

CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY: GOVERNANCE

Winner-Take-All: The Two-Party System

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the U.S. two-party election system in history and in practice today. First, students complete a reading on the two-party system, as well as the “third parties” that have arisen within that system and what role they play. Next, students review the party convention system. Finally, students role-play delegates to a third-party convention, drafting their own platform for what their political party would stand for.

Standards and Topics

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A:** Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.B:** Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

Topics: two-party system, elections, political campaigns, voter participation, Democratic Party, Republican Party

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain why the winner-take-all election system in the United States favors a two-party system.
- Analyze the major historical developments in the two-party system, including recent history.
- Create a party platform for a hypothetical third party.

Materials

[Handout A: Winner Take All: The Two-Party System](#) (one for each student)

[Handout B: Creating a Party Platform](#) (one for each student)

[Handout C: Our Platform](#) (one for each small group)

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

- A. Tell students to think of a Democratic or Republican U.S. politician and not to say the name out loud. It could be someone contemporary or from history. Give students one minute to jot down on a piece of paper (1) what office the politician holds (e.g., governor, senator, president, or some other office), and (2) everything they know about this politician's positions on issues (e.g., on immigration, civil rights, gun control, or something else).
- B. After the minute, ask students to share their description with a partner and see if their partner can guess from the information who the politician is.

Ask a few of the pairs to share the name and office of the politicians they discussed, just to give the class some examples.

- C. Tell students that they are about to learn how political parties work in the United States, and how parties identify around particular policies, similar to what they jotted down about a politician.

II. Reading: Winner Take All: The Two-Party System

- A. Distribute [Handout A: Winner Take All: The Two-Party System](#) to each student. (Or assign as homework to begin activity the next day.)
- B. Once students have completed the reading, use the Writing & Discussion questions to check for understanding in a whole-class discussion.

III. Activity: Role Play: Creating a Party Platform

- A. Organize students into groups of four or five. Tell them that they are delegates to a national party convention for a third party, along with other like-minded persons.
- B. Distribute [Handout B: Creating a Party Platform](#) to each student.
 1. Give students a few minutes to read the handout and the instructions on it.
 2. Check to see that all the groups know what the task is: Each group is composed of delegates responsible for drafting the party's platform, focusing on the areas of the economy, foreign policy, elections, education, environment, and one other area that the group chooses. The idea is that their proposed platform will be voted on by all the delegates at the convention at some later time.
 3. Distribute [Handout C: Our Platform](#) to each group. Remind students to come up with a name for their political party. Note: They may want to wait until after crafting their platform to decide on the name, or they may want the name to guide their platform policies.
 4. If a group is stuck on choosing a sixth area of the platform to discuss, you can suggest criminal justice, national defense, labor unions, gun rights, immigration, or some other issue.
 5. If necessary, remind students to be careful to avoid using their platform to target or use offensive language against any group based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or gender.

6. Groups may need additional time to research the different areas of the platform. You may want to assign this as part of a longer-term inquiry into the political process and public policy, postponing the share-back in part C below until all the groups are ready.
- C. Have a spokesperson from each group share their group's platform.
 - D. After the lesson, post the platforms in class for all to see.

IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. Debrief the activity by asking the whole class the following questions:
 - Was it difficult to reach an agreement on any part of your platform in your group (including the name)? Why or why not?
 - Did you ever disagree with the majority in your group (also called dissenting from the majority)? Why or why not?
 - Was any part of the platform included even though you dissented? How did that make you feel? Did you want to start a completely different political party? Why or why not? (This is how political parties develop and evolve.)
- B. Assign Writing & Discussion question 3 for homework to be answered in a well-developed paragraph.

Alternatively, question 3 can be assigned as a longer inquiry-based essay, for which this lesson is the basis.

