THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM
A HISTORIOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses the origins and effectiveness of the political party system in America. The major themes of the scholarly research included in this historiography are that political parties are and have been controversial, that political parties created a dilemma for the founders in terms of weighing faction against liberty, and that a continuing debate exists over the effectiveness of the modern political party system in America. The resulting literature review unearthed a wide array of conflicting interpretations about the efficacy of both the historical and modern political party system. It is clear that author bias and inconsistent research techniques may have influenced the development of the controversy.

This project also includes a unit plan for teaching about the political party system within the larger context of American history. The lesson plan will focus on the early development of our Constitution and what part the issue of political parties took in its evolution.
I wish to acknowledge my parents, John and Shirley, who raised me to value education, my children, Benjamin and Rebekah, who have been patiently waiting for me to finish, my colleagues for their support and hard work, my professors who have been so dedicated to our success, and Elizabeth, thank you for all that you have done for me during this time in my life.
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Introduction

Scholars have argued about the virtues and effectiveness of political parties in America since the founders began to frame our constitution. In the writings of these scholars the American political party system has been interpreted in different ways. Some see parties or factions as important tools in a democratic form of government, as the guarantors of our liberties and freedoms, and as methods to resolve conflicts within our society and provide a unified voice for those who subscribe. These interpretations shed a positive light on a party system. Other scholars see parties or factions as a roadblock to progress, a hindrance to the democratic process, and a tool with which to grab and maintain power. These interpretations shed a negative light on parties. Another group of scholars fall somewhere in between by recognizing both virtue and vice when interpreting the existence and effectiveness of political parties and by believing that political parties are an inevitable conflict within our constitution. These interpretations emphasize that American political history is, “…the story of the unhappy marriage of the parties and the Constitution…”¹ and that “political parties lie at the heart of American politics.”² What all scholars appear to agree upon is that political parties exist and that they impact our society.

This historiography focuses on each of these three interpretations by examining the literature that praises the evolution and contribution of political parties, that lament the manner in which parties have influenced the political process, and that parties have brought both positive and negative forces to bear on the political system. The framework for the discussion falls into two large categories: the early debate among the founders about how to strike a balance between protecting the liberties of citizens and allowing responsible opposition; and the larger debate about the effectiveness of parties and how they have shaped the American political system.

The Founders Debate

Throughout the eighteenth century, American and European leaders thought and wrote a great deal about the nature of political parties and their relationship to liberty and freedom. In his essay, *Of Parties In General*, David Hume described the effects of parties: “Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other.”

In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “It is against the natural order that a large number should rule and a small number be ruled.” Hume and Rousseau’s statements help to frame the questions the founding fathers faced: How can a population of people peacefully co-exist? If every issue has at least two sides how will the population affected by those issues peaceably choose a side? How will a

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3 David Hume, *Of Parties In General*, 1776
system of government protect the will of the minority from continually being overshadowed by the will of the majority? Should the system be compelled to do so?

As Richard Hofstadter illustrates, the framers of our Constitution understood the essential dilemma of freedom: it requires some latitude for opposition and, at the same time, it must value social unity and harmony.5 In Federalist 10 James Madison wrote,

“Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable; that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties; and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice, and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.”6

To Madison, free society could not thrive under the conditions previously described. The power of a large majority must be held in check to protect the liberties of the minority. The framers accounted for the need for checks on power within the principles of the Constitution thusly providing for freedom of opposition in spite of their inherited political philosophy, which denied the usefulness of parties and stressed their dangers.7

The freedoms guaranteed to citizens in the first amendment to the constitution also create a framework, which enables opposition to act. Madison recognized that removing the causes of faction required the restriction of liberty to oppose, which is essential to the existence of democracy.8 Political parties, therefore, existed under the protection of the Constitution. To limit political parties required restriction on our

6 James Madison, Federalist 10.
personal liberties and even the most fervent of detractors on the subject of political
did not seem willing to go to that extreme. The cost of limiting liberty and freedom to control the power of factions was too high.

J.S. Mill wrote of the combination of individuals, he declared that the freedom to unite is an essential liberty and that, “no society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected is free, whatever may be its form of government.”9 While the protection of liberty was of paramount importance to the framers of the Constitution, Madison explained how one of those treasured liberties lay at the heart of a major concern: “The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society.”10 People recognized the concept of strength in numbers and acted accordingly. Madison recognized this yet he and others diligently warned of the dangers of such actions in the political arena. Even after the Constitution was put into effect the framers held tight to their concerns. In his farewell address, George Washington warned of the, “…baneful effects of the spirit of party…”11

Thus, the framers of the Constitution created a legal framework that protected the liberties of citizens and allowed for responsible opposition. Hofstadter defines responsible opposition as that which, “ rises above naked contestation; it forswears sedition, treason, conspiracy, coup d’etat, riot, assassination, and makes an open public

8 Madison, Federalist 10.
10 Madison, Federalist 10
11 George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796
appeal for the support of a more or less free electorate.”

