

# ***THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE UNITED STATES***

"Hey, isn't your eighteenth birthday next week?" Marta asked Tony.

"That's right," Tony replied.

"Great. That means you can vote in the next election if you register soon enough. "I hadn't thought of that. I don't even know how to register. And how am I supposed to know who to vote for?"

"I don't know exactly how you register either," said Marta, "but I know you can register as a member of a political party if you want to. I think I'll probably register as a Republican."

"How come?"

"Well, my parents are Republicans and I liked the Republicans who ran in the last election. My dad even helped out with one candidate's campaign for representative."

"My mom's a Democrat, but she voted for several Republicans in the last election," Tony said. "I guess I need to find out more about what the parties stand for and what they do."

"It's up to you," replied Marta. "Let me know what you decide."



People want many things from government. They want their rights protected. They want to feel secure against poverty and unemployment. They want to be treated fairly in business, at work, and in the courts. They want a clean environment. Many want government to pass laws or to pay for specific programs that they believe are important, such as education for the handicapped, product safety, gun control, or finding a cure for cancer.

Alone, an individual may feel powerless to make his or her wants, needs, and ideas known. Acting together, however, groups of people can often have a greater effect than individuals acting alone. On a larger scale, people form groups called political parties in order to influence government. A political party is an organization of citizens who wish to influence and control government by getting their members elected to office. Party members share similar ideas about what they want government to do. If a party can put enough of its members into office, that party can have a major effect on the policies and programs of the government.

It has been said that parties are the oil that makes the machinery of American democracy work. Indeed, parties play a key role in government and provide opportunities for citizens to take part in the political process.

## ***How Parties Help Our Government***

You are probably aware of the active competition between the two main political parties in the United States, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. You may even have heard Republicans criticizing Democrats or Democrats complaining about Republicans – every day – in the newspaper or on television.

Thomas Jefferson, who helped start the Democratic Party, said, "If I could not get into heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." Despite this criticism, are parties really useful? The answer is yes.

Parties help government at the local, state, and national levels in a number of ways. As you will see, they select candidates for many public offices. They set goals for the government and

provide leadership to reach those goals. Political parties also keep an eye on each other, a function much like the checks and balances you learned about earlier.

***Nominating Candidates*** - A major way in which political parties help govern is to nominate or name candidates to run for public office. Parties take the responsibility for finding and nominating qualified candidates. There are about a half million elected positions in the local, state, and national governments of the United States. Some public offices, especially in local government, are nonpartisan, which means that the candidates do not declare themselves to be members of a political party when running for office. For example, judgeships and seats on school boards and city councils are often nonpartisan offices. However, most offices are partisan. The candidates for these offices run as members of political parties. If elected, they try to carry out the party's programs.

***Setting Goals*** - A political party establishes positions on issues and sets goals for government. Each party has a platform, a statement of a party's official stand on major public issues. The platform is made up of planks, which are position statements on each specific issue in a party's platform. These planks are often turned into government programs by party members who are elected to office. Do you want to read a party platform? They are available online ... and rather long ...

***Providing Leadership*** - Parties help provide day-to-day leadership in government. Leadership is necessary to make the laws and carry out the programs that citizens want. You saw last unit that party members in Congress select the Speaker of the House, majority and minority floor leaders, and whips to provide leadership in making laws. Parties work in much the same way in our state legislature, too. Political parties also provide leadership in the executive branch of government. The political party of the executive - the President or governor - is referred to as the party "in office". The executive often appoints loyal members of the party in office to high government posts. They are then in a position to help shape government programs and policies - to match the platform of their party.

***Parties as "Watchdogs"*** - Political parties play an important "watchdog" role in the government. After an election, the party not in power (the party "out of office" or the minority party in a legislature) makes sure that the public knows when the party in power is not living up to its promises. Parties keep tabs on the behavior of members of the other party and are eager to report any wrongdoing. The watchdog function of parties helps government by making sure that members of the party in power are honest and hard working. Currently, the Republican Party is serving as the watchdog, telling the public how the Democratic Party is doing the wrong thing in office. What will be the case after November 2? We will soon find out ...

## ***How Parties Help Our Citizens***

You have seen the ways in which political parties help make our government work. Parties also help citizens fulfill their responsibilities in our democracy. Parties link citizens to their government by making their voices heard and providing ways for them to participate. Parties also inform citizens and can help make political decision-making easier.

