

[11.1] Political Parties and What They Do



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Learning Objectives

- Understand the origins of political parties in the United States and analyze their major functions.
- Understand multiparty and one-party systems and how they affect the functioning of a political system, and explain the two-party system of the United States.
- Evaluate the role of minor parties that have been active in American politics, and understand why they are important despite the fact that none has ever won the presidency.
- Understand why the major parties have a decentralized structure.
- Describe the national party machinery and party organization at the State and local levels.

[11.1] Political Parties and What They Do

Key Terms

- political party
- political spectrum
- partisanship
- Thomas Jefferson
- George Washington
- single-member districts
- plurality
- bipartisan
- consensus
- coalition
- ideological
- single-issue parties
- economic protest parties
- splinter parties
- Theodore Roosevelt's
- ward
- precinct

What Is a Political Party?

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” So said legendary football coach Vince Lombardi. Lombardi was talking about teams in the National Football League. He might just as well have had the Republican and Democratic parties in mind. They, too, are in the business of competing and winning.

What Is a Political Party?



The two campaign signs in the yard of this home demonstrate that even members of the same family can have different opinions about which political candidate should be elected.

The Role of Political Parties

It is clear from our history, and from the histories of other peoples as well, that political parties are absolutely essential to democratic government. They are a vital link between the people and their government, between the governed and those who govern. Indeed, many observers argue that political parties are the principal means by which the will of the people is made known to government and by which government is held accountable to the people.

The Role of Political Parties

- Nominating Candidates
- Informing and Activating Supporters
- How Political Parties Inform People
- The Bonding Agent Function
- Governing
- Political Parties Help the Government Run More Smoothly
- The Watchdog Function
- Political Parties Help Make Democracy Work

The Role of Political Parties



The grassroots Tea Party movement, which gained national attention during the 2010 election campaign, advocated lower taxes, less government, and reduction of the national debt.

The Two-Party System

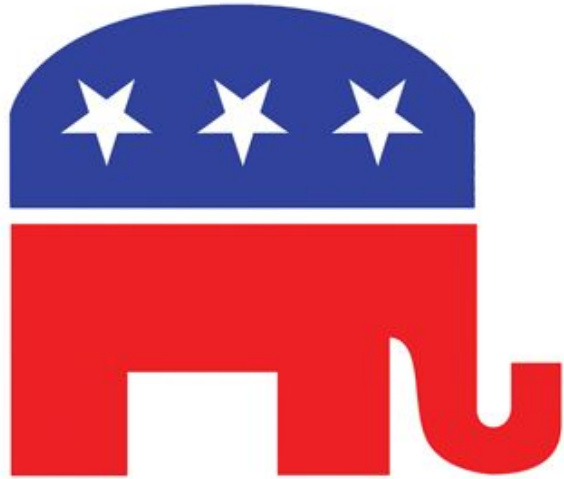
Two major parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, dominate American politics. That is to say, this country has a two-party system. In a typical election in the United States, only the Republican or the Democratic Party's candidates have a reasonable chance of winning public office.

The Two-Party System

- The Historical Basis
- Unexpected Effects
- The Force of Tradition
- The Electoral System
- Election Law Discourages Non-Major-Party Candidates
- The American Ideological Consensus
- No Unbridgeable Political Divisions
- How This Ideological Consensus Affects Political Parties

