

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).

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).

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

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

According to [Ballotpedia](#), there were 225 recognized political parties in the United States during the 2020 election.



[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.

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.

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.

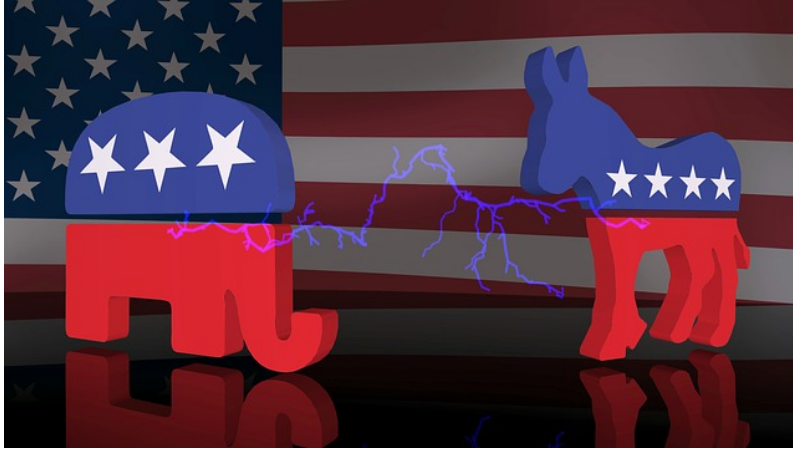


Image by chayka1270 from Pixabay

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 Mathew Grossman 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 the New Deal. In that Republican vision, business groups control the government, scaling down or eliminating entirely social and environmental regulations, infrastructure spending, social safety nets, and federal efforts to ensure equality for all. Democrats reject those policies, supporting an activist federal government to support efforts against racial injustice, climate change, and poverty while seeking to expand social services and educational opportunities for low-income and diverse Americans.

During the 2016 and 2020 elections, the business wing of Republican Party supported and enabled the Trump wing of the party, but following the 2020 election and the subsequent attack on the Capitol by an organized group of insurrectionists, the Trump wing has risen to dominance. [The Republican Choice](#) by Clare Malone (2020) offers a thoughtful review of the recent history of the Republican Party, its southern strategy to attract white voters, and the impacts of the Trump Presidency.

Political Parties and Political Polarization

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 the wings" (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 2). The result is a growing gap between the parties and their members known as **political polarization**.

In political polarization, members of political parties move away from each other toward ideological extremes, making it harder and harder to reach compromise on public policy issues. This results in legislative gridlock, where Congress and even some state legislatures are unable to reach agreement on how to respond to social and economic problems. To learn more, go to [Explainer: Political Polarization in the United States](#) from Facing History and Ourselves (2020).

In the view of some researchers, 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 increasingly more divisive; and "*conservative* and *liberal* have become almost perfect synonyms for *Republican* and *Democrat*" (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2016, p. 4).

Interestingly, the messages that political parties offer voters can serve to deepen political polarization. Most Americans tend to agree on society's problems and how to solve them. For example, they want to prohibit workplace discrimination, create racial equity, fight climate change; and wear masks to curb the pandemic. But, as two political scientists found, when politicians frame

these issues as a matter of partisan politics, then people's positions polarize into separate camps (Gadarian & Albertson, 2014).

Gerrymandering and Electoral Redistricting

Gerrymandering is the practice of redrawing legislative district lines in order to help one political party win elections and maintain political control. It is a fundamentally undemocratic process since its intent is to institutionalize political power and make it harder for voters to create change.

The practice goes back to the early days of the republic when Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry (who was also the nation's 5th Vice-President) had the state legislature create voting districts to favor the candidates of the incumbent Democratic-Republican party over the Federalists in the 1812 election. Political parties have been seeking to dilute the voting power of the other party by redrawing districts to ensure that their party holds a majority ever since.

