

American Political Parties

I. The Development of Political Parties

The United States has a two-party system. The existence of only two dominant parties is mostly because of election rules that provide for **single-member districts** and **winner-take-all elections**. Each "district" can have only one winner in any election, the person who receives the most votes. So no matter how popular a third party, it will not win a single seat in any legislature until it becomes powerful enough in a single district to take an election. By contrast, many democracies have **proportional representation**, in which officials are elected based on the percentage of votes their parties receive, and more than two dominant parties. If a party wins 10 percent of the vote in an election where 100 seats are at stake, it gets to have 10 of the seats. In a multiparty system, parties may form a *coalition*, an alliance between parties, to pool their votes if there is agreement on a major issue. Proportional representation encourages the formation of parties that are based on narrowly defined interests.

The Electoral College is also a factor in sustaining the two-party system. Even if the popular vote in a state is very close, the winner gets all of the state's electoral votes. This arrangement makes it extremely difficult for a third party to win. In the 1992 presidential election, Ross Perot captured almost 20 percent of the popular vote across the country but did not receive a single electoral vote.

The Federalists and the Democratic Republicans

Although the Constitution does not provide for political parties, two factions quickly emerged. One group (the Federalists), led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, favored business development, a strong national government, and a loose interpretation of the Constitution. The followers of Thomas Jefferson, known as Democratic Republicans, called for a society based on small farms, a relatively weak central government, and a strict interpretation of the Constitution.

Jacksonian Democrats and the Whigs

During the 1820s, with the country expanding and many states dropping their property qualifications for voting, the size of the electorate grew. Andrew Jackson took advantage of this change, and from his election in 1828, the Democrats represented an alliance of small farmers, Westerners, and "mechanics," the term used for the working class. The **Whig Party** (1834) supported business, a national bank, and a strong central government. When the Whigs broke up in the 1850s, they were replaced by the Republican Party.

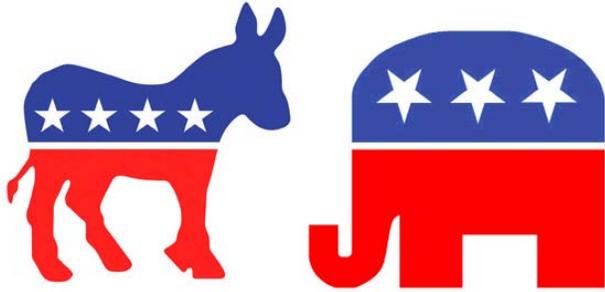
This period saw important changes in how political parties operate. In the presidential election of 1832, candidates were chosen through a national convention of representatives from the states' parties, and a **party platform**, a statement of the party's beliefs and goals, was issued.

Democrats and Republicans

The Civil War split the political parties in several ways. The Republican party's strength lay in the North; Abraham Lincoln did not receive a single electoral vote from a Southern state in 1860. The Democrats in the North divided into *War Democrats*, who supported the war effort but claimed the Republicans were doing a poor job of leading the Union, and the *Peace Democrats*, or **Copperheads**, who opposed the war and were suspected of disloyalty to the Union. To win the election of 1864, the Republicans reorganized themselves as the **National Union Party** to attract votes from the War Democrats and nominated War Democrat Andrew Johnson for vice president. When Lincoln was assassinated, Democrat Johnson became president.

Following the Civil War, Republicans moved quickly to consolidate their control of the United States government. They quickly added a series of Western states to the Union, states that they

expected would remain firm in their support for Republicans. They also set up (often corrupt) governments in the South that would regulate state elections in a manner beneficial to the party. Their record was mixed. The Democrats and Republicans alternated control of Congress, but only two Democratic presidents — Grover Cleveland (1884–1888, 1892–1896) and Woodrow Wilson (1912–1920) — were elected up to 1932. The Republican party's pro-business positions played well in the industrial North and Midwest, while the Democrats held the "solid South." The large number of immigrants who came to the United States, together with the growing industrial workforce, laid the basis for strong, largely Democratic political machines in New York, Chicago, and other large cities.



