**For Discussion**

1. Are interest groups valuable to representative democracy? How has the rise of candidate-centered politics left a void in terms of appealing to a broad-based constituency? How have interest groups sought to fill this void? Has the rise of single-issue groups driven by highly technical policy experts affected healthy political competition? Do you think that voters and candidates who rely on these experts for information are unduly swayed by the opinion of lobbyists?

2. Did Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008 signal a long-term shift toward the Democratic Party? Or, given the Republicans success in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 elections, is current state of political affairs more suggestive of a dealignment? Is it accurate to conclude that no one party dominates politics in this country?

3. Given that parties now serve a selective and supplementary role in elections, what is the relationship between political parties and individual candidates? Does this vary according to whether an election is for an open seat? Are men or women more likely to be supported in open seat contests? Are there indications of bias in terms of where parties direct their attention and support?

4. Are interest groups more powerful than political parties? The devolution of regulatory activity has left state governments more powerful than in the past. How has the rise of candidate-centered politics, particularly at the state level, affected the influence of political parties? Does the proliferation of interest groups at the state level suggest that lobbyists are able to wield an increasing amount political influence over the legislative process? Moreover, given the rise of independent political campaigns, do professional lobbies now enjoy more political access than in the past?

5. What are some factors that contribute to factional splits within political parties? For instance, how has the nationwide tightening of state budgets affected the policy choices of statewide officeholders? Are officeholders less reluctant to buck the party line and abandon traditional policy values?

6. Third parties have had relatively little success in this country. Is this a problem for democracy? If so, what can be done to improve their success rate? Should the two major parties be able to dictate ballot and registration requirements? Would forcing all candidates to accept public funds level the playing field and allow third-party candidates to be more competitive?