

Political Parties

Think for a moment about Democrats and Republicans. What good do political parties do? Each party often appears to focus on arguments with its opponent, and once Presidents, representatives, and senators are elected, they usually try to distance themselves from party politics. The general impression is that political parties are somehow a necessary evil. Some people are pleased that their influence has weakened in recent years, believing that if parties were abolished, the United States would be a better country.

A negative attitude toward parties is not new. The Constitution, not accidentally, does not mention political parties, largely because the Founders worried about their possible negative effects—divisiveness and pursuit of selfish interest. When James Madison spoke of the “evils of factions” in *The Federalist* No. 10, he almost certainly had political parties in mind. George Washington even stressed his opposition to political parties in his Farewell Address to the nation in 1796. Washington worried that “the baneful effects of the spirit of party” might distract American citizens “with ill-founded jealousies” and open “the door to foreign influence and corruption.”

However, no matter how much the Founders spoke against a political party, most of them eventually joined or helped to form one. For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a 1789 letter that if he could only “go to heaven” with a party, he “would not go there at all.” Yet he founded the Democratic-Republican party a few years later. This early ambivalence toward parties has profoundly affected their status in the country.

In this chapter . . .

Party Systems and Party Roles 61

America's Two-Party System 67

Parties in American History 68

Minor Parties 72



Party Systems and Party Roles

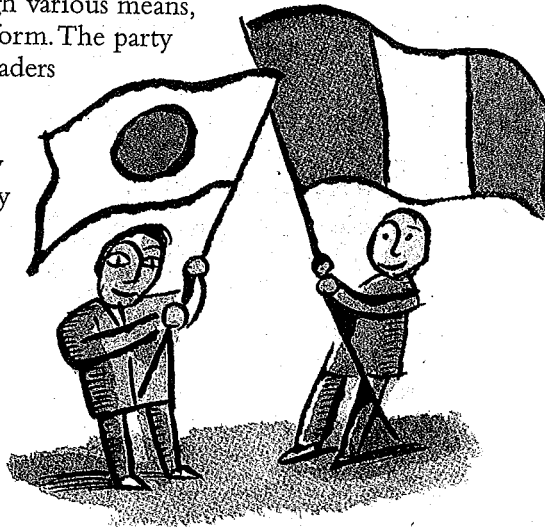
Political parties exist in some form in almost every country in the world today, forming a key connection between people and their governments. The functions of parties vary widely, but in general they almost always form because competing groups want their points of view to influence the government.

PARTY SYSTEMS

Any person or group of people may start a political party. Members of a party share similar beliefs, but not necessarily all the same beliefs. People may band together in political parties for practical reasons. In some countries, one party may form chiefly to oppose another party. In other countries, two large groups may compete for power. In others, many smaller groups may form, making it difficult for any one party to gain a majority. The end results are one-party, two-party, and multiparty systems.

One-Party Systems

In a **one-party system**, the party captures control of the government and, through various means, doesn't allow other parties to form. The party is the government. The party leaders make policy, and often political differences occur only within the party itself. Most one-party systems allow elections, but they are not competitive because only that party's candidates appear on the ballot.



definitions

political party—a group of people organized to influence government through winning elections and setting public policy.

one-party system—a political system in which only one party exists or routinely controls the government.



Headlines

MEXICO: A SYSTEM IN TRANSITION?

Mexico is neither a communist nor a religious state, but it is dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI), which was formed in 1929 as an arm of the government. All discussions about policy have taken place within the confines of the PRI. Opposition parties have formed but, until recently, had almost no say in the government.

Mexico appears to be a government in transition, however, because opposition to the party has grown. For example, opposition parties have recently captured several governorships, as well as the important position of mayor of Mexico City. Mexico's one-party system may become a two-party or multiparty system in the near future.

During the twentieth century, the Communist party took over the governments in a number of countries: first in Russia, and later in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam. During the communist regime in Russia (a member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR), which was toppled in 1991, no opposition parties were allowed, and the head of the party was also the chief of state. Today, however, Russia has numerous political parties, and the country is attempting to establish competitive elections for both the presidency and the legislature.

