Chapter Eleven Short Answer (Answers Below)

1. Compare and contrast the strategies available to parties for mediating social cleavages.

2. Explain the basis for criticism of the brokerage party model.

3. Compare and contrast the characteristics of polarized and unpolarized party systems.

4. Explain why flexible partisans are desirable targets for media and political activity during elections.

5. Compare and contrast the mobilization, electoral-administration, and representation functions of parties.

Answers

1. Social cleavages can manifest between political parties or within them. When manifest between parties, there is a tendency for a number of small parties to form, each representing a fairly exclusive constituency. This kind of party system is more characteristic of proportional electoral systems. In this model, cleavage mediation consists of the negotiation between parties in the effort to build viable governing coalitions. In majoritarian electoral systems, where a small number of larger parties exist, there is a pressure to resolve cleavages within parties. Parties take on an internal brokerage function, their electoral success and ability to mobilize support dependent, in part, on the ability to resolve the potential conflicts of interest within them.
2. The need for large parties in a majoritarian system to incorporate widely divergent groups in their basis of support leads to a recurring set of characteristics. Such parties tend to consist of constantly reforming (and fluid) interest coalitions. These coalitions tend to compete for more or less the same “centrist” policy space, offering little real choice in terms of policy alternatives. They solicit support from voters by appeals to a selection of narrow interest ranges, rather than offering a choice between comprehensive world views, with little in the way of internal consistency between the interest options they present (many of which can contradict each other). Finally, in order to simplify debate, they tend to focus and organize around leaders rather than principles and ideologies. While this is not necessarily bad, the collective effect is to limit the range of choice and, thus, the potential representative range possible within the brokerage model. The range of mutually conflicting interest appeals characteristic of brokerage parties is almost impossible to implement if a party is successful and gains power. This, in turn, suggests that the model offers only a limited and stunted version of democracy, and one that is inaccurate in its representative claims.
3. Both party systems explain the relative distribution of policy and ideological preferences in society, along with the ability of parties to represent them credibly. In a polarized system, the parties tend to appeal to distinct and separate groups within society. The voting process offers a significant degree of choice. An elected government, however, likely faces real opposition from non-supporters, and changes in government will involve volatility and change in government policy. In an un-polarized system, choice is more limited, but the social cleavages associated with party representation (or changes in government) are less severe. This is because a shift in government doesn’t equate to a significant change in underlying attitudes or even real changes in the popular base of support.
4. In majoritarian (and pluralist) elections, vote efficiency is key. As much as possible, parties want to allocate resources to elected representatives with the minimum possible number of votes. Given the role that the media plays in modern elections, selecting targets for political appeals and media attention is a critical element of success. Directing attention or appeals towards already determined loyalists is a waste, beyond appeals to existing supporters for money or volunteer time. Appealing to committed opponents is equally, if not more, wasteful. Being able to identify that group that will vote, but as yet is undecided how to vote, is key. Successfully identifying that group, particularly those located in hotly contested ridings, and finding a way to win them over, radically increases vote efficiency, insofar as it offers the greatest return on electoral resource investment.
5. All three functions reflect the connections that parties help foster between actors in the political process. The mobilization function is about rewards in the form of electoral outcomes; the party mobilizes its resources to secure scarce positions of power for its leadership. This mobilization is only possible because of the electoral administration function, the role parties play in making elections possible and shaping how they unfold. Parties are the significant actors that get the electorate out to vote, show them how, and explain why (to vote for their desired candidate). Parties do not mobilize only to achieve goals; they make the process through which the goals are achieved possible. Doing so, in turn, depends on the representative function that parties play. Parties are able to shape the electoral process the way they do because they can make credible claims to share and support the interests of voters. What rationalizes the concentrated benefits of party mobilization and administration (i.e., power for a few) is the claim that the few who gain power share the ideas, and will act in the interests of, partisan supporters.