

The Role of Political Parties

Standard 3.5: The Role of Political Parties

Describe the role of political parties in elections at the state and national levels. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T3.5]

FOCUS QUESTION: What Are the Roles and Impacts of Political Parties in American Politics?



President Lyndon B. Johnson Addressing Crowd at a Campaign Rally, September 1964
["LBJ on the campaign trail"](#) by Cecil W. Stoughton | Public Domain

Mention the term **political party** and many people think of today's two major parties and their animal symbols—the Democrats' donkey (which first appeared during Andrew Jackson's 1828 Presidential campaign) and the Republicans' elephant (first drawn by political cartoonist Thomas Nast in 1874).

For other people, political parties mean sharply different visions for how American society should be organized and they align themselves with the party that matches their viewpoint. The Gallup Poll reports that in 2019, 27% consider themselves Democrats; 26% Republicans; and 46% Independents or not aligned to any party (Gallup, 2019).

Political parties can be defined as **"a group of people who share the same ideas about how the government should be run and what it should do"** ([League of Women Voters California Education](#)

[Fund, 2013, para. 2\).](#)

Members of a political party work together to win elections and influence the making of public policy. Political parties are much more than promotional symbols or ideological home bases for policy-interested voters. Political parties determine the candidates for President, members of Congress, and many state and local positions. They establish the majority party/minority party organization of Congress. They raise enormous sums of money to support those running in state and local elections. They influence policy through political advocacy and public information campaigns.

What are different ways that political parties function within the nation's political system? The modules for this standard explore that question by examining the evolution of the political party system, the roles of third parties and radical political parties at different times in history, and the question of whether every voter should join a political party.

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: The Evolution of the Party System and the Causes and Consequences of Third Parties](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Radical Political Parties in United States Politics: Populists, Socialists, and Black Panthers](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should Voters Join a Political Party?](#)

1. INVESTIGATE: The Party System and the Causes and Consequences of Third Parties

Political parties have been part of the U.S. political system since the nation's founding, beginning with debates over the federal

Constitution of 1787 between the Federalists (led by Alexander Hamilton) and the Anti-Federalists (led by Thomas Jefferson). Party divisions and rivalries have continued ever since, despite George Washington's warning in his Farewell Address on September 19, 1796:

“It [party conflicts] serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity [hatred] of one part against another; foment[s] [provokes] occasionally riot and insurrection.”

Since just before the Civil War, American politics has been dominated by “two large-tent parties battling for primacy against each other, but often battling themselves” (Tomasky, 2020, p. 60). [Evolution of Political Parties in American Politics](#) offers an overview of the party system. This [Political Party Timeline](#) Prezi features a historical overview of political parties in American politics.

Political Parties Today

Political scientists Mathew Grossman and David H. Hopkins (2016) see **fundamental shifts happening to the two major political parties**. Traditionally, Republicans have been organized around broad symbolic principles whereas Democrats were a coalition of social groups with particular policy concerns. The 2020 Democratic primary process and the impeachment of Donald Trump show both parties being reshaped in ways that break with that asymmetry. Republicans are becoming increasingly organized around identity groups while Democrats are becoming increasingly ideological.

In their book *Polarized America*, three political scientists contend that since a mid-twentieth century period of ongoing compromise and

collaboration between Republicans and Democrats, the "parties have deserted the center of the dance for for the wings" (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 2). For these commentators, increased **political polarization** is directly connected to growing economic inequality. Those with economic resources and political power take whatever steps they can to maintain their position and status; those without have opposite resources. Compromise is harder to achieve; politics becomes more and more divisive; and "*Conservative* and *liberal* have become almost perfect synonyms for *Republican* and *Democrat*" (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 4).

Assessing the changes and polarization in political parties following the 2016 Presidential election, Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020) see the Republican Party as a mix of big-money corporate elites and socially conservative white working class voters that has party adopted policies of "plutocratic populism" including corporate tax cuts and government deregulation along with efforts to curb and eliminate health care and social safety net programs directed toward women and people of color. Ironically, the votes of people in rural, predominantly White, lower-income counties across the nation that have fewer doctors, less health care resources and higher rates of obesity and diabetes shifted to a Republican candidate whose policies would not respond to those health needs (Wasfy, Stewart & Bhamahani, 2017).

[The Republican Choice](#) by Clare Malone is a thoughtful review of the recent history of the Republican Party, its southern strategy to attract White voters, and the impact of the Trump Presidency.

Third Parties in American Politics

In addition to the Democrat and Republican parties, there have been a number of **short-term third parties** that have influenced public policy debates and the outcomes of national and state elections. Historically, third parties arise around a major issue of

interest that attracts support from voters. In the election of 1860, the Republican party candidate Abraham Lincoln who opposed expansion of slavery into new territories defeated candidates from the Democrat, Southern Democrat, and Constitutional Union parties. Following Lincoln's election, southern states seceded from the Union and the Civil War began.

The Progressive, or Bull Moose Party, led by former President Theodore Roosevelt, and the Socialist Party, led by Eugene V. Debs, were among the most impactful third parties in American history. In 1912, Roosevelt, running as the Bull Moose candidate, won six states and 27% of the popular vote; Debs received nearly one million votes in that same election. Other important third parties include the American Independent Party whose candidate segregationist George C. Wallace won 46 electoral votes and over 9 million popular votes in 1968. In 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan defeated Democrat Jimmy Carter, independent party candidate John B. Anderson received nearly 7% of the popular vote.

Many observers believe that the 2000 Green Party candidate Ralph Nader who won nearly 3% of the popular vote took enough votes away from Democrat Al Gore to enable Republican George W. Bush to win the Presidency. In 2016, when Donald Trump lost the popular vote but defeated Hillary Clinton in the electoral college, third party candidates received 6% of the national vote.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a Sketchnote**

- When Have Third Parties Impacted American Presidential Elections?
 - [Political Parties: Two is Company, Three's a Crowd](#), PBS Newshour
 - [Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process](#) from PBS Newshour provides an overview of third parties in American history.
 - [The Third Party Impact on American Politics](#), *UVA Today*, University of Virginia (August 3, 2016)

- **Analyze Primary Sources**

- Compare and contrast [American Political Party Platforms, 1840 to 2008](#) from the American Presidency Project (includes only parties that received electoral votes)

Online Resources for Political Parties

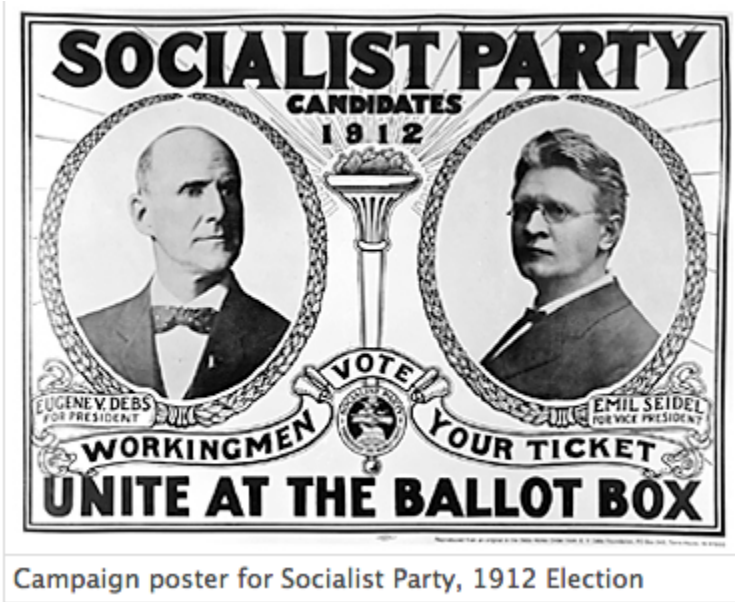
- ["What Unites Republicans May Be Changing. Same with Democrats,"](#) *FiveThirtyEight*, December 17, 2019
- [Politics and Public Policy](#), iCivics
- [Political Parties Learning Plan](#) that includes a rap song.

2. UNCOVER: Radical Political Parties in United States Politics: Populists, Socialists, and Black Panthers

The Populist Party and the Socialist Party

The period from the late 1890s through the first two decades of the

20th century saw the rise of radical political parties associated with unions and working people, notably the **Populist Party** and the **Socialist Party**. Both sought to represent workers in politics.



["Debs campaign"](#) | Public Domain

This period in United States History was known as the **Gilded Age** when expansive growth in industry led to vast inequalities of wealth and power. A class of industrial entrepreneurs alternatively called “captains of industry” or “robber barons” dominated American politics. Many different industries were dominated by a few corporations and people; for example:

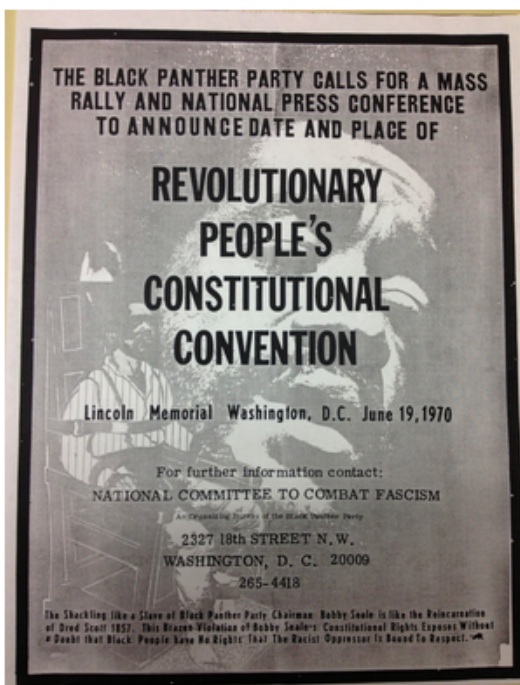
- Oil -----> Standard Oil, [John D. Rockefeller](#)
- Steel -----> Carnegie Steel, [Andrew Carnegie](#)
- Railroads ----> Central Pacific Railroad, [Cornelius Vanderbilt](#)
- Automobiles--> Ford Motor Company, [Henry Ford](#)

In 1860, there were 400 millionaires in the United States; by 1892, there were 4,047. John D. Rockefeller became the nation's first billionaire in 1916. In 2018, there were 11.8 million Americans with a net worth of at least \$1 million (Spectrum Group, 2019).

Radical political parties offered a sharp critique of the economic and social class structure. These parties supported changes in laws as well as efforts by labor unions to create change in conditions for workers through strikes and political action ([Labor Unions and Radical Political Parties in the Industrial Era](#)).

The Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a militant political organization, was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale ([Overview of the Black Panther Party](#)). Political activism by women was also an important party of the Black Panther Party ([People's Historians Online: Women in the Black Panther Party](#), Zinn Education Project).



Flyer for a Black Panther Party Rally, 1970
["Black Panther DC Rally Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention 1970"](#) | Public Domain

The Panthers set forth a [10-Point Platform](#) for political, economic, and social change that “contained basic demands such as self-determination, decent housing, full employment, education that included African-American history, and an end to police brutality” ([Weise, 2016, para. 20](#)). The Black Panthers are frequently called extremists, but the historical reality is quite different ([27 Important Facts Everyone Should Know About the Black Panthers](#)). Learn more at a [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page about the [Accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement](#).

Interest in the origin of the name "Black Panther" followed from the 2018 movie [Black Panther](#) about King T'Challa of the fictional land of

Wakanda. In the movie, Blacks have power, money, technology and high culture and a superhero to lead them. But the name goes back much further. During World War II, the [majority-Black 761st Tank Battalion](#) engaged in combat for 183 days in a row in France and Germany throughout 1944 and 1945, its members earning 7 silver stars, 246 purple hearts, and one Congressional Medal of Honor.

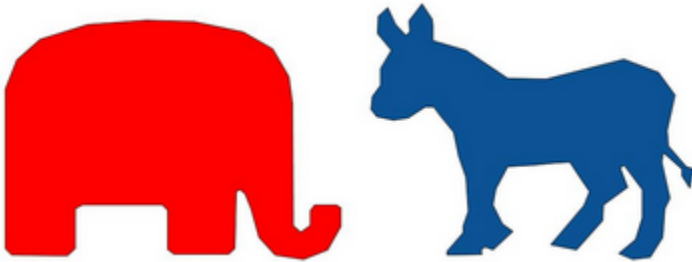
Some have speculated that the Black Panther Party was connected to the appearance of the [Black Panther comic book character](#). Both appeared in 1966 and both sought to express the pride and power of Black people. Black Panther party founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale said they adopted the black panther symbol from Alabama's Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Black Panther comic creators Jack Kirby and Stan Lee have said they were not specifically influenced by the Black Panther Party. While the [Black Panther Party dissolved in 1982](#), the Black Panther comic has continued, explicitly addressing themes of Black empowerment and opposition to White racism, notably when the [Christopher Priest](#), the comic's first African American cartoonist, drew the strip in the 1990s. [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) currently writes the Black Panther strip for Marvel Comics.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Design a Poster for a New 21st Century Radical Political Party**
 - Propose a new radical political party whose mission is to address a current political, social or economic issue: for example a Black Lives Matter Party, End Plastic Waste Party, or Clean Water for All Party.
 - What would be the party's symbol?
 - What would be its slogan?
 - What would be its platform for change?

3. ENGAGE: Should Voters Join a Political Party?

When registering to vote, each person has a choice whether or not to join a political party.



["Donkey and elephant - democrat blue and republican red - polygon rough"](#)
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Those who do not select a party designation are considered to be “independent” or “unenrolled,” joining 39% of all Americans who are not members of a political party. Importantly, registered voters can vote in any general election whether or not they belong to a political party. In general elections at the national, state, and local level, everyone receives the same ballot and can choose from among the same number of candidates.

Does it make sense for every voter to join a political party? Party membership enables you to vote in that party’s primary election where its candidates for general elections are chosen. Four parties hold primaries in Massachusetts: Democrat, Republican, Green-Rainbow, and Libertarian ([Political Parties in Massachusetts](#)).

A voter’s political party choices are different in other states. In California, for example, there are seven qualified political parties: Americans Elect, American Independent, Democratic, Green,

Libertarian, Peace and Freedom, and Republican. But to be able to vote in a primary is not the only reason to belong or not belong to a political party.

Suggested Learning Activities

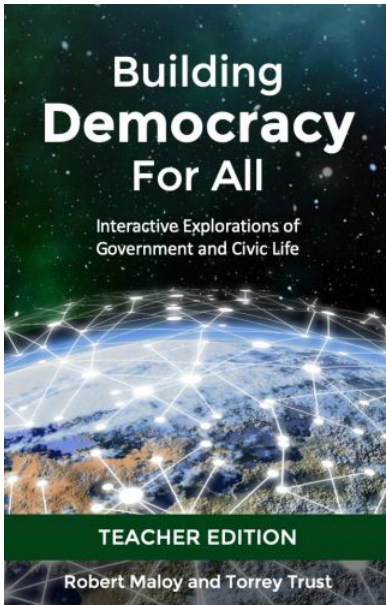
- **State Your View:**
 - Do you plan to join a political party when registering to vote? Why or Why Not?
- **Learn Online:**
 - Take a [2020 Political Quiz](#) from Isidewith.com to establish which political party aligns to your views on important issues.
- **Argue Both Sides**
 - What are the advantages and drawbacks to joining a political party?
 - [How to Choose a Political Party](#). League of Women Voters California Education Fund (May 1, 2019)
 - [Six Reasons Progressive Activists Should Join a Political Party](#), Open Democracy (November 19, 2013)

Online Resources for Political Party Membership

- [Sick of Political Parties, Unaffiliated Voters are Changing Politics](#), *NPR* (February 28, 2016)
- [Massachusetts Directory of Political Parties and Designations](#) from the Secretary of the Commonwealth's office provides a listing of parties in present-day Massachusetts, as well as links to the websites of the Democratic Party, Republican Party, Green Party, and others.

Standard 3.5 Conclusion

Political parties are central to the nation’s system of elections at all levels of government. Parties nominate candidates and organize voters. Two major parties, the Democrat and Republican, dominate national politics today. **INVESTIGATE** explored how the system of political parties evolved in U.S. history, including how third parties influence elections and policies. **UNCOVER** examined the emergence of radical political parties in different time periods - Populists, Socialists, and the Black Panthers. **ENGAGE** asked whether every voter should join a political party?



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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