

Guide to Partisanship

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most profound differences between the American democratic system and **parliamentary system** is the existence of two dominant **political parties**. The United States is one of the only countries in the world with just two parties. Perhaps more remarkably, those two parties—the Democratic and Republican parties—have been the dominant competitors since 1860. They have evolved as American society has changed, but the two-party system has stood strong. This guide is designed to address the following questions: How did the two-party system emerge? How do the parties function in American politics? What are the major ideological views dividing the parties? Lastly, why there are no major third parties?

HISTORY

Initially, the drafters of the U.S. Constitution were opposed to the idea of political parties. Writing in Federalist Paper No. 10, James Madison wrote, “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an ailment without which it instantly expires.” Madison was basing his judgment on 17th and 18th Century England’s experience with political divisions such as regional and religious interests that had torn the country apart in civil war. Coming out of an era of state domination under the **Articles of Confederation**, Madison feared local factions would turn American elections into competitions between small parties that would never agree and whose differences would be irresolvable. He feared that the new **republic**, which still lacked a genuine national identity, would be vulnerable to the attacks of self-interested factions.

Madison argued that aspects of the new constitutional system would eliminate factions. For example, he believed that by creating larger **electoral districts** for the House, groups of factions would come together to support a single candidate for office. Yet, while Madison and his fellow Federalists envisioned democratic **legislative** elections, they did not imagine that candidates would run with the support of specific political parties, and they simply could not imagine a system with only two parties.

While the Democratic and Republican parties have existed since the earliest days of the United States, the political parties as they exist today didn’t develop until the Civil War era (1861-1865). Since 1860, the Democratic and Republican parties have remained the two dominant forces in American politics. Despite their dominance, they have changed dramatically, with alliances and interests shifting from one party to another. They have become forces in American politics in ways that Madison would never have envisioned. Yet in a way, Madison’s prediction held true because the two political parties have come to include many interests, including interests that disagree on a variety of

issues. Parties are not the small factions that Madison feared, but rather, are a combination of candidates, voters, and interests that represent broad **platforms** and perform a variety of different functions in American politics.

WHAT DO PARTIES DO?

The Democratic and Republican Parties fulfill several functions in American politics—they (or usually, their **members**) select candidates, provide a platform on which their nominees campaign, select the nominees for major offices, and provide support to candidates and office-holders.

Ideas and Platform

Citizens choose which party they support after examining their respective policies. More than any other aspect of American partisanship, **ideological differences** make political parties meaningful. When voters elect a Democrat, they can generally expect to be voting for a candidate who supports an active and **progressive** government with broader **civil liberties**. When voters support a Republican, they are likely voting for a candidate who supports a small government that plays an active role in preserving conservative views on cultural and social issues. Almost all Democrats are either **liberals** or **left-of-center**, and most Republicans are either **conservatives** or **right-of-center**. Party platforms, revised every four years at the parties' **national conventions**, are formally written statements of these principles. In writing these platforms, Democrats and Republicans address the most pressing issues of the next four years.

The chart below represents the political spectrum of the United States:

Democratic Party (usually left of center)		Republican Party (usually right of center)
Liberal (or left)	Moderate (or center)	Conservative (or right)

Nomination of Candidates

Most candidates for **federal office** run on a **party line**, whether as a Democrat, a Republican, or a member of a **third party**. It is essential for politicians to win the **nomination** of a political party. In order to appear on most state **ballots**, a politician must either be affiliated with a party or clear a variety of administrative hurdles. While the process by which the parties select their nominees varies depending on the office and the state, the most popular selection process is the **primary**. Voters who are members of each party elect the nominee during a primary process. For a House seat, this election is usually among party members who reside in the district, and for a Senate seat, this election is usually limited to state residents who are party members. The Presidential nomination process involves a complex series of primaries that each state administers on its own.

Division of Power

Once in office, politicians continue to divide themselves along party lines. In the legislature, members of each political party in each chamber form a **caucus**. The caucus that has a majority of members holds a great amount of power. All committee chairs and the majority leader are affiliated with that party, and they have considerable power over the business of Congress. While the power of party caucuses has varied historically, **partisanship** has in recent years played a *very* large role in Congress. Congress usually enacts an agenda consistent with the platform of its majority party.

Presidents also maintain their partisan affiliation in office as they often surround themselves with party loyalists within their circle of advisers that work in the **West Wing**. Furthermore, the President nominates a considerable number of political **appointees** who serve on his *cabinet* that are generally of the same party. Presidents, like Congress, pursue an agenda that is usually in line with the platform of their party.