The Donkey has come to symbolize the Democratic Party, while the elephant symbolizes the Republican Party.

The New Deal coalition and Republican resurgence

The Great Depression brought about a major shift in political party allegiance. African-American voters, who had traditionally supported the Republicans since Reconstruction, now joined the unemployed, the immigrants and their descendants, the liberal intellectuals, and the South in backing Franklin Roosevelt. The Democratic party's New Deal coalition redefined the role of the federal government as an active agent in promoting the general welfare. The Democrats dominated national politics for the next 20 years. Roosevelt's New Deal was followed by Harry Truman's Fair Deal; Republican Dwight Eisenhower (1952–1960) found it impossible to dismantle the New Deal agencies that had become an integral part of American society.

Democratic dominance collapsed in the 1960s. Young radicals turned away from liberalism in response to the Vietnam War, while moderate Democrats increasingly blamed their party for the rise of lawlessness that had accompanied liberal social change during the decade — especially the explosion of urban rioting that devastated American cities starting in 1964. From the 1968 election of Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton's 1992 victory, only one Democrat attained the White House: Jimmy Carter, whose term spanned 1976 to 1980. This succession of Republicans was due in part to the party's Southern strategy, which began to bring Southern states into the Republican column in presidential elections. Not until 1994 were Republicans able to consolidate their power by capturing control of Congress, the first time they had held both the House and the Senate in almost half a century. The Republicans continued to dominate Congress, albeit often with slim majorities, until 2006; opposition to the war in Iraq and Bush's declining popularity returned the Democrats to power in the midterm elections.

II. The Functions of Political Parties

Political parties perform an important task in government. They bring people together to achieve control of the government, develop policies favorable to their interests or the groups that support them, and organize and persuade voters to elect their candidates to office. Although very much involved in the operation of government at all levels, political parties are not the government itself, and the Constitution makes no mention of them.

The basic purpose of political parties is to nominate candidates for public office and to get as many of them elected as possible. Once elected, these officials try to achieve the goals of their party through legislation and program initiatives. Although many people do not think of it this way, registering as a Democrat or Republican makes them members of a political party. Political parties want as many people involved as possible. Most members take a fairly passive role, simply voting for their party's candidates at election time. Some become more active and work as officials in the party or volunteer to persuade people to vote. The most ambitious members may decide to run for office themselves.

Representing groups of interests

The people represented by elected officials are called **constituents**. Whether Republican or Democrat, constituents make their concerns known to their representatives. In turn, elected officials must not only reflect the concerns of their own political party (**partisan** issues) but must also try to attract support from people in their districts or states who belong to the other party. They can attract this support by supporting **bipartisan** issues (matters of concern that cross party lines) and **nonpartisan** issues (matters that have nothing to do with party allegiance).

Political parties represent groups as well as individuals. These **interest groups** have special concerns, called **interests**. They may represent the interests of farm workers, urban African Americans, small business operators, particular industries, or teachers — any similar individuals who cooperate to express a specific agenda.

Simplifying choices

The two main political parties in the United States appeal to as many different groups as possible. They do so by stating their goals in a general way so that voters are attracted to a broad philosophy without necessarily focusing on every specific issue. Republicans are known for their support of business, conservative positions on social issues, and concern about the size of government; Democrats traditionally have supported labor and minorities and believe that government can solve many of the nation's problems. The alternative to using the general philosophies of the political parties to sort out candidates is to vote for individuals based on just their own one-or two-issue programs.

Making policy

Political parties are not policymaking organizations in themselves. They certainly take positions on important policy questions, especially to provide alternatives to the position of whichever party is in power. When in power, a party attempts to put its philosophy into practice through legislation. If a candidate wins office by a large majority, it may mean that the voters have given him or her a **mandate** to carry out the program outlined in the campaign. Because President Bill Clinton failed to win a majority of the popular vote in both 1992 and 1996, few considered his victories a mandate for any specific policy or ideology. President George W. Bush also entered office without a clear mandate, because his opponent, Al Gore, won more votes (and might have won the Electoral College if not for irregularities, such as confusing ballots, in Florida).