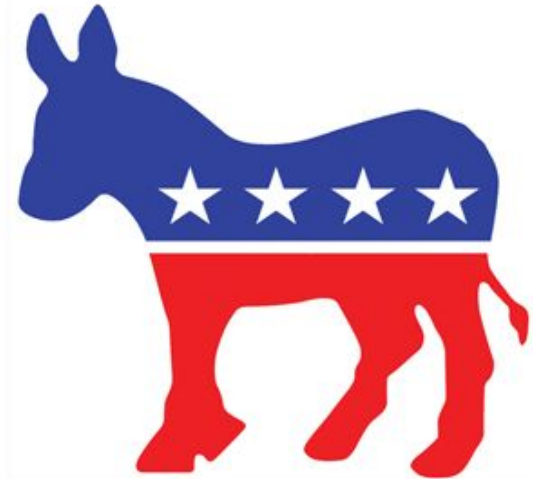
The Two-Party System

Republican Party



VS

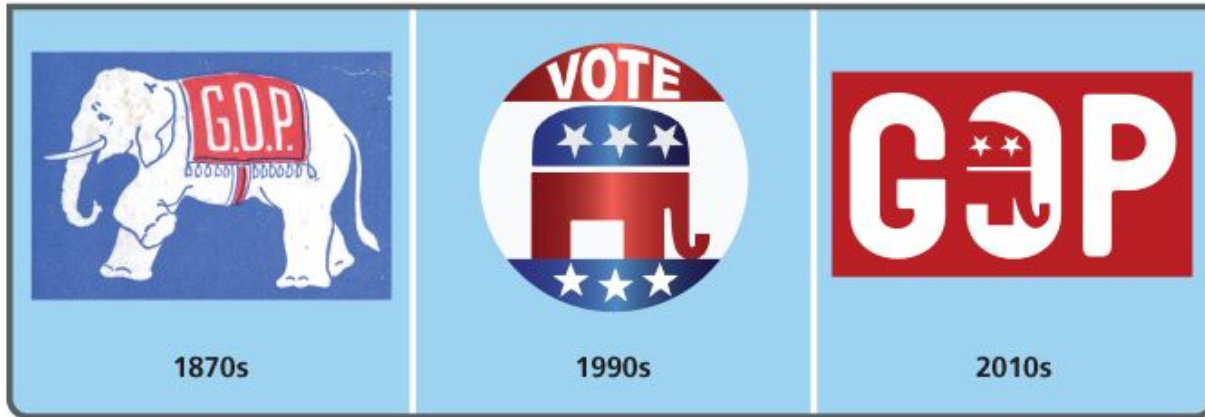
Democratic Party



A political party logo is a symbol that represents the entire party. The Republicans and Democrats have adopted the elephant and the donkey respectively to represent their parties.

