

POLITICAL PARTIES

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Summary

Political parties function as a go-between the public and the government and also play many other vital roles in the political system. Functionally, they can be defined as bodies that (:?) organize public opinion and interest; transmit public demands to the government; attempt to recruit and propose political leadership; and often attempt to articulate to followers what is desirable in terms of social, economic, cultural and political development.

The emergence of political parties in the modern era implies that a political system has entered a new complex stage in which political power can no longer be forced onto the public without public support and elections.

According to their attitudes toward the existing political order, political parties can be termed conservative (status quo oriented) or progressive (challenger). The political party system can be classified as a multi-party system, a one party dominant (or hegemonic) system, a one party (or monopoly) system, or a two-party system. There is a strong tendency for a particular type of political party system to prevail over time in many political systems.

1. Introduction

With the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, where a single party, the Communist Party, existed, a “big bang” era of political parties began, from extreme left- to middle-of-center, to extreme right (see *Communist System*). Political parties are essential components of liberal democracies. Not all organized political groups that form a newly emerging or established political order, however, can be called “political parties.” Some

may be groups of union activists and some may be forums of citizens, intellectuals, or scholars concerned with the analysis of remedies for the malfunctioning of a political system or government.

What then, is a “political party”? How are political parties different from other groups and organizations in a society? Many have attempted to define the term. As early as 1770, Edmund Burke defined a political party, ideologically, as a body of men and women united on the basis of their shared political ideas so as to promote the national interest. Some have viewed it as a political organization with a hierarchical network, which attempts to nominate its candidates in order to get them elected as statesmen in the legislature.

With the rise of functionalism and systems analysis of social life, especially in the 1960s, American political scientists attempted to examine political parties according to the functions and roles which they perform in the political process. For example, Samuel J. Eldersveld defined a political party as a system of patterned activity or a group of individuals populating particular roles and behaving as member-actors of a bounded and identifiable social unit. Yet, to date there is no agreed definition of a “political party” (Paul Allen Beck and Frank J. Sorauf, 1992).

Some political parties may be exclusive, elitist, religiously or ideologically oriented, and others may be inclusive of all kinds of interests regardless of class, gender, religion, profession or race. Some parties such as Greenpeace have specific areas of concern and a global network. How, then, have political parties come into being?

2. The Emergence of Political Parties in the Modern Era

Political parties emerged in modern Europe when the political elite could no longer secure legitimacy without the support of masses at large in the political system. In European colonies, however, many political parties came into being through their independence movements and post-colonial modernization efforts.

The emergence of a political party in the modern era implies that a political system has entered a new complex stage. In this stage, political power can no longer be exercised on the public without public support and elections. In many cases, sovereignty is vested in the people. Popular sovereignty is one of the key barometers of take-off in modern political development.

In ancient Athens, a type of democracy based on limited suffrage developed. Many political theorists became concerned with the relationship between voters (male citizens) and elected politicians, including the manipulation of the former by the latter through eloquence, demagoguery, and propaganda. Primitive forms of political parties emerged in Athens though the political system that spawned them was quite different from the liberal democracies of the modern era. Some major differences were the lack of guarantee for basic human rights and universal suffrage. Polity was based on slavery and lacked a broad electorate. The electorate was limited to male citizens of the upper class. Concern for the malfunctioning of the political system led Socrates to advocate an

alternative government under a wise supreme commander rather than government by corrupt elected politicians.

The roots of contemporary political parties can be found in modern Europe. After the dark ages of feudalism, politically active groups emerged with the rise of elected legislature and the gradual broadening of suffrage. This does not mean, however, that the famous “Breton Club” in pre-Revolutionary France, which later evolved into the Jacobins, or aristocratic salons and clubs of early nineteenth century England can be termed “political parties.” The former had a limited geographical base and the latter was simply a device to elect notables to Parliament. The first so-called “political parties” that emerged in Japan in the 1870s and in Italy in the 1880s were not true political parties either. They were nothing but a localized device for the re-election of politicians, which resulted from a regionally divided electoral constituency of the legislature (Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, 1966).

The electoral process requires a system that mobilizes popular support for particular candidates for the legislature. The establishment of the elected legislature itself, however, is not an absolute condition for the emergence of political parties. The extension of suffrage is also required. This is clearly demonstrated in Britain where formation of the first modern political parties was associated with the electoral reforms of 1832, 1867, and 1884. With increased suffrage, segmented efforts became ineffective and, instead, large nationally-organized efforts became essential for electoral success. In many countries, legislators themselves created political parties for their own re-election or election of their supportive followers. Examples include: the Conservative and Liberal Parties in Britain and Canada; the original conservative parties which emerged in Scandinavian countries in the mid-nineteenth century; the Democratic and Republican Parties in the USA; the Progressive and Liberal Parties of late nineteenth century Japan; and the Italian Liberal Party in the twentieth century. Because of their historical origins, they tend to defend the status quo and are accordingly conservative in their policy orientation whatever names they may have. They are “internally” created parties by legislators (see *Legislature*).

With the broadening of suffrage, many groups in society created political parties “externally”, outside the legislature. Trade unions in Britain and some other European countries established the Socialist (or labor) parties; farmers’ cooperatives in Scandinavia became the nucleus of powerful agrarian parties; nationalist movements in colonial Africa and Asia led to the formation of political parties, many of which became the dominant parties in the post-colonial era. More recently, the Green Party, which has developed as a non-governmental international organization concerned with the protection of the environment, has entered the national political scene in some countries. This is a unique transnational political party that has formed with particular concerns and global policy issues (see *Ecologism*).

3. Conservative and Progressive Parties

Most political parties that have been established by those outside and critical of the legislature tend to challenge the established order and norm. Examples include socialist parties, which emerged in Europe late in the nineteenth century, or Christian

Democratic parties which were formed in order to counteract the socialist movement. Those parties whose visions challenge the established value system or order are often called progressives and those which attempt to defend it, conservatives. Political parties formed externally are often conceived in similar political beliefs and ideologies. They are sometimes based on a particular type of support such as ‘class’ in the case of communist parties. In general, they are more disciplined and ideologically-oriented than those parties created internally by elected politicians. They often challenge the established political order and are accordingly termed progressive or radical parties.

In extreme cases, externally created parties, especially communist and socialist parties, are exclusionary and ban opposition once they are in power (see *Communist System, Authoritarian System*). There are two major reasons for this. One is that when they were outside the mainstream political arena, they were oppressed or operated under severe conditions imposed by the conservative regime. As a result, once in power, they insist that other parties are public enemies and are not legitimate. The second reason is related to the hierarchical order that needs to be enforced after some chaotic political change. By banning political oppositions, they can claim to be the sole legitimate party through which all political agenda and leadership have to be contended.

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Biographical Sketch

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