This concept of political opposition that operates within the confines of a constitution was sophisticated within the eighteenth century political arena. But was this constitutional balance of liberty and faction a brilliantly developed design? E.E Schattschneider quotes Madison as saying,” The great object of the constitution was to preserve the public good and private right against the danger of such a faction and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government.”

This implies that the balance of party and liberty was well thought out and deliberately implemented in the writing of our Constitution. Hofstadter, however, suggested that the framers did not have a firm grasp on this delicate balance and that “they had not arrived at the view that opposition, manifested in organized popular parties, could sustain freedom without fatally shattering social harmony.” It is suggested that the discovery of a working party system was a result of drift and experimentation. Bernard Bailyn provides another interesting perspective on the development of the American political party system, by suggesting that while the framers of the Constitution were correct in their concerns about the dangers of faction they were making inconsistent comparisons. The concerns over faction were rooted in the context of old-world precedents that bore little resemblance to the situation in America when the Constitution was being developed. Bailyn quotes New Jersey lawyer John Stevens , “It would be downright madness to shackle ourselves with maxims and principles which are

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15 Ibid. 9.
clearly inapplicable to the nature of our political institutions.”17 To Stevens the “old
world” maxims and principles were those of Hume and Rousseau whose perspectives on
governing should have no bearing on America’s unique political experience.

The American political party system is a creation born out of the striking of a
delicate balance between conflicting liberties. Scholars have suggested that the framers
of our Constitution created a system of government, which includes political parties, by
their own genius. Other scholars suggest that the framers were more like sailors adrift in
an uncharted political sea armed only with knowledge of the past and blessed with good
fortune. This debate did not end with the founders but rather has extended into
contemporary scholarly literature about the origins and roles of the American political
party system.

The Effectiveness of Political Parties

The effectiveness of the American political party system has been the subject of
numerous debates. Some scholars have been writing obituaries for the party system for
decades, only to have others announce its resurrection shortly afterwards. The reasons
are numerous for believing the party system is healthy. The reasons are also numerous
for believing that the system is ailing. At the center of the debate is the relationship
between the electorate’s perception of parties and their functions and the operation of our
system of government. E.E. Schattschneider frames the debate when he claims that
“political parties created democracy, and…democracy is unthinkable save in terms of

17 Ibid, 363.
parties.”18 The implication is that if our democracy is working and healthy it is because our party system is working and healthy.

Historically political parties have performed many functions. In *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-1996*, Martin Wattenberg suggests a list of eleven party functions five of which will be analyzed in this historiography.

Table 1. Martin P. Wattenberg’s list of functions that parties have been said to perform in American society.

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<td>2. Aggregating and articulating political interests.</td>
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<td>3. Mobilizing majorities in the electorate and in government.</td>
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<td>4. Socializing voters and maintaining a popular following.</td>
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<td>5. Organizing dissent and opposition.</td>
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<td>8. Overriding the dangers of sectionalism and promoting the national interest.</td>
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<td>9. Implementing policy objectives.</td>
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<td>10. Legitimizing decisions of government.</td>
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<td>11. Fostering stability in government.</td>
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The first function to be analyzed is the ability of political parties to aggregate and articulate political interests. Responsible opposition must build a consensus by articulating the party’s interests to the electorate. In his essay, “Can the System Be Saved? The Short Happy Life of American Political Parties,” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. quotes Franklin D. Roosevelt as saying “The party system of government is one of the greatest methods of unification and of teaching people to think in common in terms of our civilization...” Schlesinger goes on to say that by furthering the nation’s political education, defining a framework of national consensus, and debating issues within that framework, parties have provided a vital function in a healthy democracy. He argues that the Founders doctrine of the “separation of power” attempts to defeat the ideal of concerted action, which is the essence of effective government and that parties continue to provide that concerted action. Other scholars have taken a different view on the ability of political parties to educate and build consensus. In 1986, Jack Dennis delivered a paper at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington D.C. in which he explained the results of a twenty-year study of the electorate in Wisconsin. An overwhelming majority (ninety-four percent) of the voters in 1984 believed that parties did more to confuse issues than to clarify them and that they often provoked unnecessary conflict. He concluded that trends in popular support for the party system in the state of Wisconsin have been in decline for the twenty-year period.

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21 Ibid, 96.
Conclusions from the Wisconsin study provide some insight into the mood of the rest of the nation. While William Keefe suggests it is difficult to say whether or not Wisconsin voters are representative of the national electorate, the claims that it seems likely that this is the case. He argues that nationwide surveys of voter attitudes toward control of both the presidency and Congress by the same party point to popular doubts about parties. Only about one-third of the voters believe that the country is better off when the same party controls both the executive and legislative branches of government. Keefe takes somewhat of a leap in his conclusion in terms of validating the specifics of the Wisconsin study as reflective of the nation as a whole. The big picture does however suggest that the conclusion is a logical one and that the Wisconsin electorate’s concern about parties confusing issues rather than articulating them is shared on a national level.

