

Policy Connection



What kind of impact do the major political parties have on public policymaking?

DOMESTIC AND
FOREIGN POLICY

The Policy Challenge

We noted in Chapter 7 that political parties remain a relevant and viable part of our political system and that they often play a role in developing public policy by articulating and promoting solutions to public problems in their platforms. The exact nature of that role in public policymaking has been questioned in recent years as a growing number of Americans have become more skeptical about the value of both the Republican and the Democratic parties. In this Policy Connection we offer a summary of three distinct perspectives on the role and impact of political parties in shaping and even directing public policies.

Parties and Policy Convergence

The first perspective is derived from the view that the primary objective of political parties is to get members of their coalition elected—and reelected—to office. This view is built into the very definition of political parties offered in Chapter 7, and it is reflected in what can be called the *policy convergence* view of party politics.

The logic of this approach is relatively simple: to accomplish the electoral objective, those running for elective office are driven to adopt policy positions that will attract enough voters to ensure victory. In the same way, parties develop platforms aimed at attracting a sufficient number of voters to their candidates. Put otherwise, in their efforts to gain support of the “median voter” in an election, each party will tend to avoid extreme policy solutions that might reflect the ideological commitments of its core or active membership and instead develop and support more

centrist positions reflecting the preferences of the median voter.³⁵ Since both parties are seeking the same result—victory at the polls on election day—the result will be a convergence of policy positions. Assuming those elected under this system remain true to their party’s commitments when serving in office, the result should be policies that reflect a centrist consensus.

For many observers of American politics during most of the twentieth century, this view supported a positive feeling about political parties and their role in the policymaking system. Despite strong partisan disagreements of individual party members, the need for electoral victory seemed to act as a moderating force, often overcoming pulls to the ideological left or right. Some attribute many of the greatest legislative accomplishments of the 1960s and early 1970s to the pressures of policy convergence (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Clean Air Act amendments of 1970 and similar laws).

That said, there were also significant criticisms of the tendency toward convergence. Some felt that the pressure to satisfy the median voter position created a “Tweedledee–Tweedledum” party system, where clear policy differences and choices were reduced or minimized, thus leaving the American voter with few real choices over policy options when they went to the voting booth.

Polarization of the Parties

A contrasting view is the *policy divergence* or polarization model of how parties impact public policymaking. Here, the assumption is that although political parties are committed to winning elections,

they are also subject to a range of forces that counter that effort. For some, polarization of the parties reflects the growing polarization of the electorate, and elections are manifestations of the “culture wars” that increasingly divide the nation.³⁶ For others, polarization is an indication that the party machinery has been captured by activist party members who are more committed to the pursuit of ideological purity than victory at the polls. Whatever the reason, this model focuses on how the divergence between the two parties impacts policymaking.

What kind of impact? The convergence view implies that since the two parties are somewhat committed to similar positions on policy issues because both come close to reflecting the preference of the median voter’s position, reaching an agreement on a specific issue will tend to be easier since it involves bridging whatever remaining gaps might exist between them. In the divergence model, however, policymaking is more difficult, especially under conditions where the major policymaking institutions (e.g., the U.S. Senate and U.S. House) are controlled by different parties.

In its severest (most polarized) form, this produces a type of policymaking “gridlock” on many issues and can result in the kind of government “shutdowns” the United States has witnessed in recent decades. When a policy favored by one party does pass under such conditions, it is typically without the support of the other party. Perhaps the most notable example is the passage of the 2010 Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”), which passed the Democrat-controlled Senate and House without a single Republican vote. As a result, ever since the GOP assumed control of Congress in 2011, there have been constant (although unsuccessful) efforts to repeal and otherwise undermine the act.

Parties and Policy Coalitions

The convergence–divergence views summarized here have been the focus of considerable debate and study among political scientists for several decades. During that time, another perspective has emerged that addresses the policy challenge in a different way. Instead of asking how parties shape and direct policies, the “policy coalition” model begins by arguing that the role of political parties in the policymaking

process is determined by the nature of policy issues themselves.³⁷

According to the coalitions view, political parties are just one among various social, economic, and political organizations that engage in the policymaking process.³⁸ These include groups representing business, labor, agriculture, etc. (see Chapter 9); mass media (Chapter 10); and a wide range of social movements focused on specific concerns (e.g., civil rights, the environment, health care) that emerge on the constantly changing public stage (see Chapters 3–6). When a given issue arises, policy coalitions drawn from each of these organization types are engaged. Over time, political parties may play different roles in these coalitions. They may play a leading or central role, especially when a general agreement exists among party leaders regarding a given policy position. At other times, the party role may be minimal, perhaps reflecting divisions within the party itself over taking a stand in the policy debate.

On issues such as abortion or policies to deal with climate change, for example, each party has been identified with opposing coalitions. On other issues, such as recent debates over education policy reform or criminal justice reform, the lines are not clearly drawn between the two parties and we see individual members of each party taking “bipartisan” positions. In other words, under the policy coalition perspective, although the parties do play a role in the policymaking arena, they do so as one of many participants in coalitions formed around specific policy issues and proposals. Sometimes their role is significant, whereas at other times it is limited.

Conclusion

What impacts do political parties have in shaping and directing public policymaking? In general terms, the answer varies depending on which of these three views you adopt. Among political scientists and other students of American politics, these are just three of many different “theories” or models that can be used to deal with the policy challenge.

Some observers, for example, argue that the position taken by political parties on policy issues is unimportant in the overall scheme of things and that, once elected to office, politicians will vote according to what serves their best interest and not what is in

the interest of the party or its leadership. Others take the opposite view, pointing to episodes of gridlock and shutdowns as indicators of how significant partisan stands can be in determining public policies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. We present three contrasting views of how political parties impact public policy: the party convergence model, the policy divergence or polarization model, and the policy coalition model. Do you think that one of these models best serves our understanding of how political parties can impact public policy? Why?
2. Do you think that an elected official should take into serious consideration his or her political party's position on a public policy issue or should he or she rely just on what serves the constituents' best interests rather than that of the party? Why?