***Citizens' Voice in Government*** - One reason why people form political parties is that parties provide a way for citizens to be heard. Edie Stevenson, the county chairperson of her political party, describes her experience:

*"When I accepted the job as county chair, few people in our county were aware of what the party stood for. So we wrote short statements of our policies on such topics as education and the environment. Then we held a series of community meetings. The people who came really spoke up about what was most important to them. We rewrote some of our statements based on what we learned about people's concerns. Our candidates discovered that the meetings were a good way to keep up on what people around here want from government."*

Do political parties really reflect what citizens want? Edie's experience shows that at the local level parties can help give citizens a voice in government. At the state and national levels, party members help hammer out the party platform, debating and deciding on the issues.

**Informing Citizens** - By writing policy statements, Edie's party was helping to provide citizens in her county with information-facts, figures, and party stands on various important issues. Some other ways parties inform citizens are by sending out mailings and giving information to newspapers, radio, and television. A more personal way in which parties inform citizens is by arranging meetings with candidates. Party members and volunteers also canvass, or go door-to-door handing out information and asking people which candidates they support. Parties canvass and provide information in order to encourage people to vote for their candidates. However, by making information available to voters, parties can also help simplify political decision-making. If a voter agrees with a party's point of view or its stand on a particular issue, he or she can vote on the basis of the party. At election time Edie's party published "Voters' Tip Sheets" - the collection of statements they had prepared. They found that people who agreed with what the party stood for felt comfortable supporting most of the party's candidates.

**Involving Citizens** - Political parties provide citizens with a variety of ways to get involved in the political process. To be successful, a party needs the help of many people, especially at election time. Campaign volunteers write letters and pamphlets and send them to voters. They raise money and hold picnics and other events at which candidates can meet voters. They make phone calls and canvass neighborhoods. On Election Day, volunteers remind people to vote and may even drive them to the polls.

As a citizen, it is both your right and responsibility to participate in government. Working through a party is one way to act as an active and responsible citizen.

**Davis, James E., and Fernlund, Phyllis Maxey. Civics – Participating in Government. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2001.**

# ***THE AMERICAN TWO PARTY SYSTEM***



For more than two centuries the two-party system has endured in the United States. It has had varying degrees of influence on American government. Why, when most other democratic countries have numerous political parties whose candidates are elected to public office, does the United States still have only two parties? Minor parties have formed, and they sometimes have received a significant number of votes. However, none of them has lasted. There must be some good reasons, and indeed there are at least three.

## ***HISTORICAL INFLUENCE***

The force of historical tradition is a major reason the United States continues to have a two-party system. Since the nation began with two parties-the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans - people have grown used to the system. The longer it has persisted, the more unthinkable it has become to have it any other way. We have always had two major parties, so ... we will continue to have two major parties. Make sense?

## ***AMERICAN POLITICAL BELIEFS AND VALUES***

Another factor that has influenced America's two-party system is the shared principles and ideals of the American people. In many other countries, the range of beliefs is greater, and disagreements run deeper. For example, France has a communist party that, though weaker than it once was, still gets a significant amount of support. It also has a strong right-wing nationalist party whose members have almost the opposite political views from the communists.

Likewise, Nigeria has for many years been locked in a serious dispute over who should control policy: the military or the proponents of democracy. The broad ideological consensus in the United States encourages just two large parties-with overlapping points of view-whose main focus is to win elections, not to represent vastly different sets of beliefs. Recently, some minor parties and movements have made some waves in or political arena, but not too major ... yet.

## ***WINNER-TAKE-ALL SYSTEM***

Probably the single most important reason that the United States has a two-party system is the winner-take-all electoral system, instead of proportional representation. In nearly all elections, from the race for the presidency to contests at the local level, the winner is the one who receives the largest number of votes. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent of the vote, only one vote more than his or her opponents. Because a party does not gain anything by finishing second, minor parties can rarely overcome the assumption that a vote for them is "wasted." Elections for national and most state representatives are based on single-member districts. One person represents the people within a small area, or district, of a state. No matter how many people run, the person with the largest number of votes wins. This encourages parties to become larger, spreading their "umbrellas" to embrace more voters.