The ability of political parties to mobilize majorities in the electorate and in government is a second important function described in Wattenberg’s list. This concept is a complicated one because of the various attitudes that the electorate, scholars within the electorate, and party organizations hold on the subject. When thinking about the mobilization of the electorate, the average citizen probably envisions people at a table in front of the grocery store signing up all eligible voters. The concept that all eligible voters should vote has been the message of various advertisers and politicians. More recently the “Rock the Vote” campaign was aimed at young voters in an attempt to get

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24 Ibid, 97.
them to register and cast an informed vote on election-day. Scholars see mobilization of
the electorate as a much more complex issue, that it is not as simple as registering all
voters. E.E. Schattschneider discusses various issues surrounding mobilization of the
electorate. He suggests that mobilization and unity of the electorate on certain issues is
not durable, that “Nothing is apt to be more perishable than a political issue. In the
democratic process, the nation moves from controversy to agreement to
forgetfulness…the government creates and destroys interests at every turn.”
He puts forth the argument that it is very difficult to keep a party mobilized on continually
changing issues. Schattschneider continues by discussing how every individual is torn by
the diversity of his own interests and that it has never been possible to mobilize any
interest one hundred percent. He calls this the “law of imperfect political mobilization of
interests.” Schattschneider however does not view this as a bad thing. He argues that,
“If every individual were capable of having only one interest to the exclusion of all
others, it might be possible to form unions of monomaniacs who would go to great
extremes to attain their objectives.” These groups would be easy to motivate and
mobilize, but most people are much more complex than that, and the previously
described law of imperfect mobilization is far more prevalent in our electorate.

Perhaps the difficulty in mobilizing the electorate is not as crucial to the
effectiveness of political parties as some think. In The Vanishing Voter, Thomas E
Patterson suggests that the country is better off if total mobilization of the electorate does

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26 Ibid, 33.
27 Ibid, 33.
not occur. He argues “Some observers take comfort in low-turnout elections. They say that the country is better off if less interested and less knowledgeable citizens stay home on Election Day.”\textsuperscript{28}  He quotes Robert Kaplan who wrote in a cover story for the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} in 1997 that “… apathy, after all, often means that the political situation is healthy enough to be ignored. The last thing America needs is more voters, particularly badly educated and alienated ones, with a passion for politics.”\textsuperscript{29}  Patterson concludes that low turnout protects society from erratic or even dangerous shifts in public opinion and that irregular voters are not as well informed as habitual voters and are therefore more likely to get carried away by momentary passions.\textsuperscript{30}  The columnist George Will appears to concur by claiming that “good government” rather than voting is “the fundamental human right” and that America’s declining voting rate is a healthy development.\textsuperscript{31}  Political party organizations recognize the concepts previously described but still maintain that mobilization is an important function within their party.

In addition to the diversity of issues within each voter and the apathy of some voters is the problem of the split-ticket voter. Political parties have struggled with the idea of registering and motivating the electorate to vote just to have them split their votes among the various party’s candidates and issues. Trends from 1952 to 1984 see a general increase in split ticket voting within the electorate. Straight ticket voting dropped from sixty-six percent in 1952 to forty-three percent in 1984. The number of people who identify themselves as Democrats and Republicans also declined from eighty percent in

\textsuperscript{28}  Thomas E. Patterson, \textit{The Vanishing Voter (New York: Vintage Books, 2003)}, 11.
\textsuperscript{29}  Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{30}  Ibid, 11.
1940 to seventy percent in 1986 and those who identify themselves as independents grew to about thirty percent of the electorate.\textsuperscript{32}

Taking into account voter apathy, split ticket elections, and the idea that voters have such a diverse set of opinions on various issues how is it possible to mobilize an electorate? Some scholars see technological innovations as part of the answer. High-tech methods of identifying individuals within the electorate who are most likely to benefit a particular party have seen some success. Thomas B. Edsall and Haynes Johnson describe the use of modern technology by the Republican Party in Colorado in 1984 to selectively mobilize target groups within the electorate. Computer-generated lists of individuals who met certain criteria indicated who was likely to support the Republican Party. The criteria included family income, subscriptions to certain periodicals, the type of cars they owned, and in what part of the city or countryside they resided. The lists were “merged and purged” to yield a shortened list of individuals who were not registered to vote and were most likely to vote for the Republican candidate once registered. Those members of the electorate were then contacted, asked to register, and encouraged to vote.\textsuperscript{33} This process of selective mobilization is one example of political parties changing with the times and effectively using it’s resources to achieve their goals, which include winning national, state and local elections.

A third important function of political parties by which their effectiveness can be measured is their ability to recruit political leadership and seek government offices.


\textsuperscript{10}, \textsuperscript{32} Keefe, \textit{Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America}, 12.