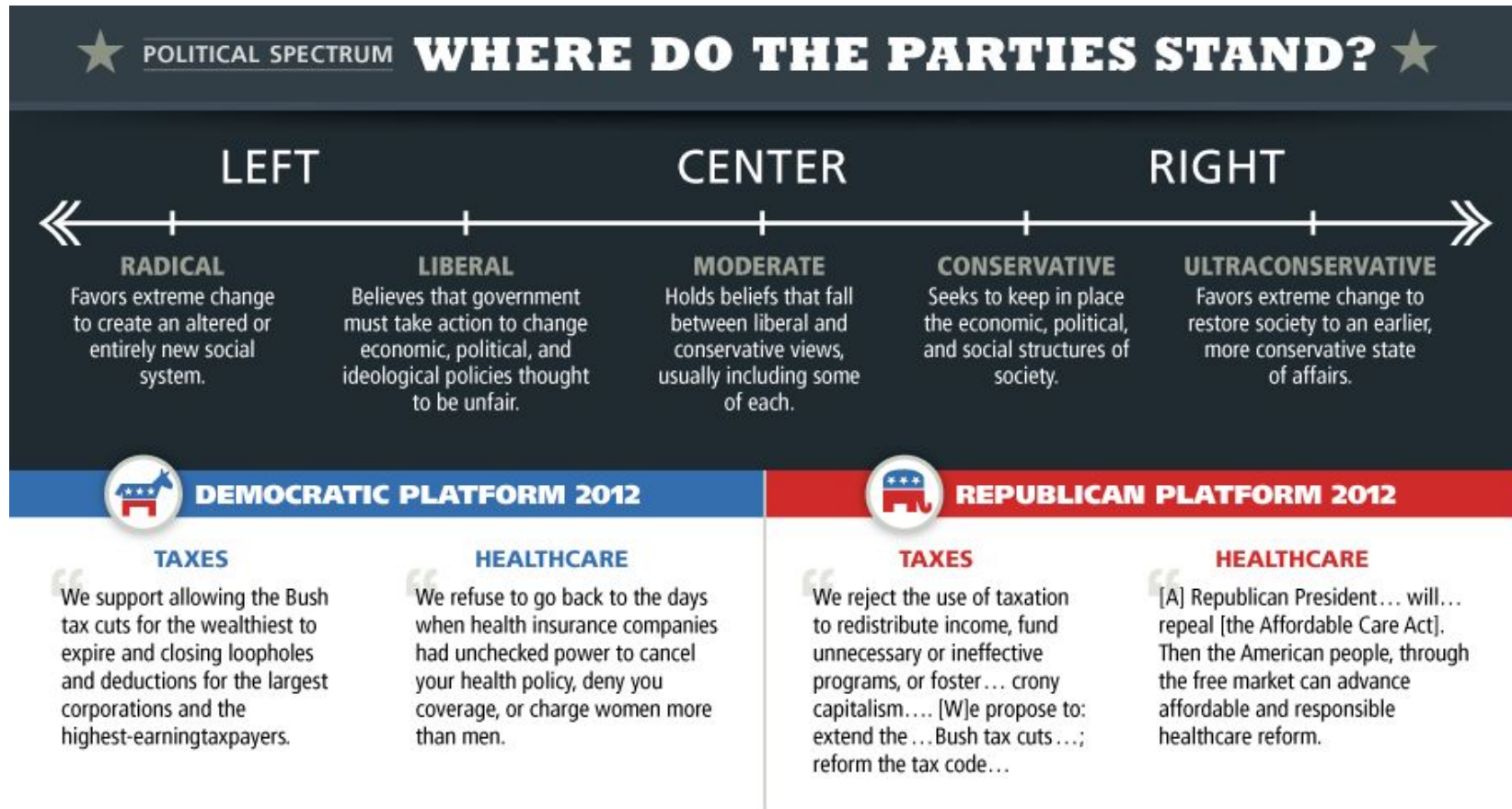
The Two-Party System

Evolution of the Republican Logo



In the two-party system, the elephant symbol of the Republican party has changed over time. Analyze Charts How has the elephant's appearance changed since the 1870s?

The Two-Party System



The Democratic and Republican parties had different platforms for taxes and healthcare in the 2012 election. Analyze Charts How do the party platforms reflect the political spectrum?

