CHAPTER **10**

Parties and Party Systems

'In politics, shared hatreds are almost always the basis of friendships.'

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America* (1835)

PREVIEW

So fundamental are political parties to the operation of modern politics that their role and significance are often taken for granted. It is forgotten, for instance, that parties are a relatively recent invention. As political machines organized to win elections and wield government power, parties came into existence only in the early nineteenth century. Now, however, they are virtually ubiquitous. The only parts of the world in which they do not exist are those where they are suppressed by dictatorship or military rule. Quite simply, the political party has become the major organizing principle of modern politics. Political parties are the vital link between the state and civil society, between the institutions of government and the groups and interests that operate within society. However, parties are by no means all alike. Not only do they differ in terms of matters such as organizational structure and ideological orientation, but they also carry out different roles within the larger political system. Political parties have thus been both lauded as the great tools of democracy and criticized as a source of tyranny and repression. Their impact, moreover, is crucially influenced by what is known as the party system, the network of relationships between and among parties, structured in particular by the number of parties in existence. One-party systems operate very differently from competitive party systems, but there are also important contrasts between two-party and multiparty systems. Nevertheless, parties and party systems have increasingly come under attack. They have been blamed for failing to articulate the new and more diverse aspirations that have emerged in modern societies, and for failing to solve, or perhaps even to address, many of their most troubling problems.

KEY ISSUES

- What is a political party? How can parties be classified?
- What are the key functions of political parties?
- How are parties organized, and where is power located within them?
- What kinds of party system are there?
- How does the party system shape the broader political process?
- Are parties in decline, and is this decline terminal?

CONCEPT

Political party

A political party is a group of people that is organized for the purpose of winning government power, by electoral or other means. Parties typically exhibit the following characteristics (1) They aim to exercise government power by winning political office (small parties may nevertheless use elections more to gain a platform than to win power). (2) They are organized bodies with a formal 'card carrying' membership. (3) They typically adopt a broad issue focus, addressing each of the major areas of government policy (small parties, however, may have a single-issue focus). (4) To varying degrees, they are united by shared political preferences and a general ideological identity.

PARTY POLITICS

Political parties are found in the vast majority of countries and in most political systems. Parties may be authoritarian or democratic; they may seek power through elections or through revolution; and they may espouse ideologies of the left, right or centre, or, indeed, disavow political ideas altogether. However, parties of some kind exist from Brazil to Burundi and from Norway to New Zealand. The development of political parties and the acquisition of a party system came to be recognized as a mark of political modernization. By the late 1950s, some 80 per cent of the world's states were ruled by political parties. During the 1960s and early 1970s, however, a decline set in with the spread of military rule in the developing world. Political parties were accused of being divisive, and of failing to solve overriding problems of poverty, and ethnic and tribal rivalry. They also proved to be inconvenient for economic and military elites. The upsurge of democratization (see p. 272) since the 1980s has, nevertheless, led to a renewed flourishing of parties. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, the relaxation or collapse of military rule was invariably accompanied by the re-emergence of parties. In former communist states, one-party rule was replaced by the establishment of competitive party systems.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that parties have always been with us. Political parties are part of the structures of mass politics, ushered in by the advent of representative government and the progressive extension of the franchise during the nineteenth century. Until then, what were called 'factions' (see p. 223) or 'parties' were little more than groups of like-minded politicians, usually formed around a key leader or family. So-called 'court' parties, for instance, often developed within autocratic monarchies as a result of the struggle for influence amongst notables and advisers. Thus, when Edmund Burke (see p. 36) in the late eighteenth century described a party as 'a body of men united . . . upon some particular principle upon which they all agree', he was thinking about fluid and informal groupings such as the Whigs and the Tories, and not about the organized and increasingly disciplined machines into which they were to develop.

Parties of the modern kind first emerged in the USA. Despite the abhorrence of parties felt by the 'founding fathers' who created the US constitution, the Federalist Party (later the Whigs and, from 1860, the Republican Party) appeared as a mass-based party during the US presidential election of 1800. Many conservative and liberal parties started life as legislative factions. Only later, forced to appeal to an ever-widening electorate, did they develop an extraparliamentary machinery of constituency branches, local agents and so on. In contrast, socialist parties and parties representing religious, ethnic and language groups were invariably born as social movements, or interest groups, operating outside government. Subsequently, they developed into fully-fledged parliamentary parties in the hope of winning formal representation and shaping public policy. By the beginning of the twentieth century, parties and party systems had, in effect, become the political manifestation of the social and other cleavages that animated society at large. However, the resulting party forms varied considerably.

Types of party

A variety of classifications have been used for political parties. The most important of these are the following:

CONCEPT

Faction, factionalism

A faction is a section or group within a larger formation, usually a political party. Its aims and organizational status must therefore be compatible with those of its host party; otherwise the group is a 'party within a party'. A distinction is sometimes drawn between 'factions' and 'tendencies', the latter being looser and more informal groups, distinguished only by a common policy or ideological disposition. Factionalism refers either to the proliferation of factions, or to the bitterness of factional rivalry. The term faction is often used pejoratively; the term factionalism is always pejorative, implying debilitating infighting.

- cadre and mass parties
- representative and integrative parties
- constitutional and revolutionary parties
- left-wing and right-wing parties.

The most common distinction is that between cadre parties and mass parties. The term *cadre* party originally meant a 'party of notables', dominated by an informal group of leaders who saw little point in building up a mass organization. Such parties invariably developed out of parliamentary factions or cliques at a time when the franchise was limited. However, the term 'cadre' is now more commonly used (as in communist parties) to denote trained and professional party members who are expected to exhibit a high level of political commitment and doctrinal discipline. In this sense, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the Nazi Party in Germany, and the Fascist Party in Italy were cadre parties, as are the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, in certain respects, the Indian Congress Party in the modern period. The distinguishing feature of cadre parties is their reliance on a politically active elite (usually subject to quasi-military discipline) that is capable of offering ideological leadership to the masses. Although strict political criteria are laid down for party membership, careerism and simple convenience are often powerful motives for joining such parties, as both the CPSU and the Nazis found out.

A *mass* party, on the other hand, places a heavy emphasis on broadening membership and constructing a wide electoral base. Although the extension of the franchise forced liberal and conservative parties to seek a mass appeal, the earliest examples of mass parties were European socialist parties, such as the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the UK Labour Party, which constructed organizations specifically designed to mobilize working-class support. The key feature of such parties is that they place heavier stress on recruitment and organization than on ideology and political conviction. Although such parties often have formally democratic organizations, except for a minority of activists, membership usually entails little in the way of participation and only general agreement about principles and goals.

Most modern parties fall into the category of what Otto Kirchheimer (1966) termed 'catch-all parties'. These are parties that drastically reduce their ideological baggage in order to appeal to the largest possible number of voters. Kirchheimer particularly had in mind the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany, but the best examples of catch-all parties are found in the USA in the form of the Republicans and the Democrats. Modern de-ideologized socialist parties such as the German Social Democrats and the Labour Party in the UK also fit this description. These parties differ from the classic model of a mass party in that they emphasize leadership and unity, and downgrade the role of individual party members in trying to build up broad coalitions of support, rather than relying on a particular social class or sectional group.

The second party distinction, advanced by Sigmund Neumann (1956), is that between so-called parties of representation and parties of integration. Representative parties see their primary function as being the securing of votes in elections. They thus attempt to reflect, rather than shape, public opinion. In this respect, representative parties adopt a catch-all strategy and therefore place pragmatism before principle and market research before popular mobilization.

The prevalence of such parties in modern politics gave considerable force to arguments based on **rational choice** models of political behaviour, such as those of Joseph Schumpeter (see p. 202) and Anthony Downs (1957), which portray politicians as power-seeking creatures who are willing to adopt whatever policies are likely to bring them electoral success.