By law, under the Constitution, state legislatures must divide their state into voting districts every ten years, following the results of the U.S. Census. The goal is for voting districts to reflect population changes while maintaining the principle of “**one person, one vote.**”

Under one person, one vote, each person's vote should count essentially the same as the next person. Since those who are elected represent "people, not trees" (that is, actual people who live in a place rather than the geographic size of a region), each state voting district is supposed to have an equal share of the state's population. But election mapmakers can manipulate the shape of those districts to favor one party over another.

Our country's **winner-take-all** election system where 51% of the voters get 100% of the representation encourages gerrymandering ([Gerrymandering](#), Fair Vote). Politicians can readjust the size of voting districts, often along racial and ethnic lines, so that one party is essentially ensured of winning most elections. [Racial Gerrymandering in North Carolina](#) offers a case study on how politicians in that state exploited redistricting to influence the outcome of elections.

[Redistricting the Nation](#) offers another view of how political districts were redrawn in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Arizona along with ideas for how citizens might go about creating their own districts to more fairly represent their interests.

To draw your own Fair Election Districts, visit [GeoCivics](#) from the University of Colorado Colorado Springs.



Watch on YouTube <https://edtechbooks.org/-GVUP>

The 2020 Census and Congressional Redistricting

The release of 2020 Census Data in August 2021 showed dramatic changes in the U.S. society. Within a total population growing at the slowest rate in nearly a century and people identifying as Hispanic, Asian, or more than one race increased while the total number of white people fell for the first time. Population diversity rose in nearly every county in the nation ([The Morning Newsletter: A Changing Country](#), New York Times, August 13, 2021).

All of the 10 largest cities increased their population from 2010; Phoenix was the fastest growing city. New York City grew by 8% as well. The fastest growing metropolitan area was The Villages - the nation's largest retirement community located outside of Orlando, Florida.

Population changes have huge political implications since states must redraw their Congressional districts every 10 years to determine the 435 seats in the House of Representatives. The latest Census data shows declines, in some cases larger than expected, in rural and white population groups and areas that traditionally vote for Republicans and increases in cities and suburbs that vote largely for Democrats. At the same time, Republican-controlled legislatures will decide 187 new district maps while Democrats decide 84.

You can go to [Topic 3.3 INVESTIGATE](#) to learn more about the House of Representatives.

You can follow [what redistricting looks like in every state](#) with an interactive from the FiveThirtyEight blog.

History of Third Parties in American Politics

In addition to the Democratic and Republican parties, **short-term third parties** have influenced

public policy debates as well as 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 total 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)
- **Interpret Map and Geography Data**
 - Research a major metropolitan in your state at the site [Where Democrats and Republicans Live in Your City](#) (*FiveThirtyEight*, May 20, 2019).
 - What do you think explained the political party patterns revealed in the data?
 - Research the 2020 Election and see if voting patterns have changed or remained the same.

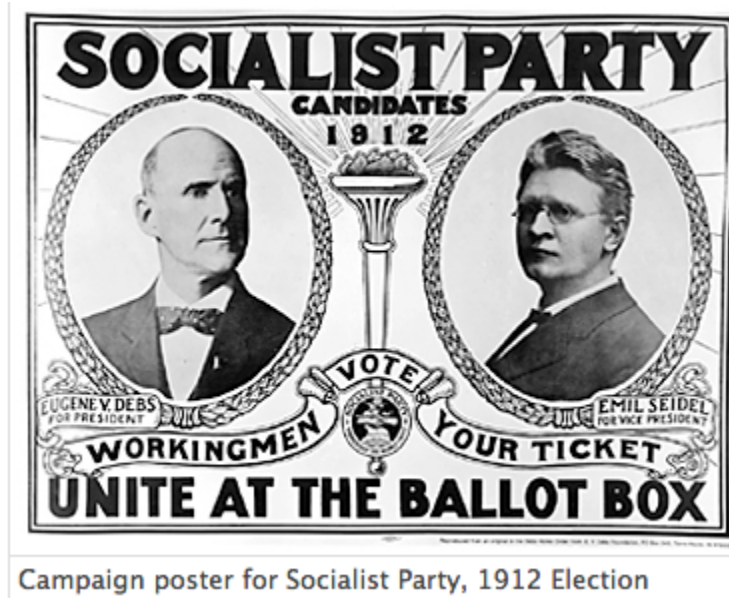
Online Resources for Political Parties

- ["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:

