

Winner Take All: The Two-Party System

Political parties are key players in American politics. But the Constitution does not mention political parties. In fact, many of the founders, including George Washington, distrusted permanent political parties, fearing that they would become too powerful. The first two political factions to appear in the United States were the Federalists, who supported ratification of the Constitution, and the Anti-Federalists, who opposed ratification. These factions disappeared once the Constitution was ratified. But early in Washington's first administration as president, two new factions formed: the Federalists, who supported Alexander Hamilton and a group that gathered around Thomas Jefferson, called the Democratic-Republicans. They were the first real political parties in U.S. history.



Throughout most of American history, the United States has had two major parties. Today's Democratic Party can trace its origins to Jefferson's old party. Today's Republican Party can trace its origins to the election of 1854. Even though minor parties, or "third parties," are active, the U.S. political system is, in effect, a two-party system. Today, third parties win few seats in state races, and they rarely win in federal congressional races. For example, out of 100 U.S. senators in 2019, only Sens. Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Angus King of Maine are not Democrats or Republicans but are Independents.

The winner-take-all character of the U.S. system favors only two parties. In the case of Congress, if a party's candidate receives a bare majority of votes, that candidate wins the seat, and there is no second place. Several states use runoff elections in state or federal congressional races when no candidate wins a required minimum of votes (e.g., 40 percent or 50 percent). A second or "runoff" election pits the top vote-getters in the first election against each other to see who will win the majority vote. And if a presidential candidate wins the general election in a state, the candidate wins all of the Electoral College votes for that state. (Maine and Nebraska are exceptions and do not have a winner-take-all system for Electoral College votes.)

Over the decades, dozens of third parties have come and gone. Some of these parties were formed to promote a particular cause, such as the Prohibition Party or the Equal Rights Party, which demanded the vote for women. Other third parties, such as the Populists and the Greenbackers, arose for a short period around economic issues. Some third parties, such as the Progressives and the Dixiecrats, splintered off from the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. Some parties have developed around a certain leader, such as George Wallace's pro-segregation American Independent Party or Ross Perot's Reform Party.

Political Parties in Action

American political parties are organized on a national, state, and local basis. Every four years, the parties hold national conventions to nominate presidential and vice presidential candidates, develop and approve a platform of issues and positions upon which the party candidates will run, and kick off the campaign. The national parties are led by national committees made up of representatives from the states; Washington, D.C.; Puerto Rico; and several territories. Besides running the convention, the national party organizations take the lead in coordinating the national campaigns and raising campaign funds. Whichever party wins the election helps the new president select people to fill government jobs with loyal party members.

State party committees exist in every state, but are not appointed or controlled by the national organizations. State party organizations concentrate on fielding and supporting candidates who run statewide for office — candidates for U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives, governor, and other elected officials. Party committees also exist at the district, county, and city levels. They work independently on local candidates and elections. The basic unit of party organization is the precinct, the voting area at the local level. Precinct committees and workers concentrate on getting people registered to vote, supporting candidates with rallies and meetings, and getting out the vote on Election Day.

In recent years, the power of political parties has somewhat declined. More voters consider themselves political independents and tend to vote on the basis of a given candidate or set of issues rather than party affiliation. Moreover, voter turnout is lower and polls indicate less interest in politics in general. The 2008 presidential election saw turnout at a 40-year high, but even then it was not nearly 100 percent of eligible voters participating. Rather, it was about 60 percent. In 2016, the number of eligible voters voting dipped to about 55 percent.

Finally, researchers have noted a downturn in people making meaningful connections with groups and other individuals in their local communities. Some believe that this social isolation has made people less concerned with political issues and the political process. At the same time, research has shown that the widespread use of social media has tended to make people seek out political information from mostly partisan sources. Citizens increasingly find themselves reading only information that confirms their own biases. The danger of that is polarization, in which people demonize those who merely disagree with them, and compromise is harder to achieve.

Writing & Discussion

1. How did the two-party system develop in the United States? What important role do third parties play in this system?
2. How are American political parties different from those in many countries? How are they organized? What do they do? Why are political parties weaker today than in the past?
3. How do political parties provide citizens with opportunities for participation?