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**5a. Political Parties**

  
During the 1860s, Thomas Nast — a cartoonist for the magazine *Harper's Weekly* — developed the idea of using the donkey and the elephant to represent the Democrats and Republicans, respectively. The above cartoon — titled "Stranger Things Have Happened" — dates from 1879.

From the beginning, American political parties have had a tarnished reputation. In his **1796 FAREWELL ADDRESS** to the nation,**GEORGE WASHINGTON** warned against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party" as inciting American citizens "with ill-founded jealousies."

Today many Americans take pride in their status as "**INDEPENDENT VOTERS**," partly because they see parties as lacking vision for the country. Since many Americans have become disenchanted by partisan politics, they avoid identification as a "loyal Democrat" or a "staunch Republican." These negative attitudes toward parties are rooted in the roles that they play in American politics.

**Roles of Political Parties**

* **Running candidates for political office.** Parties select candidates for many elected positions in American politics. With so many officials to choose, most voters would be overwhelmed by the decisions they would have to make if candidates did not wear party "labels." Parties present policy alternatives for voters. Some voters even choose a straight ticket, or candidates from the same party for all positions in that election.

  
Thomas Jefferson opposed the views of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams regarding centralized government and states' rights; and in doing so helped to build the foundation of the modern Democratic Party.

* **Checking the other party.** A party that does not hold the majority in Congress often keeps the party in power from taking complete control. Party leaders can publicly criticize actions of a President who was elected by the opposite party. The criticism of "**PARTISANSHIP**" comes from this party role because many Americans think that the "checking" becomes petty and self-serving.
* **Informing the public.**Parties take stands on issues and criticize the points of view of the other parties. Their well-publicized discussions help to inform citizens about important issues and present alternative ways of solving societal problems.
* **Organizing the government.**Congress and the state legislatures are organized according to party affiliations. **LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVES** usually support their party's position when considering potential laws and policies, and most votes fall roughly along party lines. Virtually all candidates run for public office with party labels that define their behavior after they win.

**Why a Two-Party System?**

  
The Green Party encourages its members to work in grassroots efforts on issues of ecology and social equality. In both 1996 and 2000, consumer advocate Ralph Nader was the Green Party nominee for President.

Most other democratic nations have multi-party systems. Even though third parties have popped up regularly throughout American history, they have either died, or their ideas have been absorbed by a major party. Three good reasons for the American two-party system include the following:

  
Alexander Hamilton contributed to laying the framework of the modern Republican Party. His support for the ratification of the U.S. Constitution led to the formation of the Federalist Party, which fizzled out by 1824.

* **Consensus of Values.**It is easy to complain about petty bickering between Democrats and Republicans. What we sometimes forget is that Americans share a broad consensus, or agreement, of many basic political values. Both parties believe in liberty, equality, and individualism. Neither advocates that the Constitution be discarded. Both parties accept the election process and concede defeat to the winners. In many countries with multi-party systems, the range of beliefs is greater, and disagreements run deeper. For example, in modern day Russia, one party advocates a return to communism, some offer modified **SOCIALISM** and/or capitalism, and one promotes **ULTRA-NATIONALISM**.
* **Historical Influence.**The nation began with two political parties — the Federalists and the **DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICANS**. During early American history politicians tended to take sides, starting with the debate over the Constitution, and continuing with the disagreements between two of George Washington's cabinet members — Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. The tendency has persisted throughout American history.

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**Third Parties**

Should third-party candidates be allowed to participate in presidential debates?

 Yes

 No

 No opinion



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* **The Winner-Take-All System.**The single most important reason for a **TWO-PARTY SYSTEM** is the**WINNER-TAKE-ALL** electoral system. In contrast to systems with proportional representation, the winner in American elections is the one who receives the largest number of votes. The winner does not need to have more than 50 percent, but only one vote more than his or her opponents. If a third party receives 15% of the vote for every contested Senate seat, that party wins zero seats in the United States Senate. Consequently, one of the two major parties almost always wins a**PLURALITY**, and third parties are completely shut out of national offices.

