

# **“Must Know” Concepts**

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## **Unit 3 – Political Parties, Nominations & Campaigns, Interest Groups & The Media**

### **Political Parties**

1. Parties are complex social structures composed of what is known as the "three-headed giant": the party in the electorate, the party organization, and the party in government.
2. Parties seek to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election. They are factions.
3. Parties developed as a result of response to government policy. In addition, as suffrage was extended, the need for institutions to mobilized voters developed. Parties were these institutions.
4. Parties are vital linkage institutions between the citizens and government, performing several important functions: nominating candidates, contesting elections, serving as agents for holding public officials accountable for their actions, and managing social conflicts.
5. American political parties are characterized by decentralized power structure, broad-based electoral support, and relatively non-programmatic policy orientations.
6. Ours is a two party system and always has been. There have always been minor parties, but they rarely have a chance to win major offices. Consequently, America has witnessed long periods during which one party has been the dominant majority party (Party Eras).
7. Many experts believe that American political parties are in a state of decline due to primaries, party reforms, campaigning, technology, and the media. Americans need not rely on parties to serve the important functions they once did.

### **Nominations & Campaigns**

1. There are two types of campaigns in American politics: campaigns for party nominations (nomination campaigns) and campaigns between nominees for public office (election campaigns).
2. Nominations for offices are made via primaries and caucuses, which severely weaken party organizations' control over the nomination process and encourages candidates to rely on personal campaign organizations.
3. Campaigning today is an art and a science, heavily dependent on professional political consultants, polling, and technology.
4. Candidates need money to build a campaign organization and to get their message out.
5. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974, passed in the wake of the Watergate scandal, supposedly tightened reporting requirements and limiting overall expenditures. It also allows for public funding for presidential candidates. The law's loopholes have been exploited by both parties, causing a growing concern for campaign finance reform. These loopholes and the skyrocketing costs of campaigning have given incumbents a major advantage.
6. Research has shown that campaigns have three effects on voters: Reinforcement, Activation, and Conversion. Campaigns mostly reinforce and activate, seldom do they convert.

## **Interest Groups**

1. An interest group is an organized body of individuals with shared goals who try to influence government policy. Their activities, for the most part, receive protection from the Constitution.
2. American society contains a vast array of interest groups which have grown dramatically in number since the 1960's . Traditional occupational groups have been supplemented by an increase in public interest groups and lobbying operations sponsored by corporations and state and local government bodies. Moreover, policy making now takes place in an often more complex group environment with more conflict.
3. The influence of individual interest groups depends on such factors as the nature of a group's membership, its financial and leadership resources, its prestige and status, and its governing structure, rules, and procedures.
4. Groups try to influence any branch or level of government that they believe will respond to their concerns. The tactics used by interest groups include direct and grass roots lobbying, PAC contributions and other forms of electoral support, efforts to help shape public opinion, and demonstrations and protests.
5. Interest groups are linkage institutions as they supplement the formal and geographic concerns of congressional representation by providing citizens with an informal means of influencing government. Not all Americans are equally represented by the interest group system. Although every American is free to organize and participate in interest activity, the people most likely to participate in interest activity are the better educated and those with better financial resources.

## **The Media**

1. As a major source of political information, the media, particularly television, help shape the public's perceptions and reality. As a vital linkage institution, the media is able to mobilize citizens to take political action and influence the behavior of government officials.
2. The media have a strong voice in deciding which issues will be placed on the public's agenda. When they cover election campaigns, however, they tend to focus on the "horse race" aspects of the contest and not on substantive issues.
3. The standards of newsworthiness include audience appeal and impact, uniqueness, and timeliness. The nature of media coverage also is affected by time and space constraints and accessibility of news sources.
4. Political leaders and news people are mutually dependent. Politicians rely on the media to provide them with information and to convey their message to the public. The media in turn rely heavily on public officials for the information on which to base their reporting. The relationship is characterized by tension, however, as politicians seek to use the media to achieve their objectives and the media seek to perform their news-gathering functions.
5. The vast majority of social science research has found that the media is not systematically biased toward a particular ideology or party. Because news is a business, the overriding bias is toward stories that will draw the largest audience. These tend to be stories focusing on conflict, violence, disaster, or scandal. Television is biased towards stories that will generate good pictures as well.