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**Concept Definition Assessment**

Pre-assessment: Define political party in your own words: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Once you have completed the pre-assessment, set this page aside until after the lesson.

Write each definition below:

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| --- | --- |
| Dictionary Definition of Political Party: | Complex Context Definition of Political Party: |
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What is the difference between the two definitions? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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How does the dictionary definition help you in understanding this concept? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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How has the definition derived from the context of the reading helped you in understanding this concept?

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What is the disadvantage of only using the dictionary definition? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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What is the disadvantage of only using the context definition? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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How does your pre-assessment version of the definition compare to your final definition? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Homework: Read the entire article. As you read, neatly highlight ALL the words that describe political parties. When you are finished, select the fifteen words (by numbering them from “1” as being most important) you believe best describe the author’s definition of a political party.

**Reading: Why Political Parties?**

. . . My basic argument is that the major political party is the creature of the politicians, the ambitious office seeker and officeholder. They have created and maintained, used or abused, reformed or ignored the political party when doing so has furthered their goals and ambitions. The political party is thus . . . an institution shaped by these political actors. Whatever its strength or weakness, whatever its form and role, it is the ambitious politicians’ creation. These politicians do not have partisan goals per se. Rather, they have more fundamental goals, and the party is the only instrument for achieving them.

Their goals are several and come in various combinations. . . . they include most basically the desire to have a long and successful career in political office, but they also encompass the desire to achieve policy ends and to attain power and prestige within the government. These goals are to be sought in government, not in parties, but they are goals that at times have best been realized through the parties.

Ambitious politicians turn to the political party to achieve such goals only when parties are useful vehicles for solving problems that cannot be solved as effectively, if at all, through other means.

The major American party . . . is a broad and encompassing organization, a coalition of many and diverse partners, that is commonly called umbrella-like. In seeking to appeal to a majority of the public, the two parties are based on similar values, roughly defining the “American creed.” . . . Each party is a coalition of many and diverse groups. . . Although there are good reasons why these groups are allied with their particular party, there is still great diversity within each party. There are even apparent contradictions latent - - - and at critical moments active - - - within each party.

. . . In a truly diverse republic, the problem is the opposite of majority tyranny. The problem is how to for any majority capable of taking action to solve pressing problems. A major political party, then aggregates these many and varied interests sufficiently to appeal to enough voters to form a majority in elections and to forge partisan-based, majority coalitions in government. In this view, parties are intermediaries that connect the public and the government. Parties also aggregate these diverse interests into a relatively cohesive, if typically compromise, platform, and they articulate these varied interests by representing them in government. The result, in this view, is that parties parlay those compromise positions into policy outcomes, and so they – a ruling, if nonhomogeneous and shifting, government majority – can be held accountable to the public in subsequent elections.

. . . four criteria define responsible parties. Such parties (1) make policy commitments to the electorate; (2) are willing and able to carry them out when in office; (3) develop alternatives to government policies when out of office; and (4) differ sufficiently between themselves to “provide the electorate with a proper range of choice between alternative actions.”

When the parties’ candidates do address issues, it is often felt, they are too similar. The parties are at times like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or as George Wallace claimed in his third-party presidential campaign in 1968, “there ain’t a dime’s worth of difference” between them.

Some see competition for office as the singular, defining characteristic of the major American political party. . . party leaders are motivated to win elections. As a result a party is . . “a team seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election.” The political party therefore is the organization that the team uses to realize its goals.

The hallmark of a party . . . is its ability to channel the competing career ambitions of its potential and actual office holders, forming them into an effective electoral machine. More accurately . . . each office and its partisan seeker serves as one “nucleus” of a party, and a strong party is one that has many strong organizational nuclei connected to each other in supporting its ambitious partisan office seekers.