Winner Take All: The Two-Party System

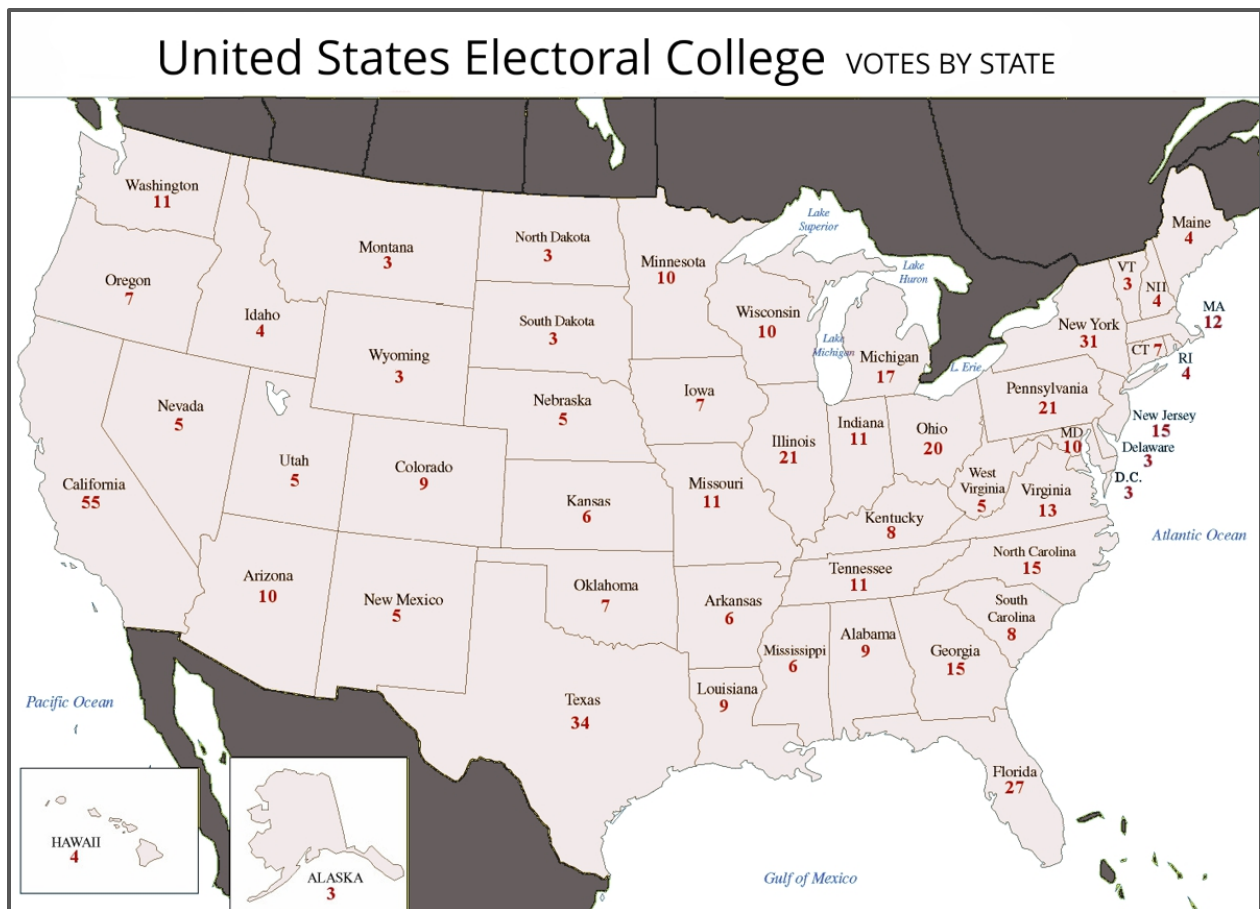
Political parties are key players in American politics. But the Constitution does not mention political parties. In fact, many of the founders, including George Washington, distrusted permanent political parties, fearing that they would become too powerful. The first two political factions to appear 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.



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Third parties have never received high percentages of votes in national elections, but they still serve important functions in the American political system. They give citizens who vote for them a forum for dissent. They also give those promoting reform a chance to air their ideas. For example, the major parties eventually adopted to a greater or lesser degree many of the ideas of the Progressives. On the other hand, many Democrats blame Ralph Nader, the Green Party presidential candidate in 2000, for the election of Republican George W. Bush in that year. The Democratic candidate Al Gore lost the Florida election by only a few hundred votes, leading to a recount settled by the U.S. Supreme Court in Bush's favor. Nader's Democratic critics say Nader took those few hundred votes from Gore and should not have run at all.

The two major political parties in the U.S. differ from those in many countries, especially where there are multi-party rather than two-party systems. In other countries parties may organize to promote a particular political or economic ideology such as socialism, communism, authoritarianism, or capitalism. Others may represent a given economic interest, such as labor or farmers.

In contrast, the United States' two major political parties try to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of the electorate. That is an effect of the winner-take-all principle. Each major party attracts diverse interest groups under one "big tent," though the parties have certain key differences. The Democratic Party tends to favor socially liberal policies, including a more regulated free-market economy, expanded federal civil rights, and some form of a welfare state (government-funded services for the disadvantaged). The Republican Party tends to favor traditional conservative policies, including a less regulated free-market economy, low taxes, and states' rights (each state should decide what government services it wants). The big-tent character of the parties, however, means that there are conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans, though these constituencies are minorities within their own parties.

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?

Creating a Party Platform

You have formed a third party with others who are like-minded. You are now a delegate to a national party convention for your third party.

Form a small group with three other delegates. Your group now forms a committee to come up with your party's platform. What will it be?

Your committee will need to decide on a policy for each of the six areas below. You will need to deliberate (discuss and reach a decision together) on each policy area. Each of your platform's "planks," or policy positions, should be written in a short sentence on Handout C. Choose a spokesperson from your committee to share the platform with the rest of the class.

You may base your group's decision on what you already know, but it will be helpful to research the questions and terms in parentheses below to get specific information related to the policy area.

The five policy areas are:

- **The Economy** (What kind of economy should the United States have? Should it have more or less government regulation of private businesses? Should the government raise taxes to provide jobs programs and public services? Or should the government cut taxes and cut programs and services for the population, allowing businesses and charities to provide goods and services instead?)
- **Foreign Policy** (What kind of foreign policy should the United States have? Should the government use its military to protect people's human rights in other countries? Or should the military stay within the United States? Should the government try to negotiate with other countries to help American businesses? Should the government provide aid to poor countries to help them develop?)
- **Elections** (Should elections be publicly funded? Should the federal government protect people's voting rights? Or should the states have that responsibility?)
- **Education** (Should federal and state governments invest more money in public schools? Or should the government spend less on schools and allow private businesses and nonprofit organizations to establish schools? Should the government raise taxes to provide free public college? Or should public colleges simply become more and more competitive with relatively high tuition fees?)
- **Environment** (What should the government do about pollution, climate change, and energy? Should the government invest more money in renewable energy sources, like solar power? Or should the government invest in tapping into fossil fuel reserves in the United States and elsewhere?)
- Your committee must decide on a sixth policy area of your committee's choice not listed above.

Our Platform

Our party's name is the _____ Party.

Our committee members are:

1. The Economy	
2. Foreign Policy	
3. Elections	
4. Education	
5. Environment	
6. _____	