Integrative parties, in contrast, adopt proactive, rather than reactive, political strategies; they wish to mobilize, educate and inspire the masses, rather than merely respond to their concerns. Although Neumann saw the typical mobilizing party as an ideologically disciplined cadre party, mass parties may also exhibit mobilizing tendencies. For example, until they became discouraged by electoral failure, socialist parties set out to 'win over' the electorate to a belief in the benefits of public ownership, full employment, redistribution, social welfare and so on. This approach was also, rather ironically, adopted by the UK Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Abandoning the party's traditional distaste for ideology (see p. 28) and abstract principle, Thatcher embraced 'conviction politics' in pursuing a mobilizing strategy based on firm support for cutting taxes, encouraging enterprise, promoting individual responsibility, tackling trade union power and so forth.

The third type of classification distinguishes between constitutional parties and revolutionary parties. *Constitutional* parties acknowledge the rights and entitlements of other parties and, thus, operate within a framework of rules and constraints. In particular, they acknowledge that there is a division between the party and the state, between the party in power (the government of the day) and state institutions (the bureaucracy, judiciary, police and so on) that enjoy formal independence and political neutrality. Above all, constitutional parties acknowledge and respect the rules of electoral competition. They recognize that they can be voted out of power as easily as they can be voted in. Mainstream parties in liberal democracies all have such a constitutional character.

Revolutionary parties, on the other hand, are antisystem or anticonstitutional parties, either of the left or of the right. Such parties aim to seize power and overthrow the existing constitutional structure using tactics that range from outright insurrection and popular revolution to the quasi-legalism practised by the Nazis and the Fascists. In some cases, revolutionary parties are formally banned by being classified as 'extremist' or 'anti-democratic', as has been the case in post-World War II Germany. When such parties win power, however, they invariably become 'ruling' or regime parties, suppressing rival parties and establishing a permanent relationship with the state machinery. In one-party systems, whether established under the banner of communism, fascism, nationalism or whatever, the distinction between the party and the state is so weakened that the 'ruling' party, in effect, substitutes itself for the government, creating a fused 'party–state' apparatus. It was common in the USSR, for instance, for the General Secretary of the CPSU to act as the chief executive or head of government without bothering to assume a formal state post.

The final way of distinguishing between parties is on the basis of ideological orientation, specifically between those parties labelled left-wing and those labelled right-wing (see p. 225). Left-wing parties (progressive, socialist and communist parties) are characterized by a commitment to change, in the form of either social reform or wholesale economic transformation. These have traditionally drawn their support from the ranks of the poor and disadvantaged

● **Rational choice**: An approach to politics based on the assumption that individuals are rationally self-interested actors; an 'economic' theory of politics (see p. 14–15).

Focus on . . .

The left/right divide

The left–right political spectrum is a shorthand method of describing political ideas and beliefs, summarizing the ideological positions of politicians, parties and movements. Its origins date back to the French Revolution and the positions that groups adopted at the first meeting of the French Estates-General in 1789. The terms 'left' and 'right' do not have exact meanings, however. In a narrow sense, the *linear* political spectrum (see Figure 10.1) summarizes different attitudes to the economy and the role of the state: left-wing views support intervention and collectivism, right-wing views favour the market and individualism. This supposedly reflects deeper ideological or value differences, as listed below:

Left			Right
Liberty		Authority	
Equality		Hierarchy	
Fraternity		Order	
Rights		Duties	
Progress		Tradition	
Reform		Reaction	
Internationalism		Nationalism	

An alternative, *horseshoe-shaped* political spectrum (see Figure 10.2) was devised in the post-World War II period to highlight the totalitarian and monistic (anti-pluralist) tendencies of both fascism and communism, by contrast with the alleged tolerance and openness of mainstream creeds. Those, like Hans Eysenck (1964), who have developed a two-dimensional political spectrum (see Figure 10.3) have tried to compensate for the crudeness and inconsistencies of the conventional left–right spectrum by adding a vertical authoritarian–libertarian one. This enables positions on economic organization to be disentangled from those related to civil liberty.

(in urban societies, the working classes). Right-wing parties (conservative and fascist parties, in particular) generally uphold the existing social order and are, in that sense, a force for continuity. Their supporters usually include business interests and the materially-contented middle classes. However, this notion of a neat left–right party divide is, at best, simplistic and, at worst, deeply misleading. Not only are both the left and the right often divided along reformist/revolutionary and constitutional/insurrectionary lines, but also all parties, especially constitutional ones, tend to be 'broad churches', in the sense that they encompass their own left and right wings. Moreover, electoral competition has the effect of blurring ideological identities, once-cherished principles commonly being discarded in the search for votes. The definitions of left and right have also changed over time, and often differ from one political system to the next. Finally, the shift away from old class polarities and the emergence of new political issues such as the environment, animal rights and feminism has perhaps rendered the conventional ideas of left and right redundant (Giddens, 1994).

