Political Parties: Crash Course Government and Politics #40

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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=====Introduction=====

Hi, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics and today we're gonna talk about parties. Woo! Yeah! No, not those kind of parties. We're talking about political parties, which can be a lot less fun. Woo.

(Intro)

So, today we're talking about why we have political parties and the role of parties in American politics. But before we dive into the pool - some would say a cesspool - that is political parties, let's have a definition. Political party: a team of politicians, activists and voters whose goal is to win control of government. So kind of an important point: the goal of a party is to control government and in the U.S. that means electing people who agree with and usually are members of the party. So above everything else, parties exist to win elections. Parties don't mainly focus on influencing policies, although particular policies are often associated with particular parties. Influencing elected officials is mainly the job of interest groups, who we'll talk about soon. For now, let's keep in mind that political parties and interest groups are not the same thing.

=====Reasons for political parties=====

So let's look at three reasons why we have political parties. One: I dunno. Two: I dunno. Three: I dunno. I do know, I'll tell you in a second. First, we create political parties to facilitate collective action in the electoral process. Given that parties exist to win elections, this is probably the main reason we have them. But what does facilitate collective action in the electoral process mean exactly? Basically, it means that parties make it easier for voters to form groups that will vote in certain ways. Here's an example, albeit one that overgeneralizes a little bit. Just come on, just go with it. In general, republican candidates support policies that are more friendly to business, so if you're a businessman, you know that affiliating yourself with the republican party is probably going to benefit you.

The second reason given for forming political parties is that they facilitate policy making. This reasoning applies to elected members who being to political parties, not to voters. So membership in a party allows politicians to work together. It's easier for democrats to form alliances with other democrats and sometimes these alliances have the added benefit of strengthening the party. Party affiliation can help legislators from different places work together. For example, common republicanness should make it easier for a republican from rural Kansas to work with another republican from suburban Florida. Sometimes though, party ideology can prevent even members of the same party from working together as happened in 2008 when republicans couldn't agree on whether the government should bail out struggling banks.

A third, and I must say not altogether convincing reason why we have political parties is to deal with the problem of politicians' ambition. According to this idea, parties provide a structure, maybe even a career ladder for politicians so that they're not always acting in their own self interest. The fact that the party provides different leadership possibilities and some sense of discipline prevents ambitious politicians with largely similar views from competing against each other, like say 16 candidates running for president all in the same party. Just wouldn't happen. Ever.

=====Functions of political parties=====

So that's why political parties exist, but what do they do? Well, they have five main functions in the U.S. and I'll leave it up to you to decide which - if any - is the most important. Eagle doesn't get to decide. Eagle doesn't get to decide anything.

So here's the list: 1. Recruit candidates, 2. Nominate candidates, 3. Get out the vote, 4. Facilitate electoral choice, 5. Influence national government.

The first thing that parties have to do if they want to win elections is find candidates. This is a two-step process involving recruiting and nominating. We've already mentioned that in order to be a good candidate for office, you generally have to have an unblemished personal record - like me - or at least be really good at heartfelt apologies. I don't have an unblemished record and I'm very sorry about that. Also, you need the ability to raise money. Of course, in order to avoid any problems with campaign financing, it's helpful to have money yourself, but why spend your own money if you can convince people to give money to your campaign? Maybe print out some hats. Merch works, merch helps raise money.

There are lots of people who want to run for office, although there's some debate about whether we're really getting the best candidates. The pay isn't great and neither is the prestige anymore, and then there's the scrutiny that a run for office puts you and your family through. Parties play an important role in sifting through all the people who want to run and picking those who have the best chance of winning. Nomination is the process through which a potential candidate is actually chosen to represent a particular party in an election. When we talk about nominations in the US, we're mostly talking about the presidency because that's the only office that goes through the formal nomination process. But technically congressman and senators are nominated by their parties to run as well. There are three ways that a candidate for president can be nominated. In the old days, presidential candidates were nominated at a convention or caucus, which are gatherings of party members governed by rules. Conventions still occur every four years but they're largely ceremonial these days because presidential candidates are actually nominated during the primaries. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Primary elections are held to choose candidates who will then run in the later general election. Political parties decide when and how primaries will be held and who the candidates will be. These are the elections that pit democrat against democrat and republican against republican to see who will face off in November. Primaries can either be open or closed. Most states have closed primaries, which means that only registered voters of a particular party can vote in that election. So, in a state with closed primaries, like New York, only democrats can vote in the democratic primary. And since in many districts one party is overwhelmingly dominant, the primary winner is very likely to win the general election too. In states with open primaries, members of any party can vote in the primary, which sounds great because it encourages more participation but it also opens up opportunities for mischief *evil laughter*. For example, if there's a strong republican candidate up against a weak republican candidate in a state with open primaries, democrats can turn up and vote for the weak republican in the hopes that if he wins he will have less of a chance in the general election running against a democrat. Sneaky.

