Political parties are major structures of politics in modern societies. In developing democracies they are universal phenomena. They are objects of intensive study, primarily because, as apparatuses of political action and social power, they engage in activities that may be of great consequence for the individual citizen and for the world in which that citizen lives. In order to understand parties and arrive at a useful way of thinking about them, we will discuss parties from three standpoints: their place in the political system, their nature as a special group, and their importance to democracy.

**THE PLACE OF PARTIES IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM**

Modern political systems are highly complex, the American system particularly so. The institutions of government in Washington and at the state and local levels consist of huge bureaucracies, large bicameral legislatures with elaborate committee systems, and many layers of courts with different jurisdictions — structures so separated and fragmented as to make coordination of governmental action extremely difficult. In addition to these institutions, a multiplicity of interest groups in modern systems, seemingly always increasing in number and diversity and constantly pressing their conflicting claims and demanding governmental attention, makes the representation of these interests and the mediation of group conflicts more involved and trying than ever before. And finally, there is in modern systems the mass public, larger than ever because of the extension of the right to vote and the greater opportunities for participation in politics than in the past. The task of political leadership to communicate with this public and mobilize its support is ever more complicated at the same time that it is ever more important.

If such systems are to survive and to be governed effectively, means must be developed to bring the scattered parts together, to lubricate the system so that, at least minimally, leaders, groups, and citizens can work toward the achievement of certain goals for the society. Specifically, leaders must be recruited, policy objectives defined, citizens heard, group conflicts negotiated, and elections conducted. Leaders have to mobilize support, competition has to be organized, and the public has to be educated. These activities must be accomplished in such a way as to make sense to citizens as well as to lead to important policy decisions by elites.
What emerges to facilitate government in modern systems under these complex conditions are linkage structures, intermediary organizations that help produce positive action and effective decisions in the face of fragmentation, conflict, and mass involvement. These structures are groups that engage in activities and organize initiatives that make cooperative behavior possible. The political party is one major type of linkage structure (see Figure 1.1); some would say it is the central one. In what ways is such a structure crucial for the system? First, it provides a basis for interaction and cohesion within legislatures, such as Congress, and often, but not always, between legislative and executive leaders, such as between Congress and the president. Further, a party provides some basis for cooperation between national, state, and local institutions and leadership. Second, the party is a forum within which interest groups can (but not all do) present their views about governmental policies as well as press for particular types of candidates for offices, both elective and appointive. The party is, therefore, an arena for the development of compromises by interest groups as well as the agent in creating interest group coalitions working for particular goals. Third, a party constitutes a medium or chan-