Multiparty and One-Party Politics

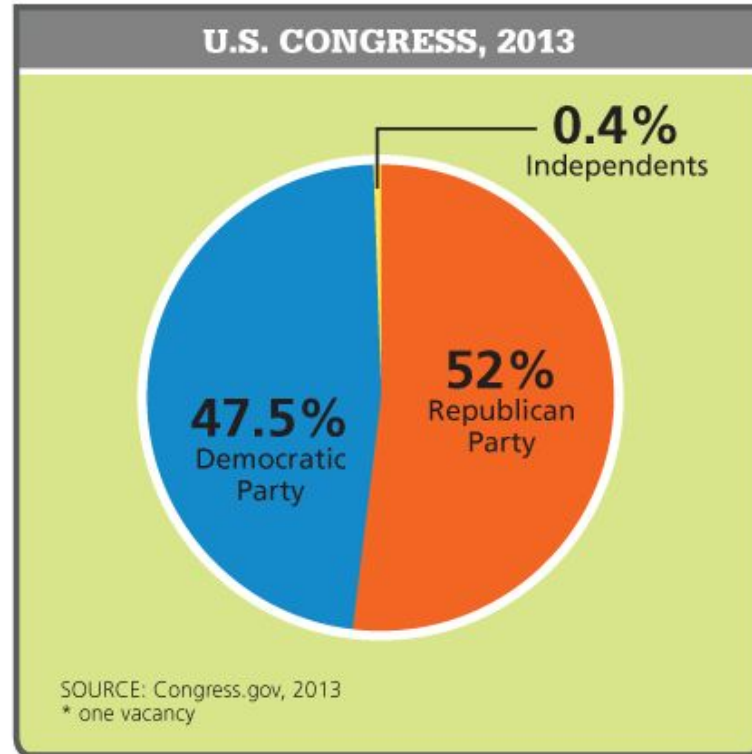
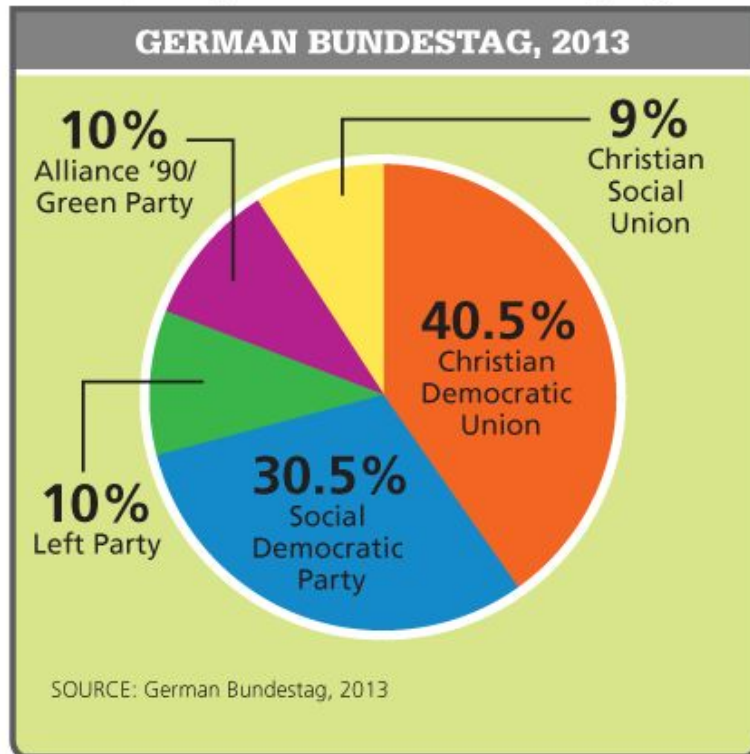
Some critics argue that the American two-party system should be scrapped. They would replace it with a multiparty arrangement, a system in which several major and many lesser parties exist, seriously compete for, and actually win public offices. Multiparty systems have long been a feature of most European democracies, and they are now found in many other democratic societies elsewhere in the world.

Multiparty and One-Party Politics

- Multiparty Politics Strengths and Weaknesses
- One-Party Politics

Multiparty and One-Party Politics

Multiparty Versus Two-Party Systems



In Germany's multiparty system, power is shared by several parties. In America, two parties have a monopoly on power. Analyze Charts How are majorities built in the German Bundestag?

Multiparty and One-Party Politics



“My goodness, if I'd known how badly you wanted democracy I'd have given it to you ages ago.”

In a dictatorship, one person or group exercises sole control of the government. Analyze Political Cartoons What is this cartoon saying about one-party systems?