With institutions that are so greatly influenced by partisanship, government policy and legislation vary dramatically between when the President and Congress are of the same party and when they are not. It is much easier for the President to accomplish his agenda when his fellow partisans control Congress, and far more legislation is **signed into law** by presidents who are of the same party. When the President is of one party and the other controls Congress, then it is far more difficult for either side to get its agenda passed. Either the two sides must compromise, or they get caught in a stalemate. President Bill Clinton, the Democratic president who served in the 1990s, had a Republican Congress for six of his eight years in office. At times, Clinton and Congress compromised, as they did on the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill. Often, however, Clinton and Congress were at odds. In 1995, Clinton and Congress failed to accept each other's budget proposals, which prohibited the government from functioning effectively. President Barack Obama enjoyed working with members of his party who controlled Congress during his first two years in office, however the results of the 2010 elections put Republicans in control of Congress and President Obama is now working to avoid problems similar to those experienced by President Clinton.

Political Parties as Organizations

Political parties are not only comprised of voters and candidates, they also have official governing structures called National Committees. The Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee elect their own chairs and administer party affairs, such as the primaries. Party leaders can also raise money, **register voters**, and strategize on behalf of its candidates. In addition, they strive to hold their parties' many candidates and elected officials together under a unified message, and serve as a resource center for candidates.

The chairs of the party have served a variety of functions. Often their role depends on whether the President is of the chairman's party. The chairman of a party in control of the White House strongly supports the President's agenda and is often close to the President. The White House is limited in its political activities; as a government institution, it cannot campaign or raise **campaign money**. Thus, the party chairman handles the President's activities in leading the party.

The chairman of the party in opposition plays a different role. While he also must fundraise and strategize, he also serves as one of the chief spokespersons in opposition to the President. In the United States, there is no official opposition leader, as there is in many parliamentary systems. While the opposition party's leadership in Congress may play as much or perhaps an even greater role in leading the opposition against the President, the party chair also accepts this responsibility.

SOURCES OF DIVISION

Both political parties function in a similar manner. They are both collections of candidates and citizens, united by a platform, and led by national chairs. Yet the ideologies of the two parties set Democrats and Republicans apart. Each party has different ideas, represents different groups of voters, and gains support from different **special interests**.

The Democratic and Republican Parties have very different outlooks on public policy. Democrats favor an active, progressive government; Republicans support limited government intervention. Democrats take civil libertarian positions on most social issues, while Republicans take more conservative positions on these matters. While the two parties do not divide as neatly on matters of foreign policy, Democrats tend to support **multilateralism** and are often reluctant to support war, while Republicans are often more **hawkish** and willing to take unilateral action. These basic philosophies can be seen in the parties' platforms. Because Democrats support a more active government, they support expanding access to programs such as **Medicaid** and **food stamps**. Republicans, who favor smaller government, support broad tax cuts. Because Democrats support broad definitions of civil liberties, they oppose **racial profiling**. Republicans, who take more conservative positions on social questions, support measures such as the PATRIOT Act. Debates over foreign policy are usually less pronounced along party lines. While Republicans initially supported the work in Iraq (2002-present), Democrats were divided. Yet almost all Democrats supported the U.S. intervention in Kosovo (1999), while Republicans were divided.

Because the political parties take different positions on issues, they appeal to different voters. Because their policies are designed to equalize opportunity, poorer Americans tend to favor Democrats. Republicans, who see high taxes on the wealthy as a punishment for hard work and as harmful for the economy, tend to receive votes from more wealthy Americans. Minorities, who are attracted to Democratic positions on civil rights, tend to vote Democratic; most Republican voters are ethnically white (of European descent). Since many Democrats favor broad civil liberties, they gain support from **social liberals** and **secular** voters. The emphasis of Republicans on **traditional values** finds favor with religious conservatives.

Special Interests

Special interest groups complicate the two-party system. In American politics, special interests are organized around a cause, such as abortion rights for women or lower taxes. Others advocate for ethnic groups that have an interest in political affairs, such as Hispanic Americans or Muslim-Americans. Most prominent causes have at least one

group representing their interests. The Sierra Club advocates for a cleaner environment. The National Council of La Raza **lobbies** Congress and the White House on behalf of Hispanic Americans. These organizations gain **clout** in a variety of ways, such as raising money that can be contributed to campaigns, mobilizing popular support for their cause, and providing a base of knowledge and resources for members of Congress.

