



The Role of Political Parties in Wisconsin Government

WHAT IS A POLITICAL PARTY?

One definition of a political party is a private, voluntary organization of people with similar political beliefs that competes with other parties for control of the government. Political parties help voters select their government officials and create a consensus on the basic principles that direct governmental activities and processes. For federal elections, a political party is an organization that has a candidate on the ballot, but since state law governs ballot access, each state decides when a political organization qualifies as a “political party.” Even though the states have different laws, they usually require nonmajor parties to prove sufficient voter support to qualify for ballot access.

Recognized political parties in Wisconsin are those that either had a candidate in the last general election receive at least 1 percent of the total vote or have collected, from January 1 to June 1 of the election year, a minimum of 10,000 voter signatures on a petition, with at least three separate congressional districts having 1,000 voter signatures or more. At the beginning of 2005, Wisconsin had five recognized political parties: Constitution, Democratic, Libertarian, Republican, and Wisconsin Green.

HOW DO POLITICAL PARTIES OPERATE?

State party chairpersons are the primary leaders within the state parties and are responsible for the party headquarters, field staff, finance, and communication with elected officials and local party leaders. While historically the party chairperson is an unpaid position, Wisconsin has started to join other states in hiring full-time, paid party chairpersons. Although the party chairperson is ultimately in charge, the executive director often runs the day-to-day operation of the party.

Political party membership is a voluntary step that individuals take to become more involved with their party. Members join the local party units, pay dues to the party, attend party meetings and conventions, contribute money, and often volunteer to work on the political campaigns. The basic unit of most political parties is the county organization and those who attend their county caucuses (meetings for party members only).

Party delegates from the political party’s local units meet in an annual state convention to create a new or change the current state party platform (a statement of its principles and objectives), select

national committee members, elect state officers, consider resolutions, and conduct other party business. Every four years, party delegates from throughout the United States meet in a national convention to nominate candidates for president and vice president and to adopt a national platform for the next four years. In Wisconsin, the selection of national convention delegates is usually based on the results of the April presidential preference primary vote.

WHAT ROLE DO POLITICAL PARTIES AND COMMITTEES PLAY IN CAMPAIGNS?

Political parties provide campaign support in the form of direct campaign contributions, fund-raising assistance, polling, media consulting, and get-out-the-vote drives. With the growing influence of candidate and legislative campaign committees, political party organizations have had to adjust to having less control over their party’s election campaigns. One way has been for political parties to increase their efforts in party building and campaign activities, like get-out-the-vote drives, that take a significant number of volunteers and extensive local organization. With expansive networks and significant barriers to entry, the two major

political parties have successfully kept third parties out of contention for most national and state offices. Of Wisconsin's major elected partisan (between political parties) offices in January 2005, the Democrats held the positions of governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and attorney general, as well as both U.S. Senate seats and four of the eight congressional seats. Republicans filled the position of state treasurer, held the other four congressional seats, and controlled both the state senate and assembly.

Candidate committees, created by the candidates themselves, manage the political campaigns independently from political party direction. Owing to this shift in control, American politics has been described as "candidate centered." This movement away from choosing candidates based on political party alone has increased the occurrence of split-ticket voting (voting for candidates from different parties). Some contend that this has resulted in the current trend of divided governments (executive branch controlled by one party and legislative branch controlled by another).

Legislative campaign committees exist to help fellow party members get elected. In Wisconsin, legislative campaign committees are made up of current elected officials, with their own staff and officers, chosen by the party caucuses in the state assembly and senate. These campaign committees are able to raise funds based on their status as incumbents (those already holding office), and use these funds to hire staff and consultants, as well as to contribute directly to candidates. These committees are involved in recruiting and training candidates and their support staff.

BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN WISCONSIN

Statehood in 1848 to 1855: The Democratic Party won the majority of elections against the other major party of the time, the Whig Party.

1854: The Republican Party was founded in Ripon, Wisconsin. The Republican Party replaced the Whig Party in the 1850s.

1856 to 1900: The Republican Party dominated the political scene by winning a large majority of elections and controlling the top political positions in the state.

1900 to 1932: The major political battles occurred between two groups within the Republican Party, the conservative "stalwart" Republicans and the "progressive" (La Follette) Republicans, influenced by the political ideologies of Governor and then Senator Robert M. La Follette.

1934 to 1946: The progressive Republicans officially split from the Republican Party in 1934 and became the Progressive Party, which won gubernatorial (to elect the governor) elections in 1936 and 1942, as well as a majority in both houses of the legislature in 1936. The Progressive Party dissolved in 1946 due to declining support.