Even though political parties are often regarded as "necessary evils," they still play an important role in American government and politics today. The two broad-based major political parties offer alternatives to voters and help connect citizens to their government.

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On the Web

[**Democratic National Committee**](http://www.democrats.org/)  
Visit the official page of the Democratic National Committee for up to the minute information on Democratic candidates and other goings on. Visit the "Newsroom" for the latest press releases from the Democratic Party, and take a gander at "GOP Watch" to keep an eye on what the Republican Party is up to.

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[**Republican National Committee**](http://www.rnc.org/)  
Visit the official page of the Republican National Committee for up to the minute information on Republican candidates and other goings on. Visit the "Newsroom" for the latest press releases from the Republican Party and watch "GOP-TV" for "exclusive webcast updates on the events that shape the Republican message."

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[**Green Party**](http://www.greenparty.org/)  
Following the success of the German Green Party in the early 1980s, a group of Americans came together in 1984 to introduce the Green Party to the United States. With a platform that includes an emphasis on social justice and equal opportunity, this third party continues to gain support. Get the history and key values of the Green Party USA from their official website.

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[**George Washington's Farewell Address**](http://www.ushistory.org/documents/farewelladdress.htm)  
Upon leaving office, George Washington penned a farewell address (which was never given aloud) that warned Americans to avoid "the baneful effects of the spirit of party" as inciting American citizens "with ill-founded jealousies."

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[**The Center for Voting and Democracy**](http://www.fairvote.org/)  
This page from the Center for Voting and Democracy is an excellent place to go for information and opinions on voting in both the United States and the rest of the world. Voting issues such as voter turnout and the role of third parties are discussed. You'll also want to visit the "Your State" section on the Center's efforts to ensure fair votes across America.

[**Proportional Representation Articles**](http://www.fairvote.org/pr/index.html)  
These articles will show you the differences between the American winner-take-all electoral system and the proportional representation system.

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[**Directory of U.S. Political Parties**](http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm)  
Woo-hoo, it's party time! This directory of U.S. political parties from Politics1.com is an extremely valuable resource that you'll consult often. Here you'll find a list of nearly 50 political parties in the United States — many of which are active and regularly offer a candidate for President — with a short synopsis of each. The best part is that there are links to the party home pages — explore them for more info.

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[***The Federalist***](http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa00.htm)  
Alexander Hamilton can be credited with being the leading thinker of the ideas that later resulted in the modern Republican Party. Perhaps his most articulate expression of these ideas was his contribution to a series of essays known as *The Federalist Papers*. Read Hamilton's thoughts — along with those of John Jay and James Madison — at this site that offers all 85 essays.

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[**Thomas Jefferson on Politics & Government**](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/)  
The wisdom of the great "Sage of Monticello" lives on at this University of Virginia website. Consisting of over 2,700 quotations from the writings of Thomas Jefferson, this site is the perfect place to sample the philosophy that laid the groundwork for the modern Democratic Party. Of special note is the searchability of this massive site — it will help you quickly track down just what you need.

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[**All This Talk About Anarchy**](http://www.metroactive.com/papers/sonoma/10.19.00/anarchy-0042.html)  
Political parties? Who needs 'em!? This is the belief of an anarchist — a person who advocates a system where power is centralized in the hands of no one. This intelligent overview of present anarchist activities that — as this author puts it — "flow like an underground river," comes to you from*Adbusters Magazine*.

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[**Libertarian Party**](http://www.lp.org/)  
Libertarians believe the answer to America's political problems is the same commitment to freedom that earned America its greatness: a free-market economy and the abundance and prosperity it brings; a dedication to civil liberties and personal freedom that marks this country above all others; and a foreign policy of non-intervention, peace, and free trade as prescribed by America's founders. -the Libertarian Party website. Visit the home of one of America's strongest third parties and get the skinny on their position on everything from censorship to trade laws. Don't miss their link to the world's smallest political quiz!

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