These organizations are independent – by law, they cannot be affiliated with one party or another. Even so, most interest groups tend to support one political party or another, especially groups that advocate for a particular cause (though ethnic interest groups often remain neutral in elections). Labor unions, **environmental advocacy** groups, minority rights groups, abortion rights organizations, and trial lawyers usually support Democrats. **Gun rights** groups, conservative Christian organizations, small business interests, and anti-tax groups usually support Republicans. Political parties rely upon these supportive organizations for campaign money, organizational help, and policy expertise. **Labor unions** are pivotal to any Democratic turnout effort. Republicans rely on campaign funds raised from the business community. Once in office, Democrats and Republicans must pay attention to and coordinate their agendas with those of these special interests. While political parties remain the institutions to which almost all politicians belong, if office holders ignore special interest organizations' agendas, it is to their political peril.

Special interests do much to weaken the power of political parties. First and foremost, the interests seek to force both Democrats and Republicans to follow the positions advocated by the group. Abortion rights activists may harden Democrats' positions on access to abortions; gun rights interests may force Republicans to take non-centrist positions on gun control. Even if these groups are natural parts of the parties' **constituencies**, they still drive the parties to take more uncompromising positions than members would otherwise take. Additionally, the conflicts among interest groups weaken the consistency of the parties' agenda. For example, labor unions and environmentalists may both support Democrats, but they take differing positions on **fuel economy** – labor unions oppose government restrictions on automakers because they fear that higher costs to manufacturers would cause jobs to be lost, but environmentalists support such regulations because they conserve energy. Christian conservatives and members of the business community may both support Republicans, but they may disagree on whether to tax Internet pornography. Some Christian conservatives would like to see the government use such a tax to discourage the use of pornography, while fiscal conservatives may prefer seeing Internet commerce unregulated. Many times it is impossible for the parties to please all of its interest groups. As a result, the parties may go back and forth on an issue and not address it at all, or they may side with one group or another and thereby lose vital resources and support.

No Third Party?

Since the 1860 election, the Democratic and Republican parties have nominated a candidate for the presidency, and in each election, one of those candidates has won. Independent candidates run in every election, but few of them have come close to succeeding. Some of these candidates have made a significant impact in a variety of ways. Third party candidates may bring attention to an issue that the other two parties would have ignored. In 1992, Ross Perot focused on **campaign finance reform**, an issue

that neither his Democratic nor his Republican opponent had emphasized in their campaigns. This would become an issue that Congress would address within the next decade. Independent candidates may also draw voters who would have voted for a major party candidate, thus tilting the election one way or another. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt, a former Republican, ran as an independent candidate. His move divided the Republican vote, a key factor in Democrat Woodrow Wilson's victory. Because a third party candidate may attract voters who would not have voted for a Democrat or a Republican, many third party candidates have played spoiler. In several elections, third party candidates have made an impact in one or both of these ways, yet they have never surpassed the advantage that Democrats and Republicans have had.

SOURCES OF PARTY POWER

Having fended off several challenges from third parties over the past century, the Democratic and Republican parties continue to dominate American politics. There are many reasons why. America is one of the largest and most diverse countries in the world. It is almost impossible to imagine all of the special interests in the United States forming their own small parties and being effective. The idea of regional parties may have been a fear for the Founding Fathers in the early days of the Republic, when many still identified more with their state than with the new country. Yet today, it would be impossible for one state or one region to dominate politics – Americans identify more with their country than with their particular states. Voters from different regions and interest groups thus coalesce around two broader parties, and by voting for them, they hope to see their issues resolved.

There are also ideological reasons for the persistence of the two-party system. In most countries, citizens derive their national identity from their birth. To be Chinese, for example, is to have been born in China, and to share certain cultural characteristics with other Chinese people. The United States is a country of immigrants and their descendents, and it is too heterogeneous a society for citizens to all be of a certain cultural mode. Rather, Americans are united politically by their support of ideas such as democracy and liberty. Thus, most Americans' ideological differences are not as dramatic as those of citizens in other countries. Socialism and fascism were never widely popular ideologies in the U.S. The Democratic and Republican parties may have their differences, but they both are supportive of the Constitution and its principles, even if they have different interpretations of them. Americans have never widely supported an alternative to this consensus among their major parties.

