

A Basic Framework for Understanding American Interest Group
Politics (Part 1)

A. Fundamental Political-Economic Institutional Features (from
the British Colonial Era)

1. Representative democracy,
2. Plurality elections,
3. Geographic-Residency-based representation (the tradition
of the representative living with those he represented)
4. Private property rights

B. Demography and Geography

1. Rapid Population Growth - U.S. now 3rd in population
2. Territorial Expansion - U.S. now 4th in land area

Consequences of (A) and (B)

1. Representative democracy and capitalism co-evolved in an
environment of almost unlimited natural resources. No real
European style socialist party ever gained a lasting
foothold in the United States. (Echoing a 1948 essay by
Richard Hofstadter this is what Louis Hartz called the
"Liberal Tradition in America".)
2. The English style plurality election system (the candidate
with the most votes wins) tends to produce only two
dominant political parties. The current Democratic Party
dates from the 1820s and the current Republican Party dates
from the late 1850s.
3. In the Colonial Era the tradition was established that
legislators live in the district/town that they represented
in the colonial legislature rather than being *assigned* by a
"faction" to represent a district (at the time, there were
no political parties as we now understand them). The

colonies and later the United States always used geographic districts with (usually) one representative assigned to each district. The important shift in the colonial period was that the representative was expected to *physically live in the district*. The sharp break with English-style representation lies in the fact that *no central authority assigns members to districts*. Later, when mass based political parties emerged in the 1820s this form of geographic representation had the effect of incorporating important regional interests within the political parties. Because the political parties were active throughout the United States, these regional interests were incorporated within the parties and that tended to dampen conflict between the parties.