Two-Party Systems

The **two-party system** is a rarity, occurring in only about 15 countries in the world today. But the United States has had two major political parties—the Republicans and the Democrats—throughout most of its history. Even though minor parties do exist, many believe those two parties have the only reasonable chance to win national elections. Even on the state and local levels, nearly all elected officials belong to one party or the other. A recent exception was the 1998 election of Reform party candidate Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota. On the national level, one party is sometimes more powerful than the other, and the rival may be declared “dead,” but the balance of power between the parties always changes over time.

two-party system—a political system in which only two major parties compete for control of the government.

Multiparty Systems

Multiparty systems are far more common than two-party systems. Most European countries today (for example, Germany and Italy) have multiparty systems. They usually arise in countries with strong parliamentary systems. The legislature is the most important branch of government, and the head of government is the leader of one of the major parties in the legislature. Because the people only elect representatives to the legislature, and government leaders are party leaders, no separation of powers between legislative and executive branches exists.

Parliamentary systems that use a **proportional representation** method for elections tend to have multiple parties. Parties have a good chance of getting their representatives elected to parliament, because parties get the same percentage of representatives as they have votes in the population. For example, if a party receives 10 percent of the vote, and parliament has a total membership of 500, the party will get 50 members. This system encourages minor parties to form **coalitions**, or loose alliances, to create a majority vote so that legislation can be passed.

ROLES OF PARTIES

Political parties exist because they fill at least four important functions, especially in democratic countries with competitive elections.

1 Recruiting and Labeling

Imagine an election without political parties, an election with 75 candidates in which citizens could vote for anyone. How would voters choose wisely? People would have to study the beliefs and qualifications of them all before making an informed decision. Parties simplify the process by selecting candidates so that voters can make up their minds among just a few people. Candidates run for public office with a party label that serves as a seal of approval. Parties provide the labels in the minds of voters to help them identify a candidate's political views.

definitions

proportional representation—a system in which candidates are elected in proportion to the popular vote they received.

multiparty system—a political system in which many parties exist and compete for control of the government.

coalition—an alliance, often temporary, of people, parties, or nations to achieve a common goal.

2. Acting as Watchdogs

Parties that don't have control of the legislative or the executive bodies are the vocal critics of majority parties. Members of other parties usually hold a significant number of seats in government. They represent an opposing view and voice concerns over the policies and decisions of the party in power.

3. Getting Out Information

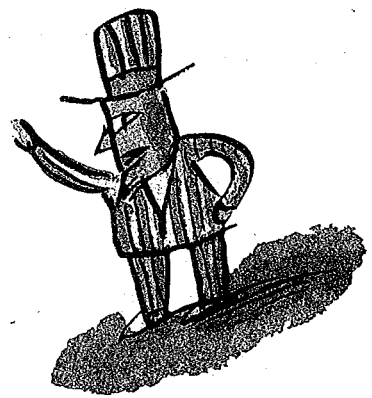
Parties go to considerable effort to publicize their points of view on various issues. Each party campaigns for its candidates, takes stands on issues, and criticizes the candidates and stands of the opposition parties. In the process, citizens learn and develop opinions about society's pressing problems.

4. Running the Government

Political parties play a key role in running the government. Congress and the state legislatures are organized according to party affiliations. Party leaders generally see that their members support the party's position when considering potential laws and policies. Most appointments to executive positions, both federal and state, are made along partisan, or party, lines.

INFLUENCE OF PARTIES IN THE UNITED STATES

How do the Republicans and Democrats really influence U.S. government and politics? What is the true nature of their power? We can begin to find the answers by looking at three areas of their influence: with voters, with party workers, and with leaders in government.



1 The Party and Voters

How do you join the Republican or Democratic party? How much does it cost, and how do you maintain your party membership? The answer to these questions is that you have to do almost nothing. In most European nations, people formally join a party, carry membership cards, pay dues, and vote regularly for party candidates. In the United States, all you have to do is choose to be a Republican or Democrat. You are free to identify yourself as such, or you can keep it a secret. No one will stop you from changing parties as frequently as you like.

