POL 215, POLITICAL PARTIES & ELECTIONS, FALL 2012

**BRIEF OPENING DAY COMMENTS**

Wednesday, September 5

This is a brief overview of some major aspects of U.S. politics and their relevance and/or consequences for the study of parties and elections.

**♦ Elections and parties SHAPE U.S. politics**

* The U.S. has always had two and only two dominant political parties at any one point in time; third parties rise and fall but have great difficulty sustaining themselves as viable in the electoral arena. Hence the **2-party system** is a defining characteristic of U.S. politics. Along with the 2-party system, the U.S. has historically experienced regular shifts in the balance of power between the parties, called **realignments**. Whether realignments still occur in the modern age is a subject of great debate, as we will see in our readings.
* Elections **select leaders** of government bodies; **candidates are chosen by political parties** (whether through primary elections or some other process), and parties adopt **platforms** spelling out their philosophies and policy goals. Hence the parties and the electoral process directly affect who is in charge.
* Parties and elections create **political interest and activity** – they give regular citizens a reason to care about government and politics, along with ways to get involved (e.g. volunteering, running for office, giving money, voting)
* **Parties are not monolithic entities** – there are variations in beliefs and priorities within the Republicans and the Democrats. Hence the existence of only 2 major political parties spawns more organized political activity by **interest groups** seeking approval for specific concerns

**♦ Elections and parties ARE SHAPED BY elements of U.S. politics**

* **Federalism** is the division of power among multiple branches of government (federal, state, and numerous local units). One consequence of federalism is that the U.S. has **a very large number of elections** compared with other democratic nations. This can be a good thing (lots of opportunities for citizens to choose their leaders and have input into what government does) but the sheer number of elections is also thought to be one factor explaining our low voter turnout.
* Another consequence of federalism is that *national* officeholders (House, Senate, President) are all selected in *local and state* elections; hence **local and state-level issues and concerns are always important in election campaigns**. Moreover, national political parties are forced to deal with specific concerns at the state/local level, and it is no surprise that national political parties have adopted a **federated structure** (dividing control of the party among national, state, and local units) that mirrors the federalist dimensions of the electoral system.
* Due to high levels of interest group activity, both major parties are responsive to large sets (whether large in number or large in ‘voice’ or resources, or both) of citizens/voters and their areas of concern. **Interest groups thus directly affect party platforms, candidate selection, and electoral success**.
* Questions about what activities governments should and should not do – and the related question of which level of government should be responsible for which activities – have always been central concerns in American political life. In the modern era (since the Great Depression), federal (national) power has expanded greatly, usually at the expense of state and local governments. Philosophically, **the major parties espouse very different views of the proper role of government in the United States**; indeed, these differences form the core of stereotypical beliefs about what Democrats and Republicans stand for. Regardless, the dominance of the federal government in so many areas of American life is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it makes elections for national office that much more important to candidates, parties, and citizens.

**COMING UP SOON IN POL 215….**

- we dive into the course, focusing mainly on parties in the first 2 weeks, then getting more into elections (but as you will see, talking about parties always means talking about elections, and vice versa)

- first semi-important deadline: signing up for group election review project by **Monday, September 17**; see syllabus pp. 3-4 for details

- next important date: by **Friday, September 21** all students will be assigned a 2012 election (governor, U.S. House, or U.S. Senate) that will be the focus of the two papers you will write for this course; see syllabus pp. 2-3 for details

- for **THIS FRIDAY**: read Hershey chapters 1 and 2, and come to class prepared to talk about these chapters

- bookmark the course home page (syllabus p. 1); you will need to use it!