III. The Strengths and Weaknesses of Political Parties

Political parties have unified groups of people and helped them seek and achieve common goals. They have a tradition of participation in democratic government that is two centuries old. Political parties have not, however, stemmed the decline in the number of people who vote. Many people view the primary elections as elimination contests that have little to do with political parties. TV ads and money from **political action committees (PACs)** seem to do more to persuade voters than the efforts of political parties.

Political parties today better reflect American society than they did a generation ago. Men and women from all ethnic and religious groups and from all walks of life participate in party caucuses and conventions. The primary system, whatever its defects, offers far more choices to voters than did the old party machines. This openness shows that political parties have had the strength and flexibility to adapt to changing times.

IV. The Structure of Political Parties

The major political parties are organized at the local (usually county), state, and national levels. Party leaders and activists are involved in choosing people to run for office, managing and financing campaigns, and developing positions and policies that appeal to party constituents. The national party organizations play key roles in presidential elections.

Local party organization

Political parties operate at the local level in municipal and county elections (though many cities choose officials — mayors and members of city council — through **nonpartisan elections**, in which candidates effectively run as independents without party affiliation). In *partisan elections*, the party is involved in identifying candidates, providing professional staff, and taking positions on issues of immediate concern to voters. The party leadership recognizes that the interaction between party workers, candidates, and voters is important.

In the late 19th century on through a good part of the 20th century, **political machines** flourished in several large cities; Tammany Hall in New York, Frank Hague in Jersey City, the Pendergast family in Kansas City, and Richard Daley in Chicago are examples. The political bosses, the mayors, and the party leaders used their control of patronage jobs to reward party loyalty and provide a broad range of social services. Reforms in the civil service and the growth of primary elections gradually brought an end to machine politics.



A cartoon of Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall. He symbolized the corrupt politics of political machines.



Mayor of Chicago for 21 years, Richard Daley symbolized the end of political machines

State party organization

Political parties prepare for statewide elections. Party activists are named as electors in the Electoral College if their party carries the state in a presidential election. Candidates for state office may be chosen through a primary election, state convention, or caucus process. At a state **caucus**, party members select their candidates. In many states, the executive officials — governor, lieutenant governor, treasurer, and attorney general — are elected as individuals. Although the party's **slate**, its candidates for office, is listed on the ballot, voters can vote for any candidate they want. In such states, it is not unusual for voters to elect a Democratic governor and a Republican lieutenant governor or vice versa.

National party organization

At the national level, political parties run candidates for Congress and the presidency. Each party has its own national committee made up of party leaders, elected officials, and the chairs of the state party organizations. The chair of the national committee is chosen by the party's candidate for president. The Democratic and Republican national committees do not run the campaigns of their respective presidential candidates; they play a supporting role to the campaign organizations of the candidates themselves. In both the Senate and the House, each party has its own **congressional campaign committee**, which raises money for congressional elections.

The national convention

The national committee loosely runs the party between national conventions. As noted earlier, a party's choices for president and vice president are nominated at the national convention. The delegates to the convention are already committed to vote for particular candidates based on the results of the state primary or caucus voting. While some delegates are appointed by the state party organization, the overwhelming majority are selected through primaries and caucuses. A party's nominee is often determined months before the convention, which makes the choice official. The party works on and announces its **platform** at the national convention. The platform is made up of **planks** that explain how the party stands on the issues facing the country. The terms *platform* and *plank* date from the presidential election of 1832, when national party conventions were first held. Developing the platform is often the most controversial part of the convention. The Republicans, for example, have had to work out an acceptable compromise on abortion between pro-choice and pro-life forces within the party.

V. Third Parties in American Politics

The electoral system in the United States works against a proliferation of political parties. This fact has not prevented minor parties or independents from running for office at the local, state, and national levels, however. In the 1992 national election, for example, 23 candidates ran for president. Third parties are created for a variety of reasons, and they have had an impact on American politics.