Indeed, the ability to switch party loyalties is part of protecting individual liberties and rights. Today one of the clearest trends in politics is the tendency for people to see themselves as **independent**. They often vote for a President from one party and a senator or governor from another. Or, they may vote for one party's presidential candidate in one election, and four years later, vote for the other party's candidate. Each party does, however, have its share of loyal supporters and a core of party workers who work for candidates, contribute money, encourage others to vote, attend party meetings, and participate in local party organizations.

2 Party Organization

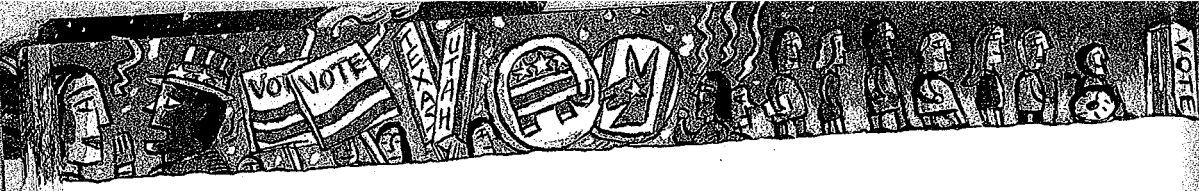
To understand party organization, we need to think about the concept of power. Many organizations, such as business corporations and even the government, give a great deal of power to the people at the top. For example, boards of directors run most corporations, communicating their wishes to their CEOs (Chief Executive Officers), who then give orders to vice presidents and managers. They, in turn, tell workers what to do.

In contrast to this top-down decision-making, political parties work from the bottom up. This is sometimes known as a **grassroots** organization. Even though each party has a national chairman and other leaders on top, those people have very little control over the people on lower levels. Instead, local and state party organizations do as they please. The national committee leaders must listen to those at the state and local levels in order to coordinate their efforts—such as getting their presidential candidate elected. The 50 state party organizations are each unique.

definitions

independent—a voter who does not belong to or consistently support one of the main political parties.

grassroots—people at the local level; average voters, not professional politicians.



A. LOCAL PARTIES

From the late nineteenth century until the 1930s, the local urban political party was the only influential party organization in America. Many cities were dominated by party machines, which were tightly knit local organizations with strong leaders who held firm control of party members in the city. Much of their power came from a **patronage** system, trading money, political jobs, or other favors from government for votes for the party's candidate.

The abuses of the party machine, which contributed greatly to the negative public image of the parties, were gradually lessened with stricter voter registration laws and civil service reforms. The reforms, however, cost the parties their source of strength. Without the machines or a developed national organization, parties in the twentieth century have struggled to keep their power in the political process.

B. NATIONAL PARTY ORGANIZATION

On the national level, parties historically have been fragmented and decentralized. Although both parties are much better financed and organized than they used to be, local and state party organizations are only loosely tied to the national party organizations. People generally feel the local parties represent their interests better.

On paper, the national Democratic and Republican parties look very much alike. Ultimate authority rests with the national convention and the representatives that meet every four years to nominate a presidential candidate. Between these conventions, the party is managed by a national committee. In Congress, each party has a committee that provides support and campaign funds to party candidates for congressional seats.

3 The Party and Government

Because many of the people who hold government offices—at any level—are party members, political parties play a key role in running and staffing the government. Congress and the state legislatures are organized and carry on their work on the basis of party membership. For example, in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the majority party leads the legislative process. It wields more control over which legislation is considered and passed than does the opposition. Congress is carefully organized according to a two-party system, a fact that makes it more difficult for a minor third party to influence government. Even though Presidents sometimes like to distance themselves from their party, they must pay attention to party politics if they want their programs to succeed.

definitions

patronage—the practice of rewarding political allies and supporters with jobs.

America's 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.