\textsuperscript{33} Davidson and Oleszek, eds. \textit{Governing}, 111.
William Keefe states that, "The process by which political leaders are recruited, elected and appointed to office form the central core of party activity. The party interests, moreover, extends to the appointment of administrative and judicial officers-for example, cabinet members and judges- once the party has captured the executive branch of government." Keefe goes on to suggest that while the recruitment of political leadership is at the core of party interests, party organizations do not necessarily dominate the process. He argues that candidates are increasingly becoming self-starters and choose to enter primaries without waiting for party approval, and that some candidates are recruited and groomed by political interest groups with large campaign funds. John Aldrich expands on the theory that political parties are losing their effectiveness in terms of recruiting candidates and campaigning for office. He states, "that the major political party is the creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and officeholder. They have created maintained, used or abused, reformed or ignored the political party when doing so has furthered their goals and ambitions." Aldrich goes on to argue that political parties are institutions shaped by politicians and that while these politicians do not necessarily have partisan goals, they do have serious career goals. He further states, “These goals are to be sought in government, not in parties, but they are goals that at times have best been realized through the parties.” Aldrich’s view of the effectiveness of political party’s ability to develop leadership is somewhat more skeptical that that of Keefe. Keefe at least concedes that despite their diminished role, parties still

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37 Ibid, 4.
play an important part in promoting candidates and getting them elected.\textsuperscript{38} He suggests that it would be tremendously difficult to fill thousands of elective offices in the absence of parties without turning each election into a “free-for-all” and that under such circumstances, “Any form of collective accountability to the voters would vanish.”\textsuperscript{39} Aldrich agrees that organized political parties are “the only means for holding elected officials responsible for what they do collectively” but goes on to argue that politicians are too concerned with reelection to think of the public good and that elections are centered on candidates and their personalities rather than party platform issues.\textsuperscript{40} James E. Campbell takes a more positive view of partisan candidates by claiming, “The presidential candidates and the issues they address certainly have clear partisan pedigrees. In winning their parties’ nominations, the candidates have proven themselves to represent at least a large segment of their parties’ faithful.”\textsuperscript{41} Campbell refutes the views of Keefe and Aldrich by suggesting that presidential campaigns have played “a positive role in sustaining and renewing the pervasive partisanship of the electorate.”\textsuperscript{42} He goes on to argue that, “Despite all of the attention to the candidates and the issues and for all of their neglect of the political parties, presidential general election campaigns are, in the end, party-friendly events. They bring straying partisans back to their parties.”\textsuperscript{43} Other scholars also agree that the relationship between parties and office seekers is a positive one for political parties. Byron E. Shafer argues that, “Those who seek to remain in

\textsuperscript{38} Keefe, \textit{Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America}, 29.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 29.
\textsuperscript{40} Aldrich, \textit{Why Parties?} 3-4.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 24.
office must also respond to the elites and voters who determine whether they will be successful. For these reasons, the actions and views of partisan officeholders probably register political change more often than they cause it.  

If the effectiveness of political parties' ability to recruit candidates and see them into office is measured in terms of who is in control, then the results are unclear based on the various opinions of scholars. The debate remains, do candidates for political office control the direction of the party they represent, or do they reflect the party and the party’s platform?

A fourth function of political parties by which their effectiveness may be measured is their ability to override the dangers of sectionalism and promote the national interest. Political parties increasingly are challenged to unify diverse interest groups into one central political movement. Some scholars see political parties growing increasingly ineffective when trying to unify interest groups. In his essay, “Policy Coherence in Political Parties: the Elections of 1984, 1988, and 1992,” William Crotty argues that political parties are becoming irrelevant in their decision making and that political action committees threaten to “further displace the party organizations as a useful tool for political candidates.” He further states that the “decreasing value of political parties for candidates, combined with their weakened public impact, would be a severe, and potentially critical, blow.” The growing ineffectiveness of political parties is echoed by Thomas E. Patterson when he states that, “The proportion of citizens who believed interest groups ran the government jumped from thirty-one percent in 1964 to sixty-seven percent in 1976.”

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44 Byron E. Shafer, Partisan Approaches to Postwar American Politics (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 1998), 34.
percent in 1988, and that the number of political action committees grew from six-
hundred to four-thousand between 1974 and 1984.”

Martin P. Wattenberg sums up the decline of party effectiveness when he argues, “…it is likely that local parties will become even more dispensable to candidates as political action committees continue to multiply and provide services that previously were often provided by the parties.”

Other scholars take a different view of the effects that interest groups have on the effectiveness of political parties. Byron E. Shafer argues that, “Party organizations at the national and state levels still operate in a more comprehensive manner that any political action committee or interest group …in integrating a network of affiliates and allied interests into campaign structures intended to benefit candidates.” He goes on to claim, “In terms of the comprehensiveness of their activities and efforts at coordination, there is no political action committee in the American political system that is the match of the Democratic and Republican organizations.”

Larry J. Sabato argues that the effectiveness of political parties in curbing sectionalism is in good standing and that there are two things that keep the power of interest groups in check, holding regular free elections and maintaining the two-party system. He argues that, “While political action committees represent particular interests, the political parties build coalitions of groups and attempt to represent the national interest. They arbitrate among competing claims, and they seek to reach a consensus on matters of overriding importance to the nation.