In presidential elections, the winner of a primary election will be assigned a certain number of party delegates. Delegates are non-elected party members who actually nominate the candidates at the convention. The delegates are usually pledged to vote for the candidate who won the primary in their state, at least on the first ballot, and majority rules in nominating. This is why we see so much election coverage of primaries and why some states like New Hampshire try so hard to have their primaries early. Once a

candidate has sewn up enough delegates, he or she becomes the nominee, and the convention serves largely as a formality.

Although the primary system is more democratic than the convention, it still has problems. Even though there's more opportunity for participation, that doesn't mean people actually participate. In fact, only about 25% of those eligible to vote in primary elections actually do, and these tend to be the more ideologically extreme members of the parties. Because to them, winning elections matters most. So, if only partisan voters show up, we tend to get uber-partisan candidates. And because they have to win bruising primaries before they even get to the general election, these candidates tend to be aggressive and uncompromising. That's good when you're competing in an election but not so good when you're trying to work with other people to craft policies or, in very rare cases, legislation. This is why many people think that primaries add to political polarization in the US. Thanks, Thought Bubble - you got my vote.

There's a third way that a person can become a candidate, but it's a long and dangerous path. Hey, Stan, zoom the camera in as I say that. It's a long and dangerous path *evil laughter*. A person can run as an independent and if they get enough signatures on a petition, they can become a candidate. You're more likely to see this in congressional races but even then it's not super common. It's also really not that long and dangerous as we implied in that last shot.

The third thing that parties do is mobilize voters, also known as getting out the vote. This is pretty obvious because you can't elect a candidate if you don't get people out to vote for them - duh! Parties get out the vote through direct mail, email and advertisements, and they can also help with voter registration drives. The main thing the party does in terms of getting out the vote is coordinate volunteers to help encourage voting. If you want to help on a campaign or with an election effort, your local party office is a good place to start. Another good place to start is getting out of bed. Getting out the bed is a campaign we should have.

Parties also help to facilitate electoral choice. Basically, a political party acts sort of like a brand. So, knowing which party a candidate represents acts as a kind of shorthand for voters in the same way that seeing, say, a Netflix logo lets you know that you're about to chill. I'm not going to go into what each party stands for right now but let's just say that knowing that a candidate is a republican or a democrat allows you to figure out pretty much what they stand for even if you don't know anything about the candidate. Political parties even help non-partisan voters by narrowing down political choices and making things easier. If you want to, you can choose a candidate by answering two relatively simple questions: which party better represents my interests and values, and which candidate belongs to that party?

Finally, believe it or not, political parties have a role in the way the national government actually works. Party membership is really important in Congress. Parties determine who the Speaker is since he or she always comes from the majority party and is chosen by a vote of members of that party. Parties also determine the composition of the committees and party leaders assign members to those committees. And parties help determine who the chairs of the committees are and they, along with the Speaker and the majority leader in the Senate, largely shape Congress' agenda. The president and his party have a reciprocal relationship - that's the best kind of relationship and the most fun to say. Reciprocal. The president is the leader of his party and his personal character and popularity helps to shape the party's brand - for better or worse - and can be used to raise money. On the other side, the party throws its support behind the president's initiatives and helps to elect candidates that support him in Congress.

=====Recap=====

So, at their most basic level, parties exist to elect political candidates and thus gain control of the government. In order for them to do this well, they need to provide voters with clear electoral preferences and encourage them to act on those preferences. In a way, this branding function - helping voters to choose between Candidate A and Candidate B - is what parties are all about. But you're free to disagree and if you do, go form your own party and do whatever you want. It's a party! Woo! Thanks for watching, see you next time.

=====Outro=====

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