Splits within the Republican and Democratic parties

Third parties often represent factions that break away from the major parties over policy issues. These breakaway third parties have been the most successful in terms of gaining popular and Electoral College votes. In 1912, former Republican President Teddy Roosevelt ran for the White House for the **Bull-Moose party** against Republican incumbent William Howard Taft. Opposed to Harry Truman's civil rights program, Strom Thurmond bolted the Democratic party in 1948 and became the candidate of the **States' Rights party**. Similar concerns led George Wallace of Alabama to run for president in 1968 under the banner of the **American Independent party**.

Farmer-labor parties

The **Populist party** (also known as the **People's party**) was formed by unhappy farmers, Western mining interests, and Southerners. It won a number of seats in Congress and won electoral votes in 1892. The Populists supported the Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1896, effectively committing political suicide. The coalition between farm and labor groups was revived by the **Progressive party** in 1924.

Ideological and one-issue parties

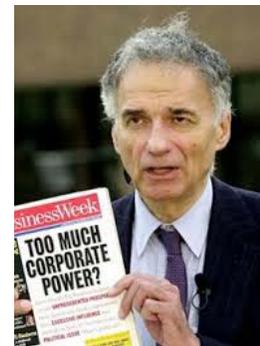
Ideological and one-issue parties may cover both ends of the political spectrum. In the presidential elections between 1904 and 1920, the **Socialist party's** candidates received between 400,000 and 900,000 votes. More recently, the most influential "party of ideas" is the **Libertarian party**, which links social liberals and economic conservatives into an alliance against government activism in all spheres of life. Although seldom successful at winning office, the party has been growing steadily; candidate Harry Browne appeared on the ballot in every state in the 2000 presidential election. In addition, political parties are formed around single issues — the **American party** (also known as the **Know-Nothing party**) campaigned for an end to immigration to the United States in the 1850s, and the **Prohibition party**, which ran candidates well into the 1950s, opposed the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

H. Ross Perot's 1992 campaign revealed the potential power of an independent candidate with a strong base of financial support. His success in winning about 20 percent of the popular vote in 1992 neither produced comparable support in the Electoral College nor changed the results of that year's election. However, Perot's campaign had a significant impact on American politics because it forced President Clinton to devote greater attention to the nation's budget deficit, one issue that Perot had used to great advantage. As with most third parties, Perot's movement fell apart after the major parties started co-opting its issues. Perot's "United We Stand" organization paved the way for the **Reform party**, but it was taken over in the 2000 election by right-wing supporters of Patrick Buchanan, a candidate whose only clear common ground with Perot was opposition to free trade.

Ralph Nader's **Green party** candidacy attracted many fewer votes in the 2000 election than Perot did in 1992, but ultimately may have had more impact. It is hard to say exactly how many Nader supporters would not have voted if he had not been in the race. But Nader's liberal profile certainly drew more votes from Vice President Al Gore than from Texas Governor George W. Bush, and it is quite likely that this opposition from the left cost Gore enough votes to swing the election. Nader is probably the first third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 to have won enough votes to affect the outcome of a presidential election.

Why third parties fail

People typically vote for a third-party candidate because they are trying to send a message to the major parties. That protest vote is often heard. Both the Democrats and Republicans have accepted reforms and programs that originally seemed radical when presented by third parties. The eight-hour workday, women's suffrage, and the railroad rate regulation are good examples. Historically, third parties eventually fail to maintain themselves at the local and state levels, usually because one of the major parties skims off their talent by embracing some of the issues that party supporters hold dear. The Populists, Progressives, and Socialists succeeded for a time in winning local and state elections, and even some congressional seats, but their numbers were too small to have a dominating influence. Third parties lack the financial resources to mount effective campaigns. Today, the cost of running for office is staggering. The two major parties consolidate their dominance of the political system by staging high-profile primaries and national conventions subsidized by taxpayer money. They exclude third-party candidates from most debates, especially those for national office. Although he held around 5 percent support in the polls, for example, Ralph Nader could not participate in the 2000 presidential debates. Indeed, he was not even allowed to sit in the audience, despite possessing a ticket!



Ralph Nader, who ran for president three times as a third party candidate in 2000, 2004 and 2008.