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46 Ibid, 136.
47 Patterson, The Vanishing Voter, 36.
50 Ibid, 177-178.
The parties are one of the unifying forces in an exceptionally diverse country."\textsuperscript{51} Sabato also argues that not every interest group has power and money and that, political parties and their candidates recognize this and value votes over dollars. He concludes that, “If interest groups and their political action committees are useful to a functioning democracy, then political parties are essential.”\textsuperscript{52}

Shafer and Sabato argue the effectiveness of political parties’ ability to unify diverse groups, Xandra Kayden and Eddie Mahe, Jr., go a step further and suggest that relationships between political action committees and parties tend to increase political action committee partisanship.\textsuperscript{53} This idea is based on evidence involving specific political action committee contributions given to the two major political parties between 1974 and 1980. The evidence suggests that the contributions by business political action committees to the Democratic Party steadily declined over time while the contributions from state employee political action committees to the Democratic Party steadily increased. These trends show the gradual growth of partisanship within the organized interest groups. Scholars have a wide variety of viewpoints on the effectiveness of political parties in their ability to unite interests and control sectionalism but they tend to agree on how important this concept is. William Keefe makes a strong point when he states “…the legitimacy of government itself probably depends in part on the capacity of the parties to represent diverse interests and to integrate the claims of competing groups

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 16-17.
in a broad program of public policy. Their ability to do this is certain to bear on their electoral success.”  

A fifth function of political parties is to organize dissent and opposition to their rivals. Scholars have recognized that conflicting interests are inevitable and that conflict is often a sign of a healthy political system, but they also agree there are consequences. In his essay, “The Mischief’s of Faction Revisited,” John Gardner observes, “The intensity of conflict today creates in each particular group a kind of siege mentality. Each group in convinced of the rightness of its aims and, believing itself to be engaged in a lonely fight for survival, feels victimized by other groups in the society.”  

Gardner continues that people who see themselves as victims are in no mood to work with others to shape a constructive future, and that political interests have achieved veto power over a piece of any possible solution and no one has the power to solve the problem. He concludes by saying, “Thus do the parts wage war against the whole.”  

Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter posit that electoral deadlock has been increasing in the United States over the past twenty-five years and that this deadlock is the result of the decaying of, “America’s traditional partisan and electoral institutions.”  

They continue that such electoral decay increases the opportunities for other forms of political conflict. They suggest that genuine competition in the electoral arena has declined sharply and that incumbents have dominated their opponents. Consequently political opponents must look outside the electoral arena for other forms of political

56 Ibid, 125
combat. One new method of political opposition finds itself in the realm of the criminal justice system. Ginsberg and Shefter state that, “Between the early 1970s and the late 1980s there has been more that a tenfold increase in the number of indictments brought by federal prosecutors against national, state, and local officials…” 58 They further state that, “Many of these indictments have been initiated by Republican administrations and their targets have been primarily Democrats, But a substantial number of high-ranking Republicans in the executive branch have also been the targets of criminal prosecutions stemming from allegations or investigations initiated by Democrats.”59 Ginsberg and Shefter argue that since there is no reason to believe that the level of political corruption in the United States has actually increased tenfold over the last twenty-five years, the sharp increase in indictments has been, “closely linked to struggles for political power in the United States.”60 The number of major issues that are fought in the courts adds increased fuel to their thesis of electoral deadlock: “The federal judiciary has become the central institution for resolving struggles over such issues as race relations and abortion and has also come to play a more significant part in deciding questions of social welfare and economic policy.”61

James Sundquist observes, that the congressional majority has every incentive to reject presidential initiatives; to accept them is to acknowledge the president’s competence, hence, to support his re-election. He continues that similarly, the president

58 Ginsberg and Shefter, Politics by Other Means, 4-5.
59 Ibid, 4-5.
60 Ibid, 7.
61 Ibid, 7.
cannot run against Congress in the next election if he admits that congressional initiatives are meritorious. He further argues that divided control gives each branch of government an electoral incentive to work for the failure of the branch held by the other. Sarah A. Binder agrees with the general thesis that polarized political opposition causes gridlock: “Rather than encouraging coherent policy change, party polarization might prevent it. If major policy change is more likely when legislators can forge large, bipartisan coalitions, we might expect the likelihood of gridlock to increase with polarization.”

She uses the recent example of the Republican Party’s “Contract with America” to prove her point: “Although the House passed nearly all of the provisions of the Contract, less that forty percent of the Contract was eventually enacted into law. Of critical importance to understanding the fate of the Contract – and the fate of agendas more generally – is the impact of bi-cameralism and supermajority rules in congress.” This suggests that parties in power set the rules of order in Congress to oppose the goals of their rivals.