1 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 Anti-Federalists—people have grown used to the system. The longer it has persisted, the more unthinkable it has become to have it any other way.

2 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.


3 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

definitions

winner-take-all—an electoral system in which the person with the most votes wins; no majority is needed.

consensus—collective opinion, general agreement.



contests at the local level, the winner is the one who receives the largest number of votes. The winner needs only one vote more than his or her opponents. A party does not gain anything by finishing second, so minor parties rarely overcome the assumption that a vote for them is "wasted." For example, in 2000 Green party presidential candidate Ralph Nader captured less than 3% of the vote and fell short of his goal of 5%, the minimum necessary to receive matching government funds for 2004.

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 and embrace more voters. Parties without big groups of voters supporting them have little hope of winning and often have a hard time getting candidates on the ballot.

Parties in American History

Although America's political parties started with a clouded reputation and George Washington's stern disapproval, they gradually gained strength over the years. By the late nineteenth century, political parties dominated elections and government decision-making. In the twentieth century, their influence has declined, and voters are not as loyal to political parties as they once were.

Throughout American history, until the last 30 years or so, one party was dominant for long periods of time. This majority party won most elections, although it may have suffered from internal squabbles or run weak candidates and temporarily lost power. Each of five party eras ended with a critical election in which loyalties shifted, eroding support for the dominant party.

THE FIRST PARTY SYSTEM: 1796–1828

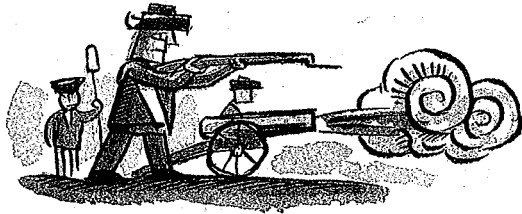
The origins of the two-party system lie in the conflicting views over the role of the national government. Opposing party views began over the battle on the ratification of the Constitution. Alexander Hamilton, co-author of *The Federalist* and first secretary of the treasury, was most concerned about the economic stability of the new country. He strongly believed that a national bank would solve many financial problems. His supporters formed the Federalist party, American's first political party. The Federalists were

definitions

single-member district—an electoral district in which only the one candidate with the most votes is elected to office.

short-lived, partly because of Hamilton's early and untimely death (he was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr), and otherwise because of the persistence of his opponent, Thomas Jefferson. The people who supported the Federalists generally believed in strong central government and the economic interests of northern businessmen, who generally benefited from a strong national bank.


The party that destroyed the Federalists was led by Virginians Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. First called the Anti-Federalists and later the Democratic-Republicans, their dominance was so complete that the Federalists didn't even bother to run a presidential candidate in 1820. The Democratic-Republicans supported states' rights and state banks and were first popular in rural areas, particularly in the South. They gained support by broadening their policies, stealing support from the Federalists and practicing for the first time the "broadening the umbrella" technique.



THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC ERA: 1828-1860

The critical election of 1828 marked the founding of the modern American political party by Andrew Jackson and his new coalition of westerners, southerners, new immigrants, and long-time citizens. Jackson was at first a Democratic-Republican, but once he became President, the name of the party was shortened to Democratic. The Democrats' primary goals were to broaden voting rights and political and economic opportunity for ordinary citizens and to eliminate privileges for the elite. Another democratic reform of the era was the establishment of the convention, or an assembly of representatives from around the country, to nominate the party's presidential candidate. The convention replaced the old system in which the party leaders did the choosing.





Although the Democrats dominated the era, an opposition party, the Whigs, emerged. The Whig party, led by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, never stated its purposes very well, except that its supporters were opposed to the Democrats. The Whigs won few elections on local, state, or national levels, although they understood the appeal of military heroes as presidential candidates. They managed to elect two war heroes to the presidency—William Henry Harrison in 1840 and Zachary Taylor in 1848. The Whigs' most serious internal problem—two distinct groups of supporters, one of northern industrialists and one of southern planters—eventually split the party.

