always been stable; party coalitions have shifted several times in the past two hundred years.

### 10.3 The Shape of Modern Political Parties

Political parties exist primarily as a means to help candidates get elected. The United States thus has a relatively loose system of party identification and a bottom-up approach to party organization structure built around elections. Lower levels, such as the precinct or county, take on the primary responsibility for voter registration and mobilization, whereas the higher state and national levels are responsible for electing major candidates and shaping party ideology. The party in government is responsible for implementing the policies on which its candidates run, but elected officials also worry about winning reelection.

### 10.4 Divided Government and Partisan Polarization

A divided government makes it difficult for elected officials to achieve their policy goals. This problem has gotten worse as U.S. political parties have become increasingly polarized over the past several decades. They are both more likely to fight with each other and more internally divided than just a few decades ago. Some possible causes include sorting and improved gerrymandering, although neither alone offers a completely satisfactory explanation. But whatever the cause, polarization is having negative short-term consequences on American politics.

## Key Terms

### **bipartisanship**

a process of cooperation through compromise

### **critical election**

an election that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances

### **divided government**

a condition in which one or more houses of the legislature is controlled by the party in opposition to the executive

### **first-past-the-post**

a system in which the winner of an election is the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes cast, also known as plurality voting

### **gerrymandering**

the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate

### **majoritarian voting**

a type of election in which the winning candidate must receive at least 50 percent of the votes, even if a run-off election is required

### **majority party**

the legislative party with over half the seats in a legislative body, and thus significant power to control the agenda

### **minority party**

the legislative party with less than half the seats in a legislative body

### **moderate**

an individual who falls in the middle of the ideological spectrum

### **party identifiers**

individuals who represent themselves in public as being part of a party

### **party organization**

the formal structure of the political party and the active members responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates

### **party platform**

the collection of a party's positions on issues it considers politically important

### **party polarization**

the shift of party positions from moderate towards ideological extremes

### **party realignment**

a shifting of party alliances within the electorate

**party-in-government**

party identifiers who have been elected to office and are responsible for fulfilling the party's promises

**party-in-the-electorate**

members of the voting public who consider themselves part of a political party or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other

**personal politics**

a political style that focuses on building direct relationships with voters rather than on promoting specific issues

**plurality voting**

the election rule by which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of vote share

**political machine**

an organization that secures votes for a party's candidates or supports the party in other ways, usually in exchange for political favors such as a job in government

**political parties**

organizations made up of groups of people with similar interests that try to directly influence public policy through their members who seek and hold public office

**precinct**

the lowest level of party organization, usually organized around neighborhoods

**proportional representation**

a party-based election rule in which the number of seats a party receives is a function of the share of votes it receives in an election

**reapportionment**

the reallocation of House seats between the states to account for population changes

**redistricting**

the redrawing of electoral maps

**safe seat**

a district drawn so members of a party can be assured of winning by a comfortable margin

**sorting**

the process in which voters change party allegiances in response to shifts in party position

**third parties**

political parties formed as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic parties, also known as minor parties

**two-party system**

a system in which two major parties win all or almost all elections