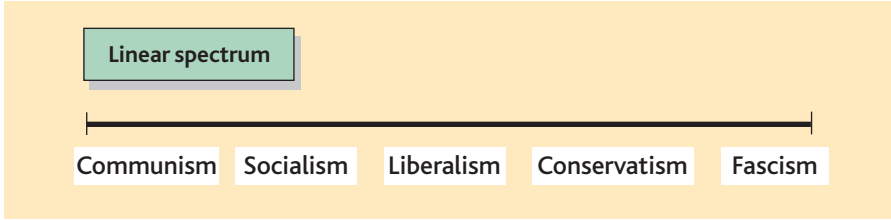


Figure 10.1 Linear political spectrum

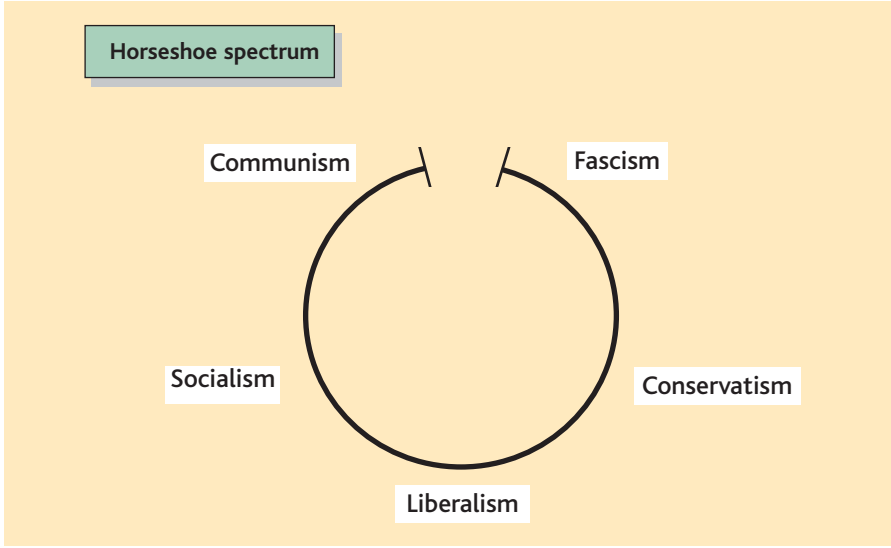


Figure 10.2 Horseshoe political spectrum

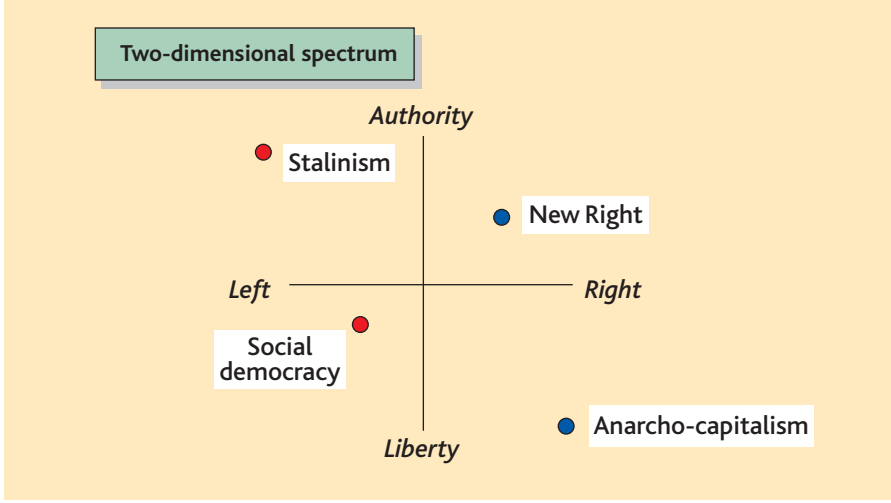
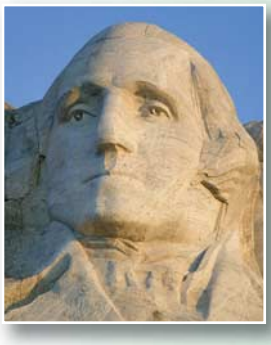


Figure 10.3 Two-dimensional political spectrum



Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

US political philosopher and statesman. A wealthy Virginian planter who was Governor of Virginia 1779–81, Jefferson served as the first US Secretary of State, 1789–94. He was the third president of the USA, 1801–09. Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and wrote a vast number of addresses and letters. He developed a democratic form of agrarianism that sought to blend a belief in rule by a natural aristocracy with a commitment to limited government and *laissez-faire*, sometimes called Jeffersonianism. He also demonstrated sympathy for social reform, favouring the extension of public education, the abolition of slavery and greater economic equality.

Functions of parties

Although political parties are defined by a central function (the filling of political office and the wielding of government power), their impact on the political system is substantially broader and more complex. It goes without saying that there are dangers in generalizing about the functions of parties. Constitutional parties operating in a context of electoral competition tend to be portrayed as bastions of democracy; indeed, the existence of such parties is often seen as the litmus test of a healthy democratic system. On the other hand, regime parties that enjoy a monopoly of political power are more commonly portrayed as instruments of manipulation and political control. Moreover, controversy continues to surround the wider impact of political parties. For instance, Thomas Jefferson and the other 'founding fathers' of the US constitution – and, in the modern period, supporters of so-called '**anti-party parties**' – have portrayed parties in deeply negative terms, seeing them as a source of discord and political regimentation (see p. 230). A number of general functions of parties can nevertheless be identified. The main functions are as follows:

- representation
- elite formation and recruitment
- goal formulation
- interest articulation and aggregation
- socialization and mobilization
- organization of government.

Representation

Representation (see p. 197) is often seen as the primary function of parties. It refers to the capacity of parties to respond to and articulate the views of both the members and the voters. In the language of systems theory, political parties are major 'inputting' devices that ensure that government heeds the needs and wishes of the larger society. Clearly, this is a function that is best carried out, some would say only carried out, in an open and competitive system that forces parties to respond to popular preferences. Rational-choice theorists, following

● **Anti-party party**: Parties that set out to subvert traditional party politics by rejecting parliamentary compromise and emphasizing popular mobilization.

CONCEPT

Primary election

A primary election is an intraparty election in which candidates are selected to contest a subsequent 'official' election. During the twentieth century, primaries became the principal nominating device used in the USA, also being used to choose convention delegates and party leaders. Most US states hold 'closed' primaries, in which participation is restricted to registered supporters of the party; 'open' primaries allow all voters to participate, regardless of party affiliation. Primary elections give rank-and-file voters more of a voice in party affairs and lead to a more candidate-orientated and less party-orientated style of politics.

Anthony Downs (1957), explain this process by suggesting that the political market parallels the economic market, in that politicians act essentially as entrepreneurs seeking votes, meaning that parties behave very much like businesses. Power thus ultimately resides with the consumers, the voters. This 'economic model' can, however, be criticized on the grounds that parties seek to 'shape' or mobilize public opinion, as well as respond to it; that the image of voters as well-informed, rational and issue-orientated consumers is questionable; and that the range of consumer (or electoral) choice is often narrow.

Elite formation and recruitment

Parties of all kinds are responsible for providing states with their political leaders. Exceptions to this include parties that are, effectively, the creation of powerful politicians and are used as political vehicles to mobilize support for them, such as Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, established in 1993 but rebranded as the People of Freedom party in 2009, and Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, founded in 2001. Much more commonly, however, politicians achieve office by virtue of their party post: contestants in a presidential election are usually party leaders, while in parliamentary systems the leader of the largest party in the assembly normally becomes prime minister. Cabinet and other ministerial posts are usually filled by senior party figures, though exceptions are found in presidential systems such as the USA's, which allow non-party ministers to be appointed.

In most cases, parties therefore provide a training ground for politicians, equipping them with skills, knowledge and experience; and offering them some form of career structure, albeit one that depends on the fortunes of the party. On the other hand, the stranglehold that parties exert over government offices can be criticized for ensuring that political leaders are drawn from a relatively small pool of talent: the senior figures in a handful of major parties. In the USA, however, this stranglehold has been weakened by the widespread use of primary elections, which reduce the control that a party has over the process of candidate selection and nomination.

Goal formulation

Political parties have traditionally been one of the means through which societies set collective goals and, in some cases, ensure that they are carried out. Parties play this role because, in the process of seeking power, they formulate programmes of government (through conferences, conventions, election manifestos and so on) with a view to attracting popular support. Not only does this mean that parties are a major source of policy initiation, it also encourages them to formulate coherent sets of policy options that give the electorate a choice amongst realistic and achievable goals.

This function is most clearly carried out by parties in parliamentary systems that are able to claim a mandate (see p. 200) to implement their policies, if they are elected to power. However, it can also occur in presidential systems with usually non-programmic parties, as in the case of the Republicans' 'Contract with America' in the US congressional elections of 1994. Nevertheless, the tendency towards de-ideologized catch-all parties, and the fact that electoral campaigns increasingly stress personality and image over policies and issues, has generally

reduced the impact that parties have on policy formulation. Party programmes, moreover, are almost certain to be modified by pressure from the civil service and interest groups, as well as in the light of domestic and international circumstances. Policy implementation, on the other hand, is usually carried out by bureaucracies rather than parties, except in one-party systems such as those in orthodox communist states, where the 'ruling' party supervises the state apparatus at every level.

Interest articulation and aggregation

In the process of developing collective goals, parties also help to articulate and aggregate the various interests found in society. Parties, indeed, often develop as vehicles through which business, labour, religious, ethnic or other groups advance or defend their various interests. The UK Labour Party, for instance, was created by the trade union movement with the aim of achieving working-class political representation. Other parties have, effectively, recruited interests and groups in order to broaden their electoral base, as the US parties did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with immigrant groups.

The fact that national parties invariably articulate the demands of a multitude of groups forces them to aggregate these interests by drawing them together into a coherent whole, balancing competing interests against each other. Constitutional parties are clearly forced to do this by the pressures of electoral competition, but even monopolistic parties articulate and aggregate interests through their close relationship with the state and the economy, especially in centrally planned systems. However, not even in competitive party systems are all interests articulated, those of the poor being most vulnerable to exclusion.

Socialization and mobilization

Through internal debate and discussion, as well as campaigning and electoral competition, parties are important agents of political education and socialization. The issues that parties choose to focus on help to set the political agenda, and the values and attitudes that they articulate become part of the larger political culture (see p. 172). In the case of monopolistic parties, the propagation of an 'official' ideology (be it Marxism–Leninism, National Socialism, or simply the ideas of a charismatic leader) is consciously acknowledged to be a central, if not its supreme, function.