All of these scholars tend to agree that the political parties have done an effective job of coordinating dissent and opposition and that the resulting gridlock and judicial activity are the consequences, Morris Fiorina takes a different view. He argues the proponents of the gridlock theory sound convincing, but there is little research to support such strong claims. He argues that divided governments are, on average, no less

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64 Ibid, 519-533.
activist than unified governments. Fiorina quotes a study done in which David Mayhew reviewed the post-World War II federal record and found, “That unified governments were no more likely to produce significant legislation than were divided governments.”66 Thus, Mayhew and Fiorina both refute the gridlock aspect of political opposition.

This analysis of the effectiveness of political parties leads to the realization that a great deal of debate continues about their ability to carry out these five basic functions.

Conclusion

Since the eighteenth century scholars have been writing about political parties. The historiography of this subject matter is ripe with conflicting ideas, opinions, and research on the origins and effectiveness of political parties. The Founders debate on parties explores the conflict within our Constitution and defines the essential dilemma of freedoms within the system of government created by that document. To allow factions to exist under the protections of the First Amendment was a controversial issue for the Founders. Their opinions on parties and faction were primarily as negative as most of the European scholars like Hume, and Rousseau who wrote before them. The guarantee of a peaceful transfer of power within our system of government was, in their minds, jeopardized by the presence of political parties. The debate over the origins and roles of the political party system continues within contemporary scholarly literature.

The current attitude toward political parties shows, at least, some residual components of the distrust of 1789. The Founders had to accept the inevitability of

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66Ibid, 87.
political parties, as do Americans today. The modern debate about political parties, however, is less about the existence of parties and more about their effectiveness. The question of how well political parties are performing their basic functions creates another wide array of opinion and research. Scholars argue that parties are failing to mobilize the electorate, articulate political interests, recruit leadership override sectionalism, and organize opposition. Other scholars argue that they are succeeding on those issues. The scholars seem to be as polarized about the effectiveness of political parties as some claim our electorate to be on political issues. Do the comparisons of the scholarly research reflect author biases, a lack of definition of certain political issues, or a lack of consistency in research methods? That the scholars can differ so drastically on certain ideas begs an explanation. The differences may be a by-product of the timing of the scholars’ writings though most of the material reviewed was published within the last two decades. The differences may also be due to rapid changes in our modern society. The advent of new technology, the changing role of mass media, and demographic changes in America may have affected some of the differences.

Political Parties are a fact of American government. At certain times in American History they have been strong and at other times weak; parties, nonetheless, have proven to be quite resilient and have shown their staying power. As long as people organize to achieve their goals, parties will have a place in society. Political parties will continue to be controversial as the dynamics of the American political system continue to evolve. The electorate will be affected by the party system and in both positive and negative ways, and scholars will continue to predict the demise and resurgence of political parties.
in America. Perhaps E. E. Schattschneider said it best when he stated, “the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties. As a matter of fact, the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime.”

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

The topic of this lesson plan is the origin and effectiveness of the political party system in American government. This lesson is intended to meet California State standards in both eleventh grade United States History and in twelfth grade American Government as shown in Appendix A.

This lesson is designed to help students take an in-depth look at the Framers’ philosophy in regard to faction and political parties. This lesson will explore the attitudes of not only the framers of our Constitution but also of the European scholars who wrote extensively on the subject of parties. The lesson will expose students to the basic dilemma of freedoms that the founders faced when authoring the first amendment to the bill of rights. After examining the origins of the American political party system students will explore current issues involving parties. These issues will include determining the effectiveness of contemporary political parties. The themes that the lesson plan will illustrate include:

1. Political parties in American government are controversial.
2. Can a nation of people with diverse interests peacefully co-exist?
3. Can a system of government protect the will of the minority from being overshadowed by the will of the majority, and should it be compelled to do so?
4. The first amendment to the Constitution created a great dilemma for the founder who were so adamantly opposed to parties.
This lesson plan is designed for a five-day period of time with classes that are approximately fifty to sixty minutes in length. The timeline for this lesson is as follows:

Day one: 1. Hook activity

2. Display and discuss themes 2 and 3.

3. Written response to the theme questions

Day two: 1. Read *Federalist 10* and George Washington’s “Farewell Address.”

2. Discussion of primary source documents.

3. Written response to questions about the documents.

Day three: 1. Read quotes from Hume and Rousseau.

2. Discuss history of anti-party sentiment.

3. Read first amendment to the Constitution and discuss the relationship between it and political parties.

Day four-six: 1. Party platform and electoral map research project.

2. Discussion on the correlation between platforms and electoral success.


Prior Content and Knowledge

Prior to delivering this unit plan, the students should have some knowledge of our Constitution and its principles. They should also have some background knowledge of the Founding Fathers and their contributions to developing our system of government. Students should also have some experience writing essays in the five-paragraph style.
Lastly, students should have some experience with the analysis of primary source documents.

Discussion of Content Hook

The hook activity for this unit plan involves the following theme questions: can a nation of people with diverse interests peacefully co-exist, and can a system of government protect the will of the minority from being overshadowed by the will of the majority, and should it be compelled to do so?

