

Unit 8

Role of Political Parties

Overview

This unit examines a number of key issues in relation to political parties: first, it looks at the role of leaders and leadership; second, it examines the notion of party discipline; and, third, it explores the relationship of parties to legislative leadership, in particular, House Leaders and Party Whips. Political parties play an important role in democratic systems because they provide the structures that select the individuals who hold institutional positions at the apex of authority in the various governments. When we look at parties we are also looking at organisations whose leaders are likely to lead governments. Political parties are particularly important in parliamentary systems because they structure the government and the opposition. Benjamin Disraeli, a former British prime minister, suggested that “without parties parliamentary government is impossible.”

Learning Objectives

After you have completed this unit you should be able to achieve the following:

1. Describe the roles played by political parties in selecting prime ministers and parliamentary candidates.
2. Outline how party discipline affects the operation of parliaments.
3. Explain why the prime minister is the dominant parliamentary actor.

Commentary

Parties go beyond the simple organisation of parliamentary government. Party mechanisms determine who can serve as candidates and who will be the competitors for the position of prime minister. In virtually every parliamentary system, parliamentarians who do not represent a party play very limited roles. Parties thus provide the pool from which voters can draw their representatives and leaders.

The way in which parties choose their candidates and leaders affects the way these people function. The importance of these party selections was highlighted by an American politician (Boss Tweed) who stated “I don’t care who does the electing so long as I can do the nominating.” Although the specific rules for choosing candidates and leaders vary extensively, they can

be captured under a few wide categories. We will look briefly at some of the basic methods for selecting leaders and candidates.

Candidates

Parliamentary candidates are often chosen by a vote open to all party members in the constituency. The central offices of a party or the leader may have some authority to reject the selected aspirant, but such rejections are generally rare. Canada provides a good example of this sort of candidate selection. A more restricted form of candidate selection leaves the real choice of candidates in the hands of a specific party committee (be it national or in a particular constituency). Examples of this can be found in countries such as Ireland, Germany and Australia.

Leaders

The selection of candidates virtually always involves party members who are not elected parliamentarians. This is not always the case with leadership selection. Some parties restrict the choice of leaders to elected parliamentarians. In some cases the elected members have the sole discretion in choosing the leader while in others they have a disproportionate voice. Placing such power in the hands of the caucus weakens the authority of the leader in that it allows for the caucus to depose leaders when they wish. In recent years, sitting prime ministers, such as Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Robert Hawke in Australia have been overthrown by their caucus in spite of electoral success.

The dismissal of Margaret Thatcher as Tory leader was marked by some discussion of the propriety of the Conservative Party's dismissing a leader who had been elected PM by the votes of millions of British voters. The Tories were able to overcome any feelings they might have had that this was improper. They were able to do this in part because the Leader was unable to claim any special mandate from the party. That is, Thatcher owed her position as Tory leader to the fact that Tory MPs had chosen her for that position. What the Tory caucus could give, the Tory caucus could take away.

Caucus selection, and the potential threat of de-selection, obviously weaken the authority of party leaders. The Labour leader in the United Kingdom is in a somewhat stronger position as he or she can claim a special partisan mandate. Leaders are chosen through a complicated electoral college in which elected members of the party exercise only a minority influence on the selection. As leaders do not owe their position to their elected colleagues, the caucus cannot take away what it did not give.

The role of elected party officials in choosing the leader has serious implications for leadership tenure. For instance of the 18 British prime ministers in the 20th century, seven were basically forced to resign because they had lost the support of their parliamentary followers. This would be unthinkable in systems where parliamentarians do not dominate the leadership selection process.

Most parties do not use such a simple mechanism and have devolved leadership choice to some sort of party assembly. Such an assembly brings

together party activists with parliamentarians in a setting in which the activists constitute a clear majority. The leader can be elected with very little parliamentary support (in Canada in 1976 Joe Clark was elected leader with the initial support of only three MPs) and cannot be deposed by his or her parliamentary colleagues. Former Canadian Liberal leader John Turner was asked by a majority of his caucus to resign before the 1988 election. Turner simply ignored the request and carried on. Under this method the leader possesses a clear independence from other parliamentarians and is in a much greater position of dominance. Parties not only create the short-lists from which parliamentarians and prime ministers are drawn; they also organise the operation of Parliament.

Party Discipline

Party discipline is the basic operating principle of elective parliamentary chambers. This discipline allows the legislature to operate effectively, ensures stability of government and eliminates suspense from parliamentary votes. Once you know how many members each party has and what each party's position is on an issue, you can accurately predict the outcome of almost every vote.

Party discipline ensures that individual members behave and vote as part of a group rather than as individuals. As the word discipline implies, those who do not vote with their party risk punishment. As Punnett explains in reference to Britain, "MPs are, of course, limited in their freedom by their ties with their parliamentary party and have to bear the consequences of any action that offends this body" (1988: 280). These consequences vary considerably. They could involve mild rebuke, reduced chances of promotion within party ranks or indeed demotion, and at the most extreme, expulsion from the party. Under the interim South African constitution the importance of party membership was such that members who ceased to be a member of the party for which they were elected had to vacate their seats. Consequently, the vast majority of time, the vast majority of members vote the party line, advance party positions in debate, and are circumspect in their criticism of party policy and leadership.

Party discipline is not always enforced by punishment; patronage and persuasion are also used to convince parliamentarians to support their party. Nonetheless, the usual toeing of the party line by elected parliamentarians has led some to deride MPs as 'trained seals'. On some occasions members who cannot agree with their party's policies simply decide to change parties, a decision which further indicates the limited role available for independent members of parliament.

