

## 3.5

# 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

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](#)).

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). You can learn more at "[How Did the US Political Parties Get Their Mascots](#)" from Wisconsin Public Radio (November 8, 2016).

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.

The Gallup Poll reports that in 2019, 27% of voters consider themselves Democrats; 26% Republicans; and 46% Independents or not aligned to any party (Gallup, 2019). In the U.S. today, the two major political parties present sharply different visions for how American society should be organized.

In their book, *The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Election and the Challenge of American Democracy* by political scientists Lynn Vavreck, Chris Tausanovitch, and John Sides (Princeton University Press, 2022) argues that the attitudes of voters have become so "calcified" that people vote for their party or against the other party no matter what the issues or who is running. [Here is an interview with the authors.](#)

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 Party System, Political Parties Today, and the 2020 Census](#)
  - o SPECIAL TOPIC BOX: Gerrymandering and Electoral Redistricting
2. [UNCOVER: Radical Political Parties in United States Politics: Populists, Socialists, and Black Panthers](#)
3. [ENGAGE: Should Voters Join a Political Party?](#)
  - o MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Website Design for New Political Parties

# 1. INVESTIGATE: The Party System, Political Parties Today, and the 2020 Census

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

[Ballotpedia](#) maintains an ongoing list of recognized political parties in the United States.



[Working Families Party](#) | Public Domain

A recognized political party is an organization that has followed a state's rules for being on an election ballot. The Democratic and Republican Parties appeared on the ballot in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, accounting for 102 of the 225 recognized parties. The Libertarian Party appeared in 35 states; the Green Party in 22 states; and the Constitution Party in 15 states.

For Massachusetts:

[Directory of Political Parties and Designations for Massachusetts.](#)

[Ballot Access Requirements for Political Parties in Massachusetts](#)

- Political Party = at least 3% of the vote in last state election
- Political Designation = signatures of at least 50 registered voters

The *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page, [The Conservative Movement in American Politics](#), charts the rise of conservative politics since 1980 and includes material on the Tea Party. Heather Cox Richardson's book, *To Make Men Free* (2014) offers a comprehensive history of the Republican Party since its emergence in the years before the Civil War.

Take a Quiz: [If America Had Six Parties, Which Would You Belong To?](#)

## The Democrats and the Republicans

Contemporary American politics is dominated by the Democratic and Republican political parties. We often refer to states or Congressional election districts as **red** (Republican) or **blue** (Democrat) as a way to characterize how people tend to vote in those places.

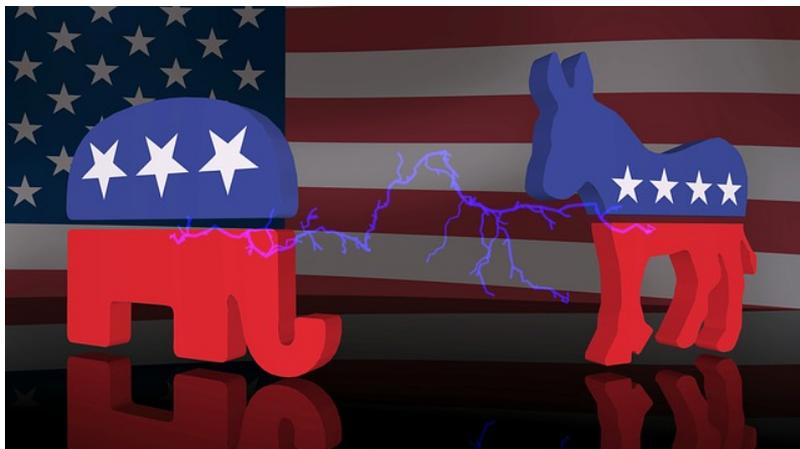


Image by chayka1270 from Pixabay

Researchers use election data to measure how red or blue a state or district is politically, what is known as **partisan lean**. A partisan lean is "the average margin difference between how a state or district votes and how the country votes overall" ([FiveThirtyEight](#), May 27, 2021, para. 3). A score of R+5 or D+5, for example, means that state or district is 5 percentage points more Republican (R) or Democratic (D) than the country as a whole. Following the 2020 elections, the District of Columbia followed by Massachusetts and Hawaii have the largest partisan lean toward the Democrats; Wyoming, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Idaho have the greatest lean toward Republicans. New Hampshire is the only state that does not lean to either party.

You can explore partisan lean further at the [FiveThirtyEight Partisan Lean Metric](#) or the [2021 Cook Political Report Partisan Voter Index](#).

## Fundamental Shifts Among the Parties

Political scientists Matthew Grossmann and David H. Hopkins (2016) see **fundamental shifts happening to both major parties**. Historically, Republicans have been organized around broad symbolic principles whereas Democrats were a coalition of social groups with particular policy concerns. The 2020 election and the impeachments of Donald Trump show both parties being reshaped in ways that are breaking apart those frameworks.

Writing in the [The New York Review of Books 2020 Election issue](#), historian David W. Blight (2020) defines the parties thusly:

*Democrats represent a coalition held together loosely by an ideology of inclusion, a commitment to active government, faith in humanistic and scientific expertise, and an abhorrence of what they perceive as the monstrous presidency of Donald J. Trump. Republicans, with notable defections, are a party held together by a commitment to tax reduction, corporate power, anti-abortion, white nationalism, and the sheer will for power. (para. 2)*

Assessing the changes in U.S. 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 who have partly 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, in the 2016 Presidential election, the votes of people in rural, predominantly white, lower-income counties across the nation which 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).

Historian Heather Cox Richardson in her ongoing series of Letters from an American has been tracking the profound disagreements between the Republicans and the Democrats over the role of government in American society. Since the 1980s, a wing of the Republican Party has sought to return to the business-dominated policies of the early 20th century before the Great Depression and the subsequent expansion of the federal government during