Finally, there are many institutions that have cemented the two party system. In order to appear on the ballot in many states, a party's nominee must get above a certain threshold of votes, thus cutting-out third parties that cannot reach such a threshold. In order to participate in presidential debates, a candidate must be polling above a percentage of the vote as determined by the presidential debate commission. It is highly difficult for third party candidates to reach this threshold against major candidates. Because Democrats and Republicans have such established records of victory, donors feel confident that their donations will make an impact, whereas a new third party does not hold that guarantee—the most successful independent candidate of the modern era,

Ross Perot, financed his own campaign. Special interests often support incumbents, since they wish to help get their agendas enacted; because almost all incumbents are Democrats or Republicans, they benefit from special interest support.

APPENDIX A: PARTY LEADERS

Title	Democrat	Republican	Duties
President	Barack Obama		Commander-in-chief and chief executive. The President is viewed as the “leader” of the party of which he/she is a part.
Senate Leader	Harry Reid (Minority)	Mitch McConnell (Majority)	Leads the Senate business and their caucuses. Party leaders are expected to impose discipline and enact their party agenda. The majority party has a significant advantage, but due to rules that allow any Senator to filibuster , the majority still retains a significant influence.
House Leader	Nancy Pelosi (Minority Leader)	John Boehner (Speaker of the House)	Leads the House business and their caucuses. Party leaders are expected to impose discipline and to enact their party agenda. The majority party has a great advantage as almost all business in the House is conducted by majority rule.
Chairman of the National Committee	Tim Kaine	Reince Priebus	The official head of the party. If the chairman is from the President’s party, he acts as one of the White House’s leading surrogates, while the chairman of the opposition to the President. Chairmen organize, fundraise, and strategize for the party and its candidates.
Prominent Interest Groups	People for the American Way, The Sierra Club, the AFL-CIO, the ACLU, and the National Abortion Rights Action League	The Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, The Chamber of Commerce, National Right to Life, The Club for Growth	These are among the most prominent special interest groups that are both essential and irksome to political parties. These groups raise money, organize, and advocate for the party’s candidates. In return for their support,

			parties must take positions they may not be as inclined to take.
Supportive Demographics	Liberals, African-Americans, secular voters, single women, union members, environmentalists, Voters with post-graduate degrees	Conservatives, White Americans, religious voters, married women, wealthy voters, business owners	These are among the most reliable voting groups for each side of the spectrum. Parts of either party's platform compel each of these groups to support one side or the other.
Most Important Modern Presidents	Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama	Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush	These are the most famous presidents to have been members of the Democratic and Republican parties. Each of these presidents made a significant impact on his party and its agenda.

APPENDIX B: LIBERALS, CONSERVATIVES, LIBERTARIANS, AND POPULISTS

Members of Congress who are **fiscal conservatives** generally support lower taxes and less generous programs to help fund poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and other social programs. Fiscal conservatives note that increased taxes and regulation make it harder for business, causing lower profits and fewer jobs. In general, fiscal conservatives support free trade with other countries. Most Republicans would describe themselves as fiscal conservatives, as would some moderate Democrats.

In contrast with fiscal conservatives, **fiscal liberals** support increased funding and government assistance with poverty alleviation, health care, education, and similar social programs. Most Democrats would describe themselves as fiscal liberals, arguing that the government should take an active role in alleviating social problems.

Members of Congress who associate with conservative Christians often describe themselves as **social conservatives**. Social conservatives are marked by their opposition to abortion, rights for homosexuals, and their disapproval of the separation of religion and government. In general, social conservatives associate with the Republican Party, though the 2006 midterm elections sent several Democrats to Congress who opposed abortion rights. Rural regions and the South frequently elect social conservatives.

Most Democrats would describe themselves as **social liberals**, as would many moderate Republicans, especially those from the New England region. Social liberals support progressive stances on social issues like abortion, and support the separation of church and state.

	Fiscal Conservatives	Fiscal Liberals
Social Conservatives	Conservatives. Traditionally align with the Republican Party.	Many Democrats from rural areas and the South oppose free trade and support conservative social policies. Populists do not fully align themselves with either traditional Republican or Democratic Platforms.
Social Liberals	Libertarians— Libertarian political theory argues that most government intervention is both a violation of individual liberty and ineffective policy. Few members of Congress would describe themselves as libertarians, though many New England and Western Republicans and moderate Democrats would describe themselves as fiscal conservatives and they say that they generally oppose policies through which the government intervenes in matters of society at large.	Liberals. Traditionally align with the Democratic Party.