Mainstream parties in competitive systems play no less significant a role in encouraging groups to play by the rules of the democratic game, thus mobilizing support for the regime itself. For example, the emergence of socialist parties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an important means of integrating the working class into industrial society. Nevertheless, the capacity of parties to mobilize and socialize has been brought into doubt by evidence in many countries of partisan dealignment (see p. 217) and growing disenchantment with conventional pro-system parties. The problem that parties have is that, to some extent, they themselves are socialized (some would say corrupted) by the experience of government, making them, it appears, less effective in engaging partisan sympathies and attracting emotional attachments. (These issues are discussed more fully in Chapter 20.)

Debating . . .

Do parties breed discord and constrain political debate?

So common are parties in modern politics that it is often forgotten how controversial they were when they first emerged. Although some welcomed them as the agents of a new age of mass politics, others warned that they would deepen conflict and subvert the politics of individual consciousness. The trend towards falling party membership and declining party identification in the modern period has served to revive such criticisms.

YES

Sacrificing personal conscience. By their nature, parties are collective entities, groups of people who agree a common platform, and advance shared views and opinions. Without unity and cohesion, parties have very little reason to exist. And yet this unity comes at the price of personal conscience, as it is inconceivable that any member would genuinely support all of a party's policies in all circumstances. Over matter small and sometimes large, parties therefore come to 'think for' their members, whether this comes about through party discipline and the fear of punishment (including expulsion from the party) or, more insidiously, through an emotional or ideological attachment to the party and its goals.

Disharmony and adversarialism. Party politics is based on partisanship, adherence and, maybe, even devotion to a particular cause or group. This inevitably breeds a tribal mentality in which the flaws and failings of other parties are exaggerated, while those of one's own party are consistently denied. Parties thus promote a one-sided view of politics in which political issues and debates are constantly distorted by considerations of party advantage. This tendency towards mindless adversarialism – disagreement for the sake of disagreement – is hardly a sound basis for advancing the public good.

Domination by the cunning and ambitious. Parties serve to concentrate political power rather than disperse it. In the 'iron law of oligarchy' (see p. 232), this tendency is explained in terms of organization. However, elite rule also reflects the fact that, within parties, 'foot soldiers' are required to do little other than obey and follow, encouraged by the knowledge that loyalty and discipline will be rewarded, while dissent and, in particular, criticism of the leadership will be punished. Those who climb the 'greasy pole' and gain advancement within the party are therefore likely, in George Washington's words, to be 'cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men'. Political parties are, in this sense, a particular example of the corruption of power (as discussed in Chapter 20).

NO

Forums of debate. The image of parties as austere, monolithic bodies, in which free debate is sacrificed in the cause of party unity, is accurate only in the context of authoritarianism. In other circumstances, parties are vibrant and multifarious; indeed, the existence of rival factions and tendencies ensures unending debate about policy issues and strategic concerns. Rather than requiring members to sacrifice personal conscience, parties provide their members with an education in politics, helping them to strengthen their knowledge and skills and making them more engaged citizens. Party membership is therefore an important vehicle for the aspect of personal self-development.

Engaging the people. Parties provide a channel of communication through which political leaders both mobilize citizens and respond to their needs and concerns. This applies most clearly when the electoral process forces parties to compete for the popular vote in order to win or retain government power, but it can also occur (albeit to a limited extent) in authoritarian systems, through attempts by 'ruling' parties to maintain legitimacy. The need to engage with the ideas and interests of the people generates pressure within parties to permit, even encourage, internal debate and argument among their members, rather than uncritical obedience.

Cross-party interaction. Bipartisanship is more common than is often supposed. For instance, the use of proportional electoral systems typically creates a bias in favour of consensus-building and alliances amongst parties based on the fact that no single party is likely to have parliamentary strength to rule on its own. The resulting coalition governments are held together by the fact that conflicts between the parties involved are resolved through a process of ongoing cross-party dialogue. A similar dynamic can develop in presidential systems due to the phenomenon of cohabitation, whereby the executive is in the hands of one party while the assembly is dominated by another party.

CONCEPT

Party democracy

Party democracy is a form of popular rule that operates through the agency of a party. There are two models of party democracy. In the first (intraparty democracy), parties are democratic agents, in that power within them is widely and evenly dispersed. This implies, for instance, that there should be broad participation in the election of leaders and selection of candidates. In the second model, democracy dictates that policy-making power should be concentrated in the hands of party members who are elected and, therefore, publicly accountable. In this view, the first model may lead to the tyranny of non-elected constituency activists.

Organization of government

It is often argued that complex modern societies would be ungovernable in the absence of political parties. In the first place, parties help with the formation of governments, in parliamentary systems, to the extent that it is possible to talk of 'party government' (see p. 236). Parties also give governments a degree of stability and coherence, especially if the members of the government are drawn from a single party and are, therefore, united by common sympathies and attachments. Even governments that are formed from a coalition of parties are more likely to foster unity and agreement than those that consist of separate individuals each with his or her own priorities.

Parties, furthermore, facilitate cooperation between the two major branches of government: the assembly and the executive. In parliamentary systems, this is effectively guaranteed by the fact the government is usually formed from the party or parties that have majority control of the assembly. However, even in presidential systems the chief executive can wield some influence, if not control, through an appeal to party unity. Finally, parties provide, in competitive systems at least, a vital source of opposition and criticism, both inside and outside government. As well as broadening political debate and educating the electorate, this helps to ensure that government policy is more thoroughly scrutinized and, therefore, more likely to be workable.

Party organization: where does power lie?

Because of the crucial role that political parties play, considerable attention has been focused on where power lies within parties. The organization and structure of parties thus provides vital clues about the distribution of power within society as a whole. Can parties function as democratic bodies that broaden participation and access to power? Or do they simply entrench the dominance of leaders and elites?

One of the earliest attempts to investigate internal party democracy was undertaken in Mosei Ostrogorski's *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1902), which argued that the representation of individual interests had lost out to the growing influence of the party machine and control exerted by a caucus of senior party figures. This view was more memorably expressed by Robert Michels in *Political Parties* ([1911] 1962) in the form of the 'iron law of oligarchy' (see p. 232), or, as Michels put it, 'he who says organization says oligarchy'. Michels (1876–1936), a prominent elite theorist, wished to analyse the power structure of the German SPD; he argued that, despite the party's formally democratic organization, power was concentrated in the hands of a small group of party leaders.

For Michels, the 'law' explained the inevitable failure of democratic socialism and, indeed, exploded the myth of political democracy. Critics, however, point out that Michels' observations are generalizations made on the basis of a single political party at a particular moment in time, and also rest on questionable psychological theories. In practice, party elites have often proved to be more faction-ridden, and mass memberships less deferential and quiescent, than Michels suggested.

Attempts have been made to strengthen the democratic and participatory features of parties through reform. One of the clearest examples of this occurred

Focus on . . .
The iron law of oligarchy

Oligarchy is government or domination by the few. The 'iron law of oligarchy', formulated by Robert Michels ([1911] 1962), suggests that there is an inevitable tendency for political organizations, and by implication all organizations, to be oligarchic. Participatory or democratic structures cannot check oligarchic tendencies; they can only disguise them.

Michels advanced a number of arguments in support of his law:

- Elite groups result from the need for specialization. Elite members have greater expertise and better organizational skills than those possessed by ordinary members.
- Leaders form cohesive groups because they recognize that this improves their chances of remaining in power.
- Rank-and-file members of an organization tend to be apathetic and are, therefore, generally disposed to accept subordination and venerate leaders.

in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. US parties differ in many respects from their European counterparts. Being loose coalitions of sometimes conflicting interests held together by little more than the need to contest presidential elections, they are highly decentralized and generally non-programmic. Traditionally, state-based or city-based party bosses (a legacy of the **machine politics** of the early twentieth century) acted as power brokers and exercised a decisive influence at nominating conventions. Following protests and clashes at the 1968 Democratic national convention in Chicago, however, a reform movement sprang up aimed at weakening the power of local party leaders and strengthening the role of rank-and-file members.