. . . the political party is – or should be – central to the American political system. Parties are – or should be – integral parts of all political life, from structuring the reasoning and choice of the electorate, through all facets of campaigns and seemingly all facets of the government, to the very possibility of effective governance in a democracy. . . political parties are complex institutions and processes, and as such they are difficult to understand and evaluate. . . Despite their defects, they continue today to be the major instruments for democratic government in this nation. . . In America the great moving forces are the parties. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more.

That parties are complex does not mean they are incomprehensible. Indeed complexity is, if not an intentional outcome, at least and anticipated result of those who shape the political parties. Moreover, they are so deeply woven into the fabric of American politics that they cannot be understood apart from either their own historical context and dynamics or those of the political system as a whole. Parties, that is, can be understood only in relation to the polity, to the government and its institutions, and to the historical context of the times.

The public elects its political leaders, but it is that leadership the legislate, executes, and adjudicates policy. The parties are defined in relation to this republican democracy. This it is political leaders . . . who are the central actors in the party.

Voters, however, are neither office seekers nor benefit seekers and thus are not a part of the political party at all, even if they identify strongly with a party and consistently support its candidates. Voters are indeed critical, but they are critical as the targets of party activities. Parties “produce” candidates, platforms, and policies. Voters “consume” by exchanging their votes for the party’s product. Some voters, of course, become partisans by becoming activists, whether as occasional volunteers, as sustained contributors, or even as candidates. But until they do so, they may be faithful consumers, “brand name” loyalist as it were, but they are still only the targets of partisans’ efforts to sell their wares in the political marketplace.

Why, then, do politicians turn to create or reform, to use of abuse, partisan institutions? The answer is that parties are designed as attempts to solve problems that current institutional arrangements do not solve and that politicians have come to believe they cannot solve. . . Elective office seekers, as that label says, want to win election to office. Parties regulate access to those offices. If elective office is indeed valuable, there will be more aspirants than offices, and the political party and the two-party system are means of regulating that competition and channeling those ambitions. Major party nomination is necessary for election, and partisan institutions have been developed-and have been reformed and re-reformed – for regulating competition.

. . . parties are institutions designed to promote the achievement of collective choices – choices on which the parties differ and choices reached by majority rule.

To win office, candidates need more than a party’s nomination. Election requires persuading members of the public to support that candidacy and mobilizing as many of those supporters as possible. This is a problem of collective action. How do candidates get supporters to vote for them – at least in greater numbers than vote for the opposition – as well as get them to provide the cadre of workers and contribute the resources needed to win election? The political party has long been the solution.

Parties are institutions. This means, among other things, that they have some durability. . . legislators might create a party rather than a temporary majority coalition to increase their chances of winning not just today but into the future. Similarly, a long and successful political career means winning office today, but it also requires winning elections throughout that career. A standing, enduring organization makes that goal more likely.

Excerpted from Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Party Politics in America. John H. Aldrich.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Political Parties

Refer to the items you highlighted and prioritized on the homework reading. In the space below, work as a team to write down brief bullet point definitions for each attributed mentioned referring to the concept of a “political party”. All team members need to record all information. You must write down fifteen words/phrases or more. When we share with the class, please write down any new words mentioned that you do not already have on your list.

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Now that you have a long list of words and phrases which are associated with the word “political party”, please work in your small group to categorize all of these words. You must name between four and five categories and then place every word in the appropriate category. No word can go uncategorized. No category can be named “miscellaneous” or something that holds ones that don’t fit. A word from your list may serve as a category name.

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| Category 1 Name | Category 2 Name | Category 3 Name | Category 4 Name | Category 5 Name | Category 6 Name |
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In your group, please consider your categories and then write a definition of the word “political party” in the space below:

A political party is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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After your classmates share their definitions and the dictionary definition is shared, what is one thing you might consider adding or deleting from your definition?

Copy the definition created by the whole class in the space below:

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Brainstorm a list of three things you have already learned about “political party”

1.

2.

3.

What are two questions you have about the concept of “political parties?”

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