Third and Minor Parties in the United States

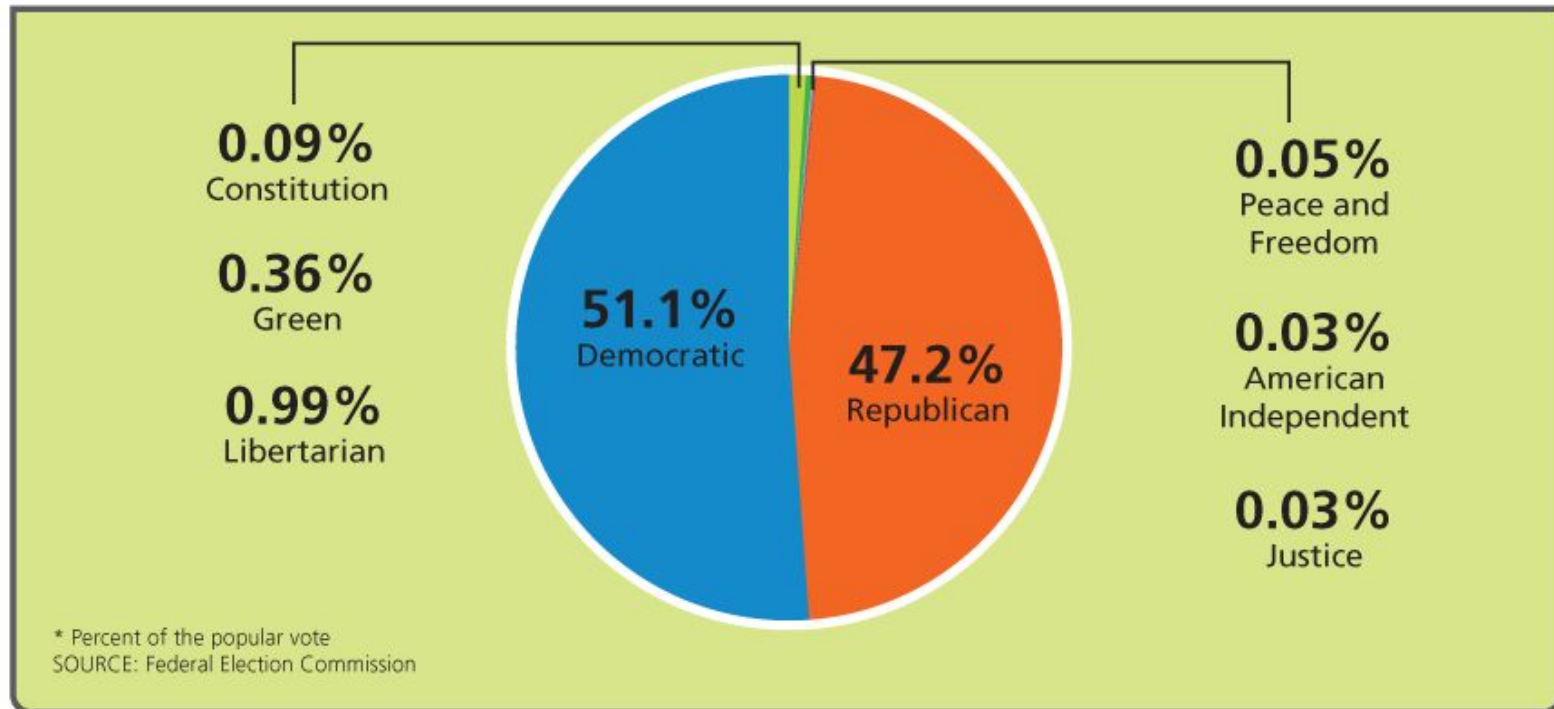
Libertarian, Reform, Socialist, Prohibition, Natural Law, Communist, American Independent, Green, Constitution—these are only some of the many parties that have fielded presidential candidates in recent years and continue to do so. You know that none of these parties or their candidates has any real chance of winning the presidency. But this is not to say that third and minor parties are unimportant. The bright light created by the two major parties too often blinds us to the vital role several minor parties have played in American politics.

Third and Minor Parties in the United States

- Ideological Parties
- Single-Issue Parties
- Economic Protest Parties
- Splinter Parties
- The Green Party
- Why Third and Minor Parties Are Important
- The Innovator Role Played by Minor Parties

Third and Minor Parties in the United States

Minor Parties in the 2012 Presidential Election*



The pie chart shows the percentage of the popular vote each party garnered in the 2012 presidential election. Analyze Charts Did the minor parties affect the election results? Explain.