This was accomplished largely through the wider use of nominating primaries and **caucuses**. These, first with the Democrats and later with the Republicans, attracted a growing number of issue and candidate activists into party politics, leading to the nomination of more ideological candidates such as George McGovern for the Democrats in 1972 and Ronald Reagan for the Republicans in 1980. Such tendencies have, nevertheless, generated concern, particularly amongst Democrats, who feared that more open and participatory structures could simply result in the nomination of unelectable 'outsider' candidates. Both the main US parties have responded to this by modernizing and strengthening their committee structures, especially at national, congressional and senatorial levels. Although this has been portrayed as a process of 'party renewal', it is evidence of the parties' desire to provide better electoral support for individual candidates, rather than of the emergence of European-style, party-focused elections.

The existence of factions and tendencies is as important as formal organization in determining the location of power within a party. While all parties, even those with an apparently monolithic character, embrace some measure of political and ideological rivalry, the degree to which this rivalry is reflected in conflict between organized and coherent groups is crucial in determining the degree of authority of party leaders. In some cases, factions can break away from parties in the manner that European communist parties often emerged out of socialist

● **Machine politics**: A style of politics in which party 'bosses' control a mass organization through patronage and the distribution of favours.

● **Caucus**: A meeting of party members held to nominate election candidates, or to discuss legislative proposals in advance of formal proceedings.

parties in the years following the 1917 Russian Revolution. Factionalism is often linked to the weight that parties place on political ideas and ideological direction. Whereas pragmatic right-wing parties usually merely have to balance or conciliate rival tendencies, more ideological parties of the left often have to deal with open disagreement and institutionalized rivalry. Together with their inclination to endorse internal democracy, this has generally made socialist parties more difficult to lead than liberal or conservative parties.

Perhaps a more significant consideration, however, is the extent to which parties have a secure hold on power. Factionalism is, in a sense, a luxury that only long-time parties of government can afford. This is why monopolistic communist parties were able to keep factionalism at bay only by exercising ruthless discipline enforced through the strictures of **democratic centralism**. It also explains the deeply factional nature of 'dominant' parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan and the Italian Christian Democratic Party (DC). The UK Conservative Party is an example of a party with an ethos that once stressed, above all, deference and loyalty. However, the Party became increasingly factionalized in the 1980s and 1990s through a combination of its more ideological character and its prolonged electoral success after 1979. Bottom-up pressures thus gave the Conservative Party a more democratic character than its formal leader-dominated structure suggested was possible. The most conspicuous casualty of this process was Margaret Thatcher, who was forced to stand down as party leader in 1990 despite having won three successive general elections. Albeit to different degrees, all subsequent Conservative leaders have experienced difficulties in confronting factional resistance inside and outside of Parliament.

PARTY SYSTEMS

Political parties are important not only because of the range of functions they carry out (representation, elite recruitment, aggregation of interests and so on), but also because the complex interrelationships between and among parties are crucial in structuring the way political systems work in practice. This network of relationships is called a **party system**. The most familiar way of distinguishing between different types of party system is by reference to the number of parties competing for power. On this basis, Duverger (1954) distinguished between 'one-party', 'two-party' and 'multiparty' systems. Although such a typology is commonly used, party systems cannot simply be reduced to a 'numbers game'.

As important as the number of parties competing for power is their relative size, as reflected in their electoral and legislative strength. As Sartori (1976) pointed out, what is vital is to establish the 'relevance' of parties in relation to the formation of governments and, in particular, whether their size gives them the prospect of winning, or at least sharing, government power. This approach is often reflected in the distinction made between 'major', or government-orientated, parties and more peripheral, 'minor' ones (although neither category can be defined with mathematical accuracy). A third consideration is how these 'relevant' parties relate to one another. Is the party system characterized by cooperation and consensus, or by conflict and polarization? This is closely linked to the ideological complexion of the party system, and the traditions and history of the parties that compose it.

● **Democratic centralism**: The Leninist principle of party organization, based on a supposed balance between freedom of discussion and strict unity of action.

● **Party system**: A relatively stable network of relationships between parties that is structured by their number, size and ideological orientation.

The mere presence of parties does not, however, guarantee the existence of a party system. The pattern of relationships amongst parties constitutes a system only if it is characterized by stability and a degree of orderliness. Where neither stability nor order exists, a party system may be in the process of emerging, or a transition from one type of party system to another may be occurring. For instance, this can be said of early postcommunist Russia. The collapse of communist rule in 1991 and the initial banning of the CPSU was always going to make the emergence of a competitive party system a difficult, perhaps tortuous, business. Russia's problem was a proliferation of parties and political groupings, none of which came close to establishing a mass membership or a nationwide organization. No fewer than 43 parties contested the 1995 parliamentary elections, with the largest of these, the Russian Communist Party, gaining just 22 per cent of the vote. The subsequent introduction of measures such as electoral **thresholds** and registration on the basis of petitions greatly reduced the number of parties, meaning, for instance, that just seven parties contested the 2011 Russian Duma elections. However, some have argued that, in an age of partisan dealignment and volatile voting patterns, party systems are generally losing their 'systematic' character, making it more difficult to distinguish one system from another. Moreover, where subnational bodies exert significant influence, different party systems may operate at different levels within the political system.

The major party systems found in modern politics are, nevertheless, as follows:

- one-party systems
- two-party systems
- dominant-party systems
- multiparty systems.

One-party systems

Strictly speaking, the term one-party system is contradictory since 'system' implies interaction amongst a number of entities. The term is, nevertheless, helpful in distinguishing between political systems in which a single party enjoys a monopoly of power through the exclusion of all other parties (by political or constitutional means) and those systems characterized by a competitive struggle amongst a number of parties. Because monopolistic parties effectively function as permanent governments, with no mechanism (short of a *coup* or revolution) through which they can be removed from power, they invariably develop an entrenched relationship with the state machine. This allows such states to be classified as 'one-party states', their machinery being seen as a fused 'party–state' apparatus. Two rather different types of one-party system can be identified, however.

The first type has been found in state socialist regimes where 'ruling' communist parties have directed and controlled virtually all the institutions and aspects of society. Such parties are subject to strict ideological discipline, traditionally linked tenets of Marxism–Leninism, and they have highly-structured internal organizations in line with the principles of democratic centralism. These are cadre parties, in the sense that membership is restricted on political and ideological grounds. Almost 6 per cent of the Chinese population are members of the

● **Threshold**: A minimum level of electoral support needed for a party to be eligible to win seats.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and around 9 per cent of the Soviet population belonged to the CPSU. In this type of party, the party core consists of well-paid full-time officials, the *apparatchiki*, who run the party *apparat*, or apparatus, and exercise supervision over both the state machine and social institutions.

A central device through which communist parties control the state, economy and society, and ensure the subordination of 'lower' organs to 'higher' ones, is the *nomenklatura* system. This is a system of vetted appointments in which, effectively, all senior posts are filled by party-approved candidates. The justification for both the party's monopoly of power, and its supervision of state and social institutions, lies in the Leninist claim that the party acts as the 'vanguard of the proletariat' in providing the working masses with the ideological leadership and guidance needed to ensure that they fulfil their revolutionary destiny. **Vanguardism** has, however, been criticized for being deeply elitist and providing the seed from which Stalinism later grew. Trotsky (1937), on the other hand, offered an alternative interpretation by suggesting that, far from the 'ruling' party dominating Soviet development, its formal monopoly of power merely concealed the burgeoning influence of the state bureaucracy.