Students will explore these questions through an activity that will designate some of the class as majority members and some as minority members. This designation will be done randomly by drawing cards. The class will be presented with various proposed laws upon which they will have a chance to vote. These laws will be designed to favor the majority if they are voted into law. Students should be reminded that people usually vote for their own best interests. The laws involved in the voting could be proposed laws that would greatly enhance the lives of the majority members and created certain hardships for the minority members. The activity should be used to frustrate or even anger, in a controlled environment, the minority students and the majority students should be fully aware of the feelings of the minority. After voting on a few proposed laws, a discussion will assess how both the majority and minority members are feeling about the activity. Minority members should get frustrated after a few votes take place. This discussion should generate some ideas about how the voices of the minority members can
be heard, and if a government should ensure that the will of the minority members is protected.

Lesson Content

Day 1: Hook activity.

Make a classroom set of three by five cards with symbols on them [Appendix B]. The cards should be produced to represent a certain ratio. In a class of thirty students there should be eleven circle/square cards, 10 circle/circle cards, 5 triangle/square cards, and 4 star/percent cards. In this case approximately 70 percent of the cards have a large circle, 53 percent have a square, 16 percent have a triangle, 13 percent have a star, and 13 percent have a percent symbol.

Distribute the cards to the class randomly and explain the symbols and terminology.

Tell the class they are going to vote on some proposed laws and discuss some basic voter behavior with them. Suggest that most voters will make decisions based on their own best interests. Introduce the proposed laws on the overhead one at a time and allow the students to vote on each [Appendix C]. Announce the results of each vote prior to the next vote. Proposed laws may look like those on overhead #1 or instructor may make up their own to fit their classrooms. Proposed laws may include: All card-holders that have a large circle on their card will be allowed two restroom passes per month. All other students will be limited to one pass per month. Another proposed law might be: All card-holders with a large circle or a square on their card will be able to turn in their
homework assignments one day after the due date. These laws are designed to isolate and frustrate the minority groups.

After voting on proposed laws a classroom discussion should take place that elicits responses from the students about the activity. Specific questions should be asked for the class to consider [Appendix D]. The context of the responses should be guided toward the themes of diverse people peacefully co-existing and the protection of the will of the minority. Themes should be displayed in the classroom throughout this lesson [Appendix E]. Have student produce a written response to the activity questions and related themes.

Day 2: Research assignment.

This lesson is designed to focus the student’s attention on the attitudes of the framers of the Constitution toward political parties. It will help students understand the concepts introduced in the lesson’s themes that suggest the controversial nature of political parties and the dilemma that the founders were confronted with. This lesson requires the students to carefully analyze primary source documents within the context of the lesson’s themes.

Students will read James Madison’s *Federalist 10* and George Washington’s “Farewell Address.” Class sets of copies of this material may be used or the material may be read from a website. The two documents may be found at:

http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm

http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm
Students will answer, in writing, the following questions for each document:

1. How did each person feel about political parties? Do they agree?
2. What specific words or phrases, used by the author, led you to your conclusion?
3. Provide at least two quotes from each author to support your argument.

**Day 3: Historical context of anti-party thought and the dilemma of freedom.**

This lesson will build upon the previous two and ask students to discover why the framers of the Constitution were so concerned about the existence of political parties. It will also delve into the basic dilemma, faced by the framers of the Constitution, balancing the protection of certain liberties and party activity.

Ask the question: Why did the framers have such an anti-party attitude?

Students will read quotes from Rousseau and Hume [Appendix F]. Briefly help students make the connection between the eighteenth century philosophers in Europe and the framers of the Constitution. Ask students if they can identify one fundamental problem with the attitude of European scholars and if it is applicable to our new nation. Hopefully a student will suggest that the circumstances in old Europe and new America are quite different.

Have students read the first amendment to the Constitution [Appendix G]. Ask students to identify, in writing, the dilemma faced by the founders. Hopefully students will recognize that the founders who distrusted political parties created an amendment to the Constitution that in effect protects the existence of political parties. Discuss the Constitutional dilemma with the class. Ask the question: if you had to make the decision under the same circumstances what would you do? Why?
Day 4-6: Party platform and electoral map research project.

This lesson moves the focus of the topic from attitudes toward political parties to the effectiveness of political parties. Students should now be comfortable with the themes of this lesson plan and the focus can now change to how contemporary political parties attempt to protect the will of their constituents through the development of a party platform, what those platforms represent and how successful each party has been in presidential election years. This lesson may take more time than allotted in this plan depending on the length of the group presentations.

Divide class into pairs and assign each group a presidential election to research. Begin with the most recent election and work back in history until each group has their own election. Depending on the size of the class some pairs may need to go back into the 1930’s or 1940’s. Using the Internet have students research the platforms of the two political parties that received the most electoral votes in that election. Students will summarize the three or four main planks in each platform [Appendix H]. This information can be found at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.php.

Students will research the electoral and popular results of their assigned election. This data can be found at: http://www.nationalatlas.gov/printable/elections.htm#list.