Many parliamentarians reject the charge that they do not voice their opinions or vote according to their consciences. However, party discipline is underpinned by the notion of 'caucus', the term given to meetings of elected members. At these meetings, which are conducted without outsiders and media coverage, policies are discussed and bills announced and discussed. For parties forming the government, these discussions supposedly inform the decision making on the part of the cabinet. Cabinet ministers either attend these meetings personally or receive reports of the discussion. Free debate and discussion in caucus meetings allows members who vote the party line

to feel that they have nonetheless had the opportunity of expressing their views on the issues of the day.

At times party members may break with the party line in a parliamentary vote. The British parliament quite often sees party discipline violated by MPs abstaining or even voting against their own party in the Commons. It is by no means rare for over 20 backbencher MPs to abstain in a vote as a means of expressing dissatisfaction. Prime Ministers however take these defections seriously. One example occurred in February 1967 when 63 Labour MPs abstained from voting on an important defence bill. It became famous because of how the Labour Prime Minister of the day, Harold Wilson, responded in caucus.

All I can say is 'watch it'. Every dog is allowed one bite, but a different view is taken of a dog that goes on biting all the time. If there are doubts that the dog is biting not because of the dictates of conscience but because he is considered vicious, then things happen to the dog. He may not get his license renewed when it falls due.

One of the other weapons in the hands of prime ministers is the power of dissolution, the right to advise the Crown to call an election. Elections always involve the potential loss of a position and MPs do not want to see elections held when their party is in turmoil. The threat of dissolution is more serious in some countries than in others. For instance in Britain, the overwhelming majority of seats are considered as safe for the two major parties. Almost 85 per cent of British MPs are re-elected in each election and few backbenchers can be forced into line with threats of dissolution. By contrast in Canada, there is close to a 40 per cent turnover of seats in an election, and each candidate (including the sitting MPs) are required to have their nomination papers signed by the party leader. Canadian party leaders then have a much stronger ability to enforce party discipline. Party discipline is often viewed negatively by citizens, but it should be kept in mind that parties structure elections as much as they structure parliament. As Dearlove and Saunders note, it was common in Britain to assume that

MPs are in the House of Commons because they stood in the name of a party; they owe the party everything; and so they are best seen as collectively responsible to the electorate as part of their party team in a way which should preclude their exercising individual judgements and voting according to their own views on a policy (1991: 53).

The importance of parties in elections can be seen in a number of ways. In election campaigns the focus is often on party leaders rather than local candidates. Policy manifestos are generally issued in the name of a party and voters often do not know the views of individual candidates. Parties conduct extensive media and advertising campaigns that would be beyond the reach of most independent candidates. Parties help candidates campaign more effectively, sponsor candidate information clinics, and by the inclusion of a party name on the ballot simplify the voting choice for citizens by not requiring them to collect extensive information about each individual candidate. The role of parties is clearly important.

Parties and Legislative Leadership

After an election parties carry a responsibility for the structure of the legislature. Members of Parliament virtually always sit in party groups rather than mixed in with other members. Parties, through their leadership, are

responsible for deciding which issues require more time for debate, who will participate in the debate, who will ask questions during question time and who will serve on which committees.

Key party officials basically negotiate these activities. As we have seen, parties determine leaders and candidates, but they also put in place the officials who make the legislature function. Two such examples are House Leaders and Whips. House Leaders are the officials with the direct responsibility for organizing the parliamentary timetable. In this capacity, determinations are made about the time devoted to various issues. More importantly, these decisions require a good deal of interaction among the various parties represented in the legislature so that the two basic needs of the legislature can be met. The basic need of the government is to have its legislation discussed and voted on as expeditiously as possible while for the opposition, the need is to ensure that they will have the opportunity to make the points they wish in debate, and focus public attention on issues deemed important. Agreements on the composition of committees are also negotiated among house leaders.

Party whips have a number of responsibilities. These include ensuring that a sufficient number of members are in the house to constitute a quorum and in the case of the government whip, making sure that enough members are available to prevent the government from losing a parliamentary vote. The whips must also make the party position on items under discussion clear to party members, approve absences and serve as an early warning indicator as to the possibility of vote defections. In short, these jobs involve managing the party participation in parliament and serving as a conduit of information between ordinary members and the party leadership (Walkland, 1979: 11).

Although Disraeli's comments about the impossibility of parliamentary government without parties are somewhat overstated, it is now certainly the case that, for most citizens, not only is parliament inconceivable without parties, but so are elections. Parliament and elections are too important to be left to individuals.

Recommended Reading

Saalfeld, Thomas. "Legislative Voting Behaviour" in *World Encyclopedia of Parliaments and Legislatures*.

Stewart, David. "The Evolving Leadership Electorate" in *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1997.

Thomas, Paul. "Caucus and Representation in Canada." *Parliamentary Perspectives* 1 (May 1998).

Study Questions

Based on your readings, see if you can answer the following questions. If not, read the commentary over again to find the answers.

1. What roles are played by political parties in selecting prime ministers and parliamentary candidates?
2. How does party discipline affect the operation of parliaments?
3. Why is the prime minister the dominant parliamentary actor?

Internet Resources

Role of Political Parties

Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine: "Do Parties Matter?"
<http://www.democruc.edu/democr/papers/sinclair.htm>

Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine: "Women's Representation in Parliament: The Role of Political Parties"
<http://www.democruc.edu/democr/papers/caul.htm>

United States. Dept. of State International Information Programs: "United States Political Parties"
<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/politics/govworks/na24.htm>

United States. Dept. of State International Information Programs: "Political Parties Play Vital Role in Democratic Societies"
<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/politics/govworks/na31.htm>

UNDP. Parliamentary Strengthening Reference Manual. "Political Parties in the Legislature"
<http://magnet.undp.org/docs/parliaments/partysystem1.htm>

Political Parties Around the World
<http://polisci.nelson.com/introparty.html>