THE REPUBLICAN ERA: 1860–1932

In the 1850s the issue of slavery dominated American politics. The Republicans arose in the 1850s as the anti-slavery party, and their candidate, Abraham Lincoln, became President in the critical election of 1860. His election sparked the secession of the southern states and the beginning of the Civil War. After the war, the Republicans controlled government and politics for more than 60 years. The South, however, remained Democratic and resentful of the Republicans who had opposed them during the war.

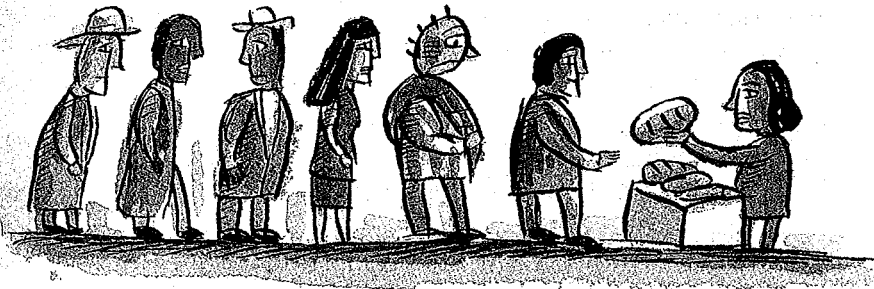
Once southern states returned to the Union by 1876, the Democratic party once again challenged the Republicans—Grover Cleveland was elected in 1884 and 1892. However, in the critical 1896 election, Democrat William Jennings Bryan lost to William McKinley, and the Republicans regained the presidency, exerting their control for another 36 years (except for Woodrow Wilson's victories in 1912 and 1916).

During this era the parties gained significant power, and many elected officials served as “puppets” for the party leaders. One of the most powerful party leaders was Mark Hanna, whose hand-picked candidates—among them President William McKinley—usually won the elections. Under party bosses like Hanna, political parties usually became associated with graft and corruption, stuffed ballot boxes, and bribery. In reaction to the corruption, a progressive movement began to try to take power away from the bosses. The reforms greatly influenced the succeeding eras.

THE SECOND DEMOCRATIC ERA: 1932–1968

The Great Depression caused the end of the Republican era and brought to power Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt. The critical election of 1932 formed the famous New Deal Coalition of eastern immigrants, southern and western farmers, African Americans, urban dwellers, labor union members, and intellectuals. These groups strongly supported the New Deal programs designed to help the country recover from the depression. Roosevelt was

elected to office four straight times. Even though the depression ended, his policies extended through the presidency of Lyndon Johnson during the 1960s. The Democrats maintained their programs and policies designed to help labor, the working classes, and minorities. Even though Republican war hero Dwight Eisenhower won the presidency in 1952 and 1956, the Democrats generally controlled Congress and dominated state and local elections.



THE ERA OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT: 1968–PRESENT

Beginning in the 1950s, the issue of civil rights for African Americans began to crack the New Deal coalition. Many southern whites, who had been loyal Democrats since the Civil War, did not approve of the Democratic party's pro-civil rights policies, and they began to defect to the Republican party in increasing numbers. A second issue—the Vietnam War—further split the coalition during the 1960s. The result has been a period without a single critical, realigning election, a period of divided government, in which one party controls the presidency and the other is the majority party in Congress. Between 1968 and 1992, the Democrats captured the presidency only once (Jimmy Carter in 1976), but they controlled both houses of Congress for most of the same period. Democrat Bill Clinton was elected in 1992, but the Republicans captured both houses of Congress two years later. Although Clinton was reelected in 1996, the Republicans retained control of Congress in both the 1996 and the 1998 elections, keeping the trend of divided government alive.

Since 1968, divided government has prevailed not only at the federal level, but at the state and local levels as well. Many state governors deal with legislatures dominated by the opposing party, and citizens tend to vote a **split ticket** on all levels of government.

definitions

split ticket—a vote for candidates of more than one party in the same election.