Students will search for a correlation between their platform and their election results and present their findings to the class. Students will take notes on each of the presentations in an attempt to determine if there is any pattern developing from one election to the next. One example of a developing pattern might be to determine if there is one plank that either party may support, that consistently.
Students will summarize the results of their research and the group presentations in writing. A classroom discussion exploring the student’s conclusions will then take place. This discussion should include the student’s views on the effectiveness of political parties in contemporary politics.

Day 7: Evaluation

Students will complete the assessment. [See Appendix I, J]
Appendix A

California History – Social Science Content Standards.
11.1 Students analyze the significant events in the founding of the nation and its’
_attempts to realize the philosophy of government described in the Declaration of
Independence.

.2 Analyze the ideological origins of the American Revolution, the Founding
Father’s philosophy of divinely bestowed unalienable natural rights, the
debates on the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, and the
addition of the Bill of Rights.

12.1 Students explain the fundamental principles and moral values of American democracy as
expressed in the U.S. Constitution and other essential documents of American
democracy.

.5 Describe the systems of separated and shared powers, the role of organized
interests (Federalist Paper Number 10), checks and balances (Federalist Paper
Number 51), the importance of an independent judiciary (Federalist Paper
Number 78), enumerated powers, rule of law, federalism, and civilian control of
the military.

12.10 Students evaluate issues regarding campaigns for national, state, and local elective
offices.

.1 Analyze the origin, development, and role of political parties, noting those
occasional periods in which there was only one major party or were more than
two major parties.

12.10 Students formulate questions about, and defend their analysis of, tensions within our
constitutional democracy and the importance of maintaining a balance between the
following concepts: majority rule and individual rights; liberty and equality; state and
national authority in a federal system; civil disobedience and the rule of law; freedom of
the press and the right to a fair trial; the relationship of religion and government.
Appendix B

Overhead
Appendix C
Proposed laws

1. All cards that contain a large circle allow their holder two restroom passes per month. All others allow only one restroom pass per month.

2. All cards with a large circle or a square allow their holder to turn in their homework assignments one day after the due date. All others must turn in their homework on the due date.

3. All cards with a large circle or a triangle allow their holder to eat in class. All others may not eat in class.

4. All cards with a percent symbol designate their holders as classroom clean-up crew and they must remain in class until it is orderly. All others may leave at the bell.

5. All cards with a large circle or a square allow their holders to have pencils provided for them in the classroom. All others must provide their own pencils.

6. All cards with a large circle or a triangle allow their holders to have the last ten minutes of each class period for preferred activities. All other will have specific assignments to complete.
Appendix D

Hook activity discussion questions overhead
1. How did this activity make you feel?

2. Was this activity fair?

3. Do you believe that most people will vote according to their own interests?

4. What happened to the rights of the minority groups?

5. How could minority rights have been protected during this activity?

Was there any concern for peaceful co-existence in the classroom?
Appendix E
1. Political parties in American government are controversial.

2. Can a nation of people with diverse interests peacefully co-exist?

3. Can a system of government protect the will of the minority from being overshadowed by the will of the majority, and should it be compelled to do so?

4. The first amendment to the Constitution created a dilemma for the founders who were so adamantly opposed to parties.
Appendix F

Overhead
“Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other.”

David Hume

“ It is against the natural order that a large number should rule and a small number be ruled.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Appendix G

Overhead
Amendment I

Restrictions on Powers of Congress

Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.
Appendix H
Worksheet for party platform and election result research project.

Student name_______________________________

Name of political party___________________  Year of presidential election__________

Presidential candidate_______________________________

Major platform planks:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Election results

Electoral College______________________________________________________

Popular election_______________________________________________________

Notes:
Appendix I

Quiz
True or False

1. Eighteenth century European philosophers like David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau favored political parties.

2. In his farewell address President George Washington voiced his displeasure with political parties.

3. The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right to free speech and assembly.

4. American political parties are controversial.

5. Federalist 10 portrays political parties in a negative manner.

Short essay #1.

Describe the Constitutional dilemma faced by the founding Fathers within the context of allowing political parties to form versus the guarantee of individual liberties.

Short essay #2.

Express your opinion regarding the following question and defend your answer. Should our government be compelled to protect the will of the minority, if so, how, and if not, why not?
Appendix J

Quiz key
True or False

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. True
5. True

Essay #1.

Students should describe the conflicting goals the founders faced when trying to both protect liberty and discourage political party activity. The First Amendment should be mentioned in the essay as guaranteeing rights that are essential to personal liberty and the formation of political parties. An excellent essay will include information about the general attitudes of the Founding fathers as expressed in Federalist 10 and Washington’s “Farewell Address” and those of eighteenth century European philosophers like Rousseau and Hume.

Essay #2.

Students should express their views on this issue using an argument either refuting or supporting the concept of majority rule. An excellent essay will have suggestions for protecting the will of the minority or justifying majority rule.
LITERATURE CITED