Third and Minor Parties in the United States



Libertarian Party presidential candidate Gary Johnson serves up lunch for supporters in 2012. Johnson went on to get more votes that year than all the other minor party candidates combined.

The Decentralized Nature of the Parties

How strong, how active, and how well organized are the Republican and Democratic parties in your community? Contact the county chairperson or another official in one or both of the major parties. They are usually not very difficult to find. For starters, try the telephone directory or the Internet.

The Decentralized Nature of the Parties

- The Role of the Presidency
- The Impact of Federalism
- The Nominating Process

The Decentralized Nature of the Parties



There are several levels to a political party's organization. Analyze Charts What kind of party jobs exist at each level of organization?

The Decentralized Nature of the Parties



President Barack Obama, the Democratic Party leader during his two terms in office, shakes hands with members of the audience after his State of the Union address on January 24, 2012.

National Party Functions

At the national level, both major parties are composed of five basic elements. They are structured around a national convention, a national committee, a national chairperson, and two congressional campaign committees.

National Party Functions

- The National Convention
- The National Committee
- Make Up of the RNC and DNC
- The National Chairperson
- Duties of the National Committee
- Congressional Campaign Committees

National Party Functions



This aerial view of the 2012 Republican National Convention shows the festivity and crowd reaction as nominee Mitt Romney accepted the Republican presidential nomination.

State and Local Party Functions

National party organization is largely the product of custom and of rules adopted by the party's national conventions over time. At the State and local levels, on the other hand, party structure is largely determined by State law.

State and Local Party Functions

- State Organization
- Local Organization

State and Local Party Functions



Local party organization can vary from State to State, but this chart shows a common example. Analyze Charts What is the difference between a ward and a precinct?

State and Local Party Functions



Bruce Clark, the Precinct 2 chairperson for Jackson County, Iowa, counts participants at the start of a Democratic caucus in 2012.

Quiz: What Is a Political Party?

A political party is defined as “a group of persons, joined together on the basis of certain common principles, who seek to control government in order to secure the adoption of certain policies and programs.” The Republican and Democratic parties do not fit this definition because they are primarily focused on

- A. winning elections.
- B. advancing principles.
- C. supporting issues.
- D. advocating programs.

Quiz: The Role of Political Parties

What is the major function of a political party?

- A. to inform supporters
- B. to act as a watchdog over the government
- C. to nominate candidates for public office
- D. to act as a 'bonding agent' for the party

Quiz: The Two-Party System

Social welfare programs, government regulation of business practices, and programs to improve the status of minorities are most associated with which political party?

- A. Republican Party
- B. Democratic Party
- C. Libertarian Party
- D. Green Party

Quiz: Multiparty and One-Party Politics

A multiparty system

- A. is common in many European countries.
- B. was the first party system used in the United States.
- C. results in fewer constituencies being represented.
- D. is usually very stable.

Quiz: Third and Minor Parties in the United States

How do ideological parties differ from single-issue parties?

- A. They are based on economic discontent instead of one issue.
- B. They are based on a particular set of beliefs instead of one issue.
- C. They are based on a disagreement with a major party instead of one issue.
- D. They are based on concerns about the environment instead of one issue.

Quiz: The Decentralized Nature of the Parties

Which word best describes the nature of the two major parties?

- A. organized
- B. close-knit
- C. decentralized
- D. well-disciplined

Quiz: National Party Functions

What is the most important function of the national convention?

- A. writing the party's platform
- B. adopting the party's rules
- C. advancing State and local candidates
- D. picking the party's presidential candidate

Quiz: State and Local Party Functions

Which describes a ward?

- A. the residential blocks that make up a precinct
- B. the unit into which cities are often divided for the election of city council members
- C. the smallest unit of election administration
- D. the residential units (homes and apartments) that make up a precinct