The second type of one-party system is associated with anticolonial nationalism and state consolidation in the developing world. In Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, for example, the 'ruling' party developed out of an independence movement that proclaimed the overriding need for nation-building and economic development. In Zimbabwe, one-party rule developed only in 1986 (six years after independence) through the merger of the two major parties, ZANU and ZAPU, both former guerrilla groups. In other cases, such parties have developed as little more than vehicles through which a national leader has tried to consolidate power, as with General Ershad's People's Party in Bangladesh in the 1980s and President Mobutu's Popular Movement of the Revolution in Zaire, 1965–97.

One-party systems in Africa and Asia have usually been built around the dominant role of a charismatic leader and drawn whatever ideological identity they have possessed from the views of that leader. Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of the Convention People's Party (CPP) in Ghana until his overthrow in 1966, is often seen as the model such leader, but other examples have been Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Not uncommonly, these parties are weakly organized (very different from the tight discipline found in communist one-party states), and they play, at best, only a peripheral role in the process of policy-making. Their monopolistic position, nevertheless, helps to entrench authoritarianism (see p. 277) and to keep alive the danger of corruption.

Two-party systems

A two-party system is duopolistic in that it is dominated by two 'major' parties that have a roughly equal prospect of winning government power. In its classical form, a two-party system can be identified by three criteria:

- Although a number of 'minor' parties may exist, only two parties enjoy sufficient electoral and legislative strength to have a realistic prospect of winning government power.

● **Vanguardism**: The Leninist belief in the need for a party to lead and guide the proletariat towards the fulfilment of its revolutionary destiny.

CONCEPT

Party government

Party government is a system through which single parties are able to form governments and carry through policy programmes. Its key features are as follows. (1) Major parties possess a clear programmic character and thus offer the electorate a meaningful choice between potential governments. (2) The governing party enjoys sufficient ideological and organizational unity to deliver on its manifesto commitments. (3) Responsibility is maintained by the government's accountability to the electorate through its mandate, and by the existence of a credible opposition that acts as a balancing force.

- The larger party is able to rule alone (usually on the basis of a legislative majority); the other provides the opposition.
- Power alternates between these parties; both are 'electable', the opposition serving as a 'government in the wings'.

The UK and the USA are the most frequently cited examples of states with two-party systems, though others have included Canada, Australia and, until the introduction of electoral reform in 1993, New Zealand. Archetypal examples of two-party politics are, nevertheless, rare. The UK, for instance, often portrayed as the model two-party system, has conformed to its three defining criteria only for particular (and, some would argue, untypical) periods of its history. Even the apparent Labour–Conservative two-partyism of the early post-World War II period (power alternating four times between 1945 and 1970) was punctuated by 13 years of continuous Conservative rule (1951–64), a period during which time Labour's electability was called into question. Moreover, despite persistent major party domination of the House of Commons in the UK, it is more doubtful that a two-party system has existed 'in the country' since 1974. This is suggested by the decline of combined Labour–Conservative support (down from over 95 per cent in the early 1950s to consistently below 75 per cent since 1974).

Even the seemingly incontrovertible two-partyism of the USA – which, for instance, sees the Republicans and Democrats usually holding between them all the seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate – can be questioned. On the one hand, the presidential system allows one party to capture the White House (the presidency) while the other controls one or both houses of Congress, as, for instance, occurred between 1984 and 2000, meaning that it may not be possible to identify a clear government–opposition divide. On the other hand, 'third' party candidates are sometimes of significance. Ross Perot's 16 per cent of the vote in the 1992 presidential election not only highlighted the decline of the Republican and Democratic parties, but also, arguably, proved decisive in securing victory for Bill Clinton.

Two-party politics was once portrayed as the surest way of reconciling responsiveness with order, representative government with effective government. Its key advantage is that it makes possible a system of party government, supposedly characterized by stability, choice and accountability. The two major parties are able to offer the electorate a straightforward choice between rival programmes and alternative governments. Voters can support a party knowing that, if it wins the election, it will have the capacity to carry out its manifesto promises without having to negotiate or compromise with coalition partners. This is sometimes seen as one of the attractions of majoritarian electoral systems that exaggerate support for large parties. Two-party systems have also been praised for delivering strong but accountable government based on relentless competition between the governing and opposition parties. Although government can govern, it can never relax or become complacent because it is constantly confronted by an opposition that acts as a government in waiting. Two-partyism, moreover, creates a bias in favour of moderation, as the two contenders for power have to battle for 'floating' votes in the centre ground. This was, for example, reflected in the so-called 'social-democratic consensus' that prevailed in the UK from the 1950s to the 1970s.

However, two-party politics and party government have not been so well regarded since the 1970s. Instead of guaranteeing moderation, two-party

systems such as the UK's have displayed a periodic tendency towards adversary politics (see p. 324). This is reflected in ideological polarization and an emphasis on conflict and argument, rather than consensus and compromise. In the UK in the early 1980s, this was best demonstrated by the movement to the right by a 'Thatcherized' Conservative Party and the movement to the left by a radicalized Labour Party, although a new, post-Thatcherite consensus soon emerged. Adversarial two-partyism has often been explained by reference to the class nature of party support (party conflict being seen, ultimately, as a reflection of the class struggle), or as a consequence of party democratization and the influence of ideologically committed grass-roots activists.

A further problem with the two-party system is that two evenly-matched parties are encouraged to compete for votes by outdoing each other's electoral promises, perhaps causing spiralling public spending and fuelling inflation. This amounts to irresponsible party government, in that parties come to power on the basis of election manifestos that they have no capacity to fulfil. A final weakness of two-party systems is the obvious restrictions they impose in terms of electoral and ideological choice. While a choice between just two programmes of government was perhaps sufficient in an era of partisan alignment and class solidarity, it has become quite inadequate in a period of greater individualism (see p. 158) and social diversity.

Dominant-party systems

Dominant-party systems should not be confused with one-party systems, although they may at times exhibit similar characteristics. A dominant-party system is competitive in the sense that a number of parties compete for power in regular and popular elections, but is dominated by a single major party that consequently enjoys prolonged periods in power. This apparently neat definition, however, runs into problems, notably, in relation to determining how 'prolonged' a governing period must be for a party to be considered 'dominant'. Japan is usually cited as the classic example of a dominant-party system. Until its defeat in 2009, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had been in power almost continuously for 54 years, only having been in opposition for a brief 11-month period between 1993 and 1994. LDP dominance had been underpinned by the Japanese 'economic miracle'. It also reflected the powerful appeal of the party's neo-Confucian principles of duty and obligation in the still-traditional Japanese countryside, and the strong links that the party had forged with business elites. However, economic stagnation and internal divisions have meant that the LDP has lost members and supporters to a number of newly-formed, smaller parties, its decline being underlined in 2009 when the Democratic Party of Japan became the first opposition party since 1945 to win a parliamentary majority.

The Congress Party in India enjoyed an unbroken spell of 30 years in power commencing with the achievement of independence in 1947. Until 1989 it had endured only three years in opposition, following Indira Gandhi's 1975–77 state of emergency. The African National Congress (ANC) has similarly been the dominant party in South Africa since the ending of apartheid in 1993, its position being based on its pre-eminent role in the long struggle against white rule (see p. 238). The best European examples of a dominant-party system are Sweden, where the Social Democratic Labour Party (SAP) held power for 65 of the previous 74 years

POLITICS IN ACTION . . .

The African National Congress: a liberation movement or a 'ruling' party?

Events: In April 1994, South Africa held its first non-racial election. The African National Congress (ANC) won the election, gaining 63 per cent of both votes and seats. The following month, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the president of South Africa. The ANC subsequently developed into the ruling party of post-apartheid South Africa. Its majority in the National Assembly increased to 66 per cent in the 1999 election, and again to 70 per cent in the 2004 election, only falling slightly in 2009 to 65 per cent. This has been a remarkable achievement for a political movement that had been banned until 1990, and whose leadership had mostly been either in prison or in exile since the early 1960s.