1946 to present: Realignment of parties started in the late 1940s with some former Progressives and Socialists moving into the Democratic Party. The conservative members of the Republican Party solidified their control with the departure of more liberal-minded Progressives and the addition of conservative Democrats leaving their party as it became more liberal. After World War II, the Democratic Party started to grow in strength and by the late 1950s had become a successful contender to the Republican Party. Since then, control of the government has shifted back and forth.

WHAT ROLE DO POLITICAL PARTIES PLAY IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS?

Party caucuses are the foundation of party organization in the legislature. The Wisconsin Senate and Assembly, which are the two houses of the legislature, each have Democratic and Republican party caucuses. A joint caucus occurs when members of the same party in both houses meet. The party caucuses help party members maintain a unified position on critical issues by meeting regularly and whenever called together by party leaders. A caucus meeting is scheduled for after the general election, but before the opening of the legislative

session to select candidates for various leadership positions in each house.

Leadership in Wisconsin's legislature is elected by majority vote in each house, with the senate electing a senate president and president pro tempore, and the assembly electing a speaker and speaker pro tempore. Pro tempore, which means "for the time being," indicates that the position acts as a temporary substitute when needed. Both houses have floor leaders elected by each party: the majority leader, assistant majority leader, minority leader, and assistant minority leader.

Standing committees focus on specific issues in each house (or both houses in a joint committee) by holding public hearings on legislation, conducting studies, and voting to (or not to) recommend passage of bills. Wisconsin Senate rules require that each state senator serve on at least one committee, but the Committee on Senate Organization sets the number of members. Usually, representation in a committee is based on the proportion of each party in the senate, but it is up to the senate majority leader to appoint the members. Under Wisconsin Assembly rules, the speaker determines the number of members, decides the division between parties, and appoints majority members directly and minority members based on the nomination of the assembly minority leader. As with the senate, each member usually serves on at least one committee.

Governing Wisconsin: "Role of Political Parties"

Study Questions

1	How many political parties have been recognized by the Wisconsin government? List them.	
2	Why is there a trend toward "split-ticket" voting?	
3	If the senate consisted of 15 Democrats and 18 Republicans and the assembly, 55 Democrats and 44 Republicans, which party would hold the two leadership positions in the each house? Why?	
4	Do political parties actually exercise governmental powers?	
5	If the five recognized political parties each had approximately equal membership, how would this affect the legislature's leadership?	
6	George Washington noted that party loyalties can be "useful checks" on the administrative branch, but there is "danger of excess." What are the dangers of excessive party loyalty?	

Governing Wisconsin: “Role of Political Parties”

Study Questions in the Cognitive Domain

1	How many political parties have been recognized by the Wisconsin government? List them.	There are five recognized parties: Constitution, Democratic, Libertarian, Republican, and Wisconsin Green.	Cognition
2	Why is there a trend toward “split-ticket” voting?	Because candidates today are likely to run their own political campaigns there is less party control, creating a “candidate-centered” environment. When people feel like they are voting for a person and not the party, they are more likely to vote a split ticket and choose candidates from different parties.	Comprehension
3	If the senate consisted of 15 Democrats and 18 Republicans and the assembly, 55 Democrats and 44 Republicans, which party would hold the two leadership positions in the each house? Why?	Senate: Because there is a Republican majority, they will elect both a Republican president and president pro tempore. Assembly: Because there is a Democratic majority, they will elect both a Democratic speaker and speaker pro tempore. Each party will have floor leaders in each house.	Application
4	Do political parties actually exercise governmental powers?	Parties affect the organization and leadership of the legislative branch, but they do not actually exercise governmental powers; that is, they have no real power outside of the people acting on behalf of the party's interests.	Analysis
5	If the five recognized political parties each had approximately equal membership, how would this affect the legislature's leadership?	Parties would most likely form coalitions to get enough votes to elect the leadership of a house. For example, the Libertarian Party might agree to vote for the Republican candidate for speaker if the Republicans promised to work on passing particular laws about which the Libertarians care.	Synthesis
6	George Washington noted that party loyalties can be “useful checks” on the administrative branch, but there is “danger of excess.” What are the dangers of excessive party loyalty?	Washington worried that parties would distract from the “common good.” Or, people might care more about their party's power than what is good for the nation. Parties can interfere with free thinking if people are easily swayed by partisan rhetoric. A two-party system may tend to crowd out other parties and their ideas.	Evaluation