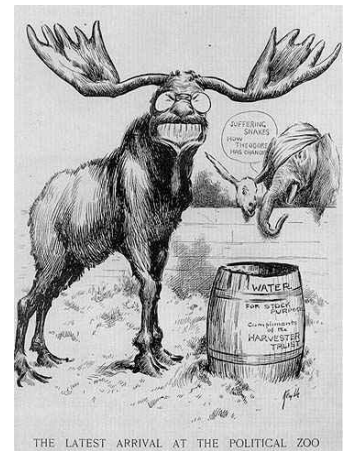
Parties without big groups of voters supporting them have little hope of winning, and often even have a hard time getting their candidates listed on the ballot.

## ***THIRD PARTIES***

Even though the two-party system is deeply entrenched in United States politics, minor third parties have popped up consistently through American history. They don't last, largely because the winner-take-all electoral system gives them almost no chance of winning elections. The names of most of them are forgotten: the Free Soil party, the Know Nothings, the Liberty party, the Poor Man's party, and the Greenback party. Others, like the Populists, Progressives, and States' Rights Democrats (Dixiecrats) have certainly influenced the course of political history.

### ***TYPES OF MINOR PARTIES***

The minor parties that have won electoral votes tend to be **economic protest parties**, often based in a particular region. Minor parties are sometimes splinter parties, which split from a major party. The Populists were an influential economic protest party that gathered support from Midwestern and southern farmers who felt taken advantage of by big banks and companies. The Progressive party of 1912 and the Progressive party of 1924 splintered from the Republicans, gaining 88 electoral votes in 1912 and 13 votes in 1924. Often these parties form around charismatic figures- Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 (Bull Moose) or George Wallace in 1968 (American Independent). Like all third parties, they faded as issues changed, sometimes because the major parties eventually broadened their goals and addressed their concerns.



Other minor parties do not always take on the goal of winning elections and electoral votes. **Ideological parties** often profess broad political beliefs and values that are radically different from the mainstream. For example, the Communist party (1920s to the present – it's still around) wants to replace capitalism with socialism, a point of view that has never won electoral votes. Although members know they will not win, they persist in running candidates for office, hoping that they can eventually bring about a revolutionary change. (Think about it to yourself – is it ok for a party to push for change - and spend members money - if it knows it isn't going to win?)

**Single-issue parties** have as their main goal to influence one major social, economic, or moral issue; too narrowly focused to win large groups of voters, they often have no real desire to continue after the issue is resolved. For example, the Free Soil party formed in 1848 to prevent the spread of slavery and faded away in 1852.

### ***THE INFLUENCE OF MINOR PARTIES***

Besides attracting new groups of voters, minor parties have shaped (and still do shape) American politics in two major ways:

***Influencing the Outcomes of Elections*** - Even though minor parties have never won the presidency, and few have elected candidates to Congress, they sometimes get enough

votes to determine which candidate from the major parties wins. For example, Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party took away votes from Republican William Howard Taft, so that Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the election of 1912. In 1968, George Wallace's American Independent party undermined Democratic support in the South, helping Republican Richard Nixon to win. Some observers believe that in 1992 and 1996 Ross Perot's campaigns hurt the Republicans more than the Democrats, ensuring victory for Democrat Bill Clinton. Ask anyone who lived during the 2000 election about Ralph Nader and the Green Party, and they will probably point to Nader taking votes away from Al Gore and the Democrats.

***Encouraging the Major Parties to Face Important Issues*** - The "umbrella" nature of the two major parties causes them to look for ways to attract more voters. They pay attention to votes lost to a minor party that addresses a significant or appealing issue. Often the Democrats or Republicans will adopt the policies of the minor parties in order to attract voters back. In fact, the actions of minor parties have helped bring many significant issues to the public's attention- from women's voting rights and the income tax to the Social Security program and voter referendums. For example, the Progressive Party championed eight-hour workdays and better working and living conditions for the urban poor, and both major parties eventually adopted this point of view.

SO – do third parties win elections? Rarely. But are they influential in politics? Absolutely! You can check out many of the current third parties online on the AHR! Website.

**Wood, Ethel, and Sansone, Stephen C. American Government – A Complete Coursebook. Wilmington, MA: Great Source Education Group, 2000.**