APPENDIX C: CONTENTIOUS POLITICAL ISSUES

	Democrats	Republicans
Social Security	Favor maintaining the program in its current form.	Favor partial privatization of the program.
Iraq War	Some have supported immediate withdrawal from the war while others do not.	Some support the President's plan to increase troop levels and few support a definitive timetable for troop withdrawal.
Taxes	Generally support higher taxes to fund increased spending on social programs.	Generally support lower taxes.
Environment	More likely to side with environmentalists over business.	More likely to side with business over environmentalists.
Healthcare	Generally favors increased government assistance in funding healthcare.	Generally oppose increasing government aid for health costs.
Education	Oppose funding private schools; believe that increased funding for public schools will improve the education system.	Favor measures such as school <i>vouchers</i> that provide choice in education for students in failing schools.
Trade	Some in the party support free trade, but other worry about economic and environmental consequences.	Generally support free trade, but a minority oppose due to job losses to foreigners.
The Future of the United Nations	Support U.S. participation in multilateral organizations like the U.N.	Favor a lesser role for multilateral organizations and are more likely to support unilateral action.
Abortion	Generally support abortion rights	Generally oppose abortion rights

Glossary

Parliamentary Systems— *a system in which the head of the government (Prime Minister) is a member of, and is selected by the legislature (Parliament).*

Political Parties—*organizations that attempt to gain political power and share common views on political and social issues.*

Articles of Confederation—*the document that outlined the first government of the U.S. after independence. It provided for a weak national government and was therefore discarded after only a few years.*

Republic—*a system of government in which citizens elect people to represent them in government.*

Electoral district— *each representative is elected by a group of people who live in the same city or group of cities.*

Legislative— *the part of the government that makes laws.*

Platforms—*the policy ideas of a political party.*

Members—*people who are part of a political party.*

Ideological differences—*disagreements over fundamental beliefs about the role of government.*

Progressive— *supporting social reform or change.*

Civil Liberties— *citizens' freedom from governmental restrictions.*

Liberals or Left-of-Center—*those who support progressive social policies, civil liberties, a multilateral foreign policy, and governmental regulation of the economy.*

Conservative or Right-of-Center— *those who support traditional social policies, limited government intervention in the economy, and assertive foreign policy.*

National Convention— *a meeting every four years in which the parties determine their platform and select a presidential candidate.*

Federal office— *an elected position in the national government.*

Party Line— *used to describe candidates who simply follow the party's position on most issues.*

Third Party— *a small party, neither Democratic nor Republican.*

Nomination— *formal approval of a party.*

Ballots— *the forms on which voters pick which candidates they want to vote for.*

Primary— *an initial vote in which members of each party choose which presidential candidate their party will nominate for the general election.*

Caucus— *a group of legislators with similar interests.*

Partisanship— *division and organization based on party lines.*

West Wing— *the part of the White House where the President's office is; used to refer to the President's administration and political advisors.*

Appointees— *people who are selected by the President to fill a position.*

Signed— *legislation is literally signed by Presidents to denote formal approval.*

Register Voters— *before a citizen can vote in an election, he needs to officially confirm that he is a citizen.*

Campaign money— *donations to a candidate for office to help with his or her campaign.*

Special interests— *groups that support one specific policy goal.*

Multilateralism— *working with other countries.*

Hawkish— *more willing to use military force.*

Medicaid— *a government program that gives the poor health insurance.*

Food stamps— *governmental aid in buying food for the poor.*

Racial Profiling— *when a group of people is subjected to greater police scrutiny simply because of their ethnic background and observed racial trends of offenders.*

Social liberals— *people who support social change and reform.*

Secular— *non-religious.*

Traditional values— *focusing on the family, religion, and community bonds.*

Lobbies— *advocates a certain policy.*

Clout— *political influence.*

Environmental advocacy— *groups that support regulations to protect the environment.*

Gun rights— *the idea that each citizen has a constitutional right to own a gun.*

Labor unions— *groups of workers who form an organization to get higher wages and increased benefits.*

Constituencies— *people who vote for a party or a Representative.*

Fuel economy— *the number of miles a car can travel on the energy from one gallon of gasoline; this is regulated by the federal government.*

Campaign finance reform— *changes in election law aimed at reducing the influence of money in politics.*

Commander-in-chief— *the President's role as commander of the military.*

Filibuster— *a procedure in the Senate in which a small number of senators can stall debate if they disapprove of a bill.*

Fiscal conservatives— *those who oppose large government expenditures on social programs.*

Fiscal liberals— *those who believe the government should spend money on social and welfare programs.*

Social conservatives— *those who support traditional values regarding the family, religion, and society.*

Social liberals— *progressives; those who support social reform.*