Significance: What accounts for the ANC's predominant position in South African politics? The key explanation is the leading role the party played in the campaign against extreme Afrikaner nationalism and in helping to promote resistance to the policies of apartheid. In describing itself as a 'liberation movement', rather than a conventional political party, the ANC continues to portray itself as the leader of South Africa's 'national democratic revolution'. This position has been bolstered by two factors. First, the ANC responds to and accommodates a broad diversity of interests and voices. Of particular significance in this respect have been the 'tripartite' alliance the ANC forged with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the ANC's willingness in 1994 to form not a single-party government but a government of national unity, including the (New) National Party (which had abandoned its support for apartheid) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (historically, the voice of Zulu nationalism). Second, the ANC has placed a heavy stress on national reconciliation, seeking to forge a single South African identity and sense of purpose amongst a diverse and splintered population. Made possible by the ANC's long-standing commitment to non-racialism, this was reflected in the establishment in 1995 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to heal the wounds of the apartheid era by exposing the crimes and injustices committed by all sides of the struggle, rather than by handing down punishments.

However, the ANC faces at least three major challenges. First, the party's ability to define itself in terms of the struggle for liberation is certain to decline over time. Not only is the proportion of the ANC's membership (and, in due course, leadership, which has direct experience of anti-apartheid activism) steadily diminishing; in people's wider perceptions, the ANC is certain to be viewed progressively more as a vehicle for government than as a vehicle for liberation. Second, and in common with other dominant parties, the ANC has been afflicted by factionalism and, at times, tumultuous internal conflicts. The most dramatic of these was between supporters of Thabo Mbeki, who became South Africa's second post-apartheid president, serving from 1999 to 2008, and supporters of Jacob Zuma, who defeated Mbeki in 2007 in the contest for the presidency of the ANC and went on to become the president of South Africa in 2009. Third, even though post-apartheid South Africa has clearly embraced liberal-democratic principles and structures, the ANC's dominance has fostered developments more commonly associated with one-party states. In particular, the ANC's apparent electoral invulnerability has blurred the distinction between the party and the state, creating scope for corruption. The most high profile corruption scandal in post-apartheid South Africa emerged in 2005 and led to the conviction of Jacob Zuma's financial advisor, Schabir Shaik, over his role in a 1999 arms deal. Zuma himself was dismissed as deputy president by President Mbeki and was subsequently charged with corruption, although these developments did nothing to diminish Zuma's power base within the ANC, or to damage his subsequent career.

CONCEPT

Coalition

A coalition is a grouping of rival political actors brought together either through the perception of a common threat, or through a recognition that their goals cannot be achieved by working separately. *Electoral* coalitions are alliances through which parties agree not to compete against one another, with a view to maximizing their representation. *Legislative* coalitions are agreements between two or more parties to support a particular bill or programme. *Governing* coalitions are formal agreements between two or more parties that involve a cross-party distribution of ministerial portfolios. A 'grand coalition' or 'national government' comprises all major parties.

until its defeat in 2006; and Italy, where the Christian Democratic Party (DC) dominated every one of the country's 52 post-World War II governments until the party's effective collapse amidst mounting allegations of corruption in 1992–94.

The most prominent feature of a dominant-party system is the tendency for the political focus to shift from competition between parties to factional conflict within the dominant party itself. The DC in Italy, for example, functioned as little more than a coalition of privileged groups and interests in Italian society, the party acting as a broker to these various factions. The most powerful of these groups were the Catholic Church (which exercised influence through organizations such as Catholic Action), the farming community and industrial interests. Each of these was able to cultivate voting loyalty and exert influence on DC's members in the Italian parliament.

Factions were also an integral institution in the Japanese political process. Within the LDP, which, until its defeat in 2009, had enjoyed 54 years of virtually unbroken rule, a perennial struggle for power took place, as various subgroups coalesced around rising or powerful individuals. Such factionalism was maintained at the local level by the ability of faction leaders to provide political favours for their followers, and at the parliamentary level through the allocation of senior government and party offices. Although the resulting infighting may have been seen as a means of guaranteeing argument and debate in a system in which small parties were usually marginalized, in Japan factionalism tended to revolve more around personal differences than policy or ideological disagreement. One example of this was the conflict between the Fukuda and Tanaka factions during the 1970s and 1980s, which continued long after the two principals had left the scene.

Whereas other competitive party systems have their supporters, or at least apologists, few are prepared to come to the defence of the dominant-party system. Apart from a tendency towards stability and predictability, dominant-partyism is usually seen as a regrettable and unhealthy phenomenon. In the first place, it tends to erode the important constitutional distinction between the state and the party in power. When governments cease to come and go, an insidious process of politicization takes place through which state officials and institutions adjust to the ideological and political priorities of the dominant party. Second, an extended period in power can engender complacency, arrogance and even corruption in the dominant party. The course of Italian and Japanese politics has, for example, regularly been interrupted by scandals, usually involving allegations of financial corruption. Third, a dominant-party system is characterized by weak and ineffective opposition. Criticism and protest can more easily be ignored if they stem from parties that are no longer regarded as genuine rivals for power. Finally, the existence of a 'permanent' party of government may corrode the democratic spirit by encouraging the electorate to fear change and to stick with the 'natural' party of government.

Multiparty systems

A multiparty system is characterized by competition amongst more than two parties, reducing the chances of single-party government and increasing the likelihood of coalitions. However, it is difficult to define multiparty systems in terms of the number of major parties, as such systems sometimes operate

through coalitions including smaller parties that are specifically designed to exclude larger parties from government. This is precisely what happened to the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1950s, and to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) throughout its existence. If the likelihood of coalition government is the index of multipartyism, this classification contains a number of subcategories.

Germany, for example, tends to have a 'two-and-a-half-party' system, in that the CDU and SDP typically have electoral strengths roughly equivalent to those of the Conservative and Labour parties in the UK. However, they were forced into coalitions with the small Free Democrat Party by the workings of the mixed-member proportional electoral system (see p. 211). Italian multipartyism traditionally involves a larger number of relatively small parties. Thus, even the DC rarely came close to achieving 40 per cent of the vote. Sartori (1976) distinguished between two types of multiparty system, which he termed the 'moderate' and 'polarized' pluralist systems. In this categorization, moderate pluralism exists in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway, where ideological differences between major parties are slight, and where there is a general inclination to form coalitions and move towards the middle ground. Polarized pluralism, on the other hand, exists when more marked ideological differences separate major parties, some of which adopt an anti-system stance. The existence of electorally strong communist parties (as in France, Italy and Spain until the 1990s), or of significant fascist movements (such as the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) – reborn in 1995 as the 'post-Fascist' Alleanza Nazionale), provided evidence of polarized pluralism.

The strength of multiparty systems is that they create internal checks and balances within government and exhibit a bias in favour of debate, conciliation and compromise. The process of coalition formation and the dynamics of coalition maintenance ensure a broad responsiveness that cannot but take account of competing views and contending interests. Thus, in Germany, the liberal Free Democrats act as a moderating influence on both the conservative CDU and the socialist SPD. Where SPD–Green coalitions have been formed in the *Länder* (provinces), the Green presence has helped to push environmental issues up the political agenda. Similarly, the multiparty features of the Swedish system, which make coalition government more common than not, have encouraged the SAP to build a broad welfare consensus, and to pursue moderate policies that do not alienate business interests.

The principal criticisms of multiparty systems relate to the pitfalls and difficulties of coalition formation. The post-election negotiations and horsetrading that take place when no single party is strong enough to govern alone can take weeks, or (as in Israel and Italy) sometimes months, to complete. More seriously, coalition governments may be fractured and unstable, paying greater attention to squabbles amongst coalition partners than to the tasks of government. Italy is usually cited as the classic example of this, its post-1945 governments having lasted, on average, only 10 months. It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to suggest that coalitions are always associated with instability, as the record of stable and effective coalition government in Germany and Sweden clearly demonstrates. In some respects, in fact, the Italian experience is peculiar, owing as much to the country's political culture and the ideological complexion of its party system as to the dynamics of multipartyism.

A final problem is that the tendency towards moderation and compromise may mean that multiparty systems are so dominated by the political centre that they are unable to offer clear ideological alternatives. Coalition politics tends, naturally, to be characterized by negotiation and conciliation, a search for common ground, rather than by conviction and the politics of principle. This process can be criticized as being implicitly corrupt, in that parties are encouraged to abandon policies and principles in their quest for power. It can also lead to the over-representation of centrist parties and centrist interests, especially when, as in Germany, a small centre party is the only viable coalition partner for both of the larger conservative and socialist parties. Indeed, this is sometimes seen as one of the drawbacks of proportional representation electoral systems, which, by ensuring that the legislative size of parties reflects their electoral strength, are biased in favour of multiparty politics and coalition government.

DECLINE OF PARTIES?

Modern concerns about parties principally stem from evidence of their decline as agents of representation, and as an effective link between government and the people. Evidence of a 'crisis of party politics' can be found in a decline of both party membership and partisanship, reflected in partisan dealignment. For example, by 2007 fewer than 1 per cent of people across the UK belonged to political parties, down from 7 per cent some 50 years before. Membership of the Labour Party fell from more than 1 million in 1956 to around 166,000 in 2009, while Conservative Party membership fell from an estimated 2.8 million to around 250,000 in the same period. A seemingly inexorable rise in the age of party members is as significant, the average age of Conservative Party members in 1998 having risen to 63. Dramatic electoral swings against governing parties have intensified such concerns. Notable examples of this include the slump of the French Socialists in 1993 from 282 seats to just 70, and the virtual annihilation in the same year of the Canadian Progressive Conservatives, who were swept out of office retaining only two seats. Falling voter turnout also illustrates the declining capacity of parties to mobilize electoral support. For instance, Wattenberg (2000) found that, in 19 liberal democracies, turnout had declined on average by 10 per cent between the 1950s and the 1990s, the trend having been particularly prominent in the USA, Western Europe, Japan and Latin America.

Alongside these changes, there is evidence of what has been called 'antipolitics'; that is, the rise of political movements and organizations the only common feature of which appears to be antipathy towards conventional centres of power and opposition to established parties of government. This has been reflected in the emergence of new political movements, the principle attraction of which is that they are untainted by having held power. Good examples have been the dramatic success of Berlesconi's Forza Italia in 1994, and the emergence in the USA since 2008 of the Tea Party movement. The rise of new social movements (see p. 260), such as the women's movement, peace movement and environmental movement, is also part of the same phenomenon. Even when they articulate their views through party organization, as in the case of green parties, these movements tend to assume the mantle of antiparty parties. (The role of such parties and movements in expressing forms of 'anti-politics' is examined in Chapter 20.)

How can the decline of parties be explained? One of the problems that parties suffer from is their real or perceived oligarchical character. Parties are seen as bureaucratized political machines, whose grass-roots members are either inactive, or engaged in dull and routine tasks (attending meetings, sitting on committees and so on). In contrast, single-issue protest groups have been more successful in attracting membership and support, particularly from amongst the young, partly because they are more loosely organized and locally based, and partly because they place a heavier emphasis on participation and activism. The public image of parties has been further tarnished by their links to government and to professional politicians. As political 'insiders', parties are tainted by the power, ambition and corruption that is often associated with high office. In other words, parties are not seen as being 'of the people'; too often, they appear to be consumed by political infighting and the scramble for power, so becoming divorced from the concerns of ordinary people.

An alternative way of explaining party decline is to see it as a symptom of the fact that complex, modern societies are increasingly difficult to govern. Disillusionment and cynicism grow as parties seek power by proclaiming their capacity to solve problems and improve conditions, but fail to deliver once in government. This reflects the mounting difficulties that confront any party of government in the form of the expanding power of interest groups and an increasingly globalized economy. A final explanation is that parties may be declining because the social identities and traditional loyalties that gave rise to them in the first place have started to fade. This can certainly be seen in the decline of class politics, linked to the phenomenon of post-Fordism (see p. 154). In addition, with the decline of old social, religious and other solidarities, new aspirations and sensibilities have come onto the political agenda; notably, those associated with postmaterialism (see p. 177). Whereas broad, programmic parties once succeeded in articulating the goals of major sections of the electorate, issues such as gender equality, nuclear power, animal rights and pollution may require new and different political formations to articulate them. Single-issue groups and social movements may thus be in the process of replacing parties as the crucial link between government and society.

SUMMARY

- A political party is a group of people organized for the purpose of winning government power, and usually displays some measure of ideological cohesion. The principal classifications of parties have distinguished between cadre and mass or, later, catch-all parties, parties of representation and parties of integration, constitutional or 'mainstream' parties and revolutionary or anti-system ones, and left-wing parties and right-wing parties.
- Parties have a number of functions in the political system. These include their role as a mechanism of representation, the formation of political elites and recruitment into politics, the formulation of social goals and government policy, the articulation and aggregation of interests, the mobilization and socialization of the electorate, and the organization of governmental processes and institutional relationships.
- The organization and structure of parties crucially influence the distribution of power within society at large. Party democracy can be promoted either by a wide dispersal of power within the party, or by the concentration of power in the hands of the party's elected and publicly accountable members. Oligarchic tendencies may be an inevitable consequence of organization, or they may arise from the need for party unity and electoral credibility.
- A party system is a network of relationships through which parties interact and influence the political process. In one-party systems, a 'ruling' party effectively functions as a permanent government. In two-party systems, power alternates between two 'major' parties. In dominant-party systems, a single 'major' party retains power for a prolonged period. In multiparty systems, no party is large enough to rule alone, leading to a system of coalition government.
- Party systems shape the broader political process in various ways. They influence the range and nature of choice available to the electorate, and affect the cohesion and stability of governments. They structure the relationship between the executive and the assembly, establish a bias in favour of either conflict or consensus, and shape the general character of the political culture.
- Evidence of a crisis in party politics can be found in the decline in party membership and partisanship, as well as in the rise of 'antiparty' groups and movements. This can be explained by the perception that parties are tainted by power, ambition and corruption, and that they have suffered as a result of general disillusionment caused by the growing inability of governments to deliver on their promises. They are also seen to have failed to articulate the aspirations and sensibilities associated with postmaterialism, or generated within post-industrial societies.

Questions for discussion

- Are all modern political parties essentially catch-all parties?
- Is it possible to have 'post-ideological' parties?
- Could government function in contemporary circumstances without political parties?
- In what ways, and to what extent, do parties promote democracy?
- Why do political parties so often tend to be leader-dominated?
- By what criteria should party systems be judged?
- How have modern parties adjusted to the decline of class and other loyalties?
- Is the age of party politics over?

Further reading

Dalton, R. and D. Farrell, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy* (2011). An examination of the link between parties and representative government that focuses on their impact on the electoral process and on government.

Katz, R. and W. Crotty (eds), *Handbook of Party Politics* (2006). A wide-ranging collection of articles that discuss the nature, functions and organization of parties and their relationship to society and the state.

Sartori, G., *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (2005). A classic, if challenging, analysis of the role of parties and the nature of party systems.

Wolinetz, S. (ed.), *Political Parties* (1997). A comprehensive set of articles that examines all aspects of the workings and significance of political parties.