Minor 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) 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. **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.

economic protest party—a political party dominated by feelings of economic discontent.

splinter party—a political party that has split off from a major party because of a serious disagreement.

ideological party—a political party based on a particular set of beliefs or ideology.

single-issue party—a political party focused on one issue.

SELECTED MINOR PARTIES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

ELECTION YEAR	PARTY	PERCENT OF VOTE	ELECTORAL VOTES	CLAIM TO FAME
1832	Anti-Masonic	7.8	7	The first party to use a national convention to nominate its presidential candidate.
1860	Secessionist Democrats	18.1	72	One of two splinter parties in the realigning election of 1860 that caused the Republicans to win.
1892	Populists	8.5	22	Sponsored reforms that favored "the people," particularly farmers.
1912	Progressive (Bull Moose)	27.4	88	Divided the Republicans and caused the election of a Democratic President for the first time in more than 50 years.
1948	States' Rights (Dixiecrats)	2.4	39	Splintered the Democrats and blocked civil rights legislation for years.
1968	American Independent	13.5	46	The party of segregationist George Wallace that tried to broaden its appeal to all "forgotten" Americans.
1996	Reform	8.4	—	The party, led by billionaire Ross Perot (that grew out of Perot's 1992 campaign as an independent), which drew support from those dissatisfied with the two major parties.

THE INFLUENCE OF MINOR PARTIES

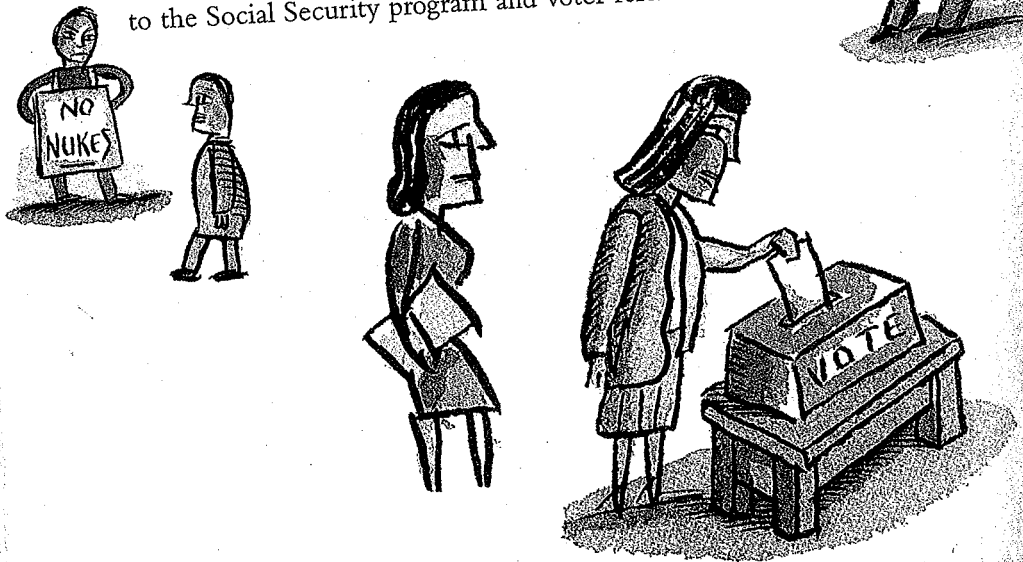
Besides attracting new groups of voters, minor parties have shaped American politics in two major ways:

1. 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 siphoned 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.

2. 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.



Political parties have played an important, though varying, role in American government and politics for the past 200 years. Sometimes, as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (through the domination of party bosses and political machines), parties have been extremely powerful. At other times, such as in the 1990s, political parties seem to be not only less well organized but less influential with both voters and candidates. Yet party candidates have persistently won elections, with very few nonparty candidates winning public office on any level of government. Furthermore, as controversial as it is, many believe the two-party system has worked well for the United States. Are political parties a necessary evil, or has the tarnish given them by George Washington and other Founders unfairly maligned them? Whatever your opinion, political parties are almost certainly here to stay.