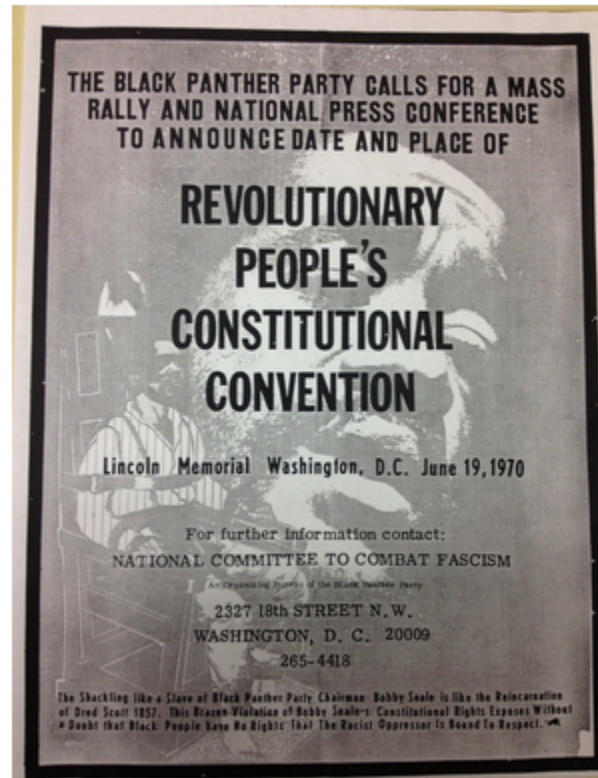
- Oil ----->Standard Oil, [John D. Rockefeller](#)
- Steel -----> Carnegie Steel, [Andrew Carnegie](#)
- Railroads ----> Central Pacific Railroad, [Cornelius Vanderbilt](#)
- Automobiles-->Ford Motor Company, [Henry Ford](#)

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](#)). Watch [Bobby Seale Speech: The BPP Ten Point Program/Platform](#).

The Black Panthers are frequently labelled extremists, but the historical reality is quite different ([27 Important Facts Everyone Should Know About the Black Panthers](#)). Learn more the Black Panthers at a [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page about the [Accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement](#).

Public 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 name Black Panthers referred to the **majority-Black 761st Tank Battalion** that 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.

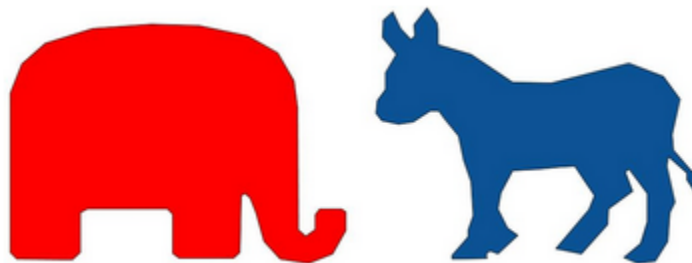
Some have speculated that the Black Panther Party was connected to the appearance of the [Black Panther comic book character](#). Both appeared in 1966 and both sought to express the pride and power of Black people. Black Panther party founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale said they adopted the black 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? For background, read the [Progressive Party Platform of 1912](#)
- **Analyze a Primary Source**
 - **READ:** [A Proposed Platform of the Progressive Party of 1950](#), a previous to 2020 unpublished piece by W.E.B. DuBois in which he asks for more rights for working people, socialized medicine, and public housing.
 - What connections and parallels do you see between what Du Bois was writing about then and people are seeking and encountering today?

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"](#)
by Sagearbor is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

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.

Four parties hold primaries in Massachusetts: Democrat, Republican, Green-Rainbow, and Libertarian ([Political Parties in Massachusetts](#)). The state also has five other political parties: America First, Communist, Constitution, Labor and Veterans.

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. Link to [National Political Parties](#) from Votesmart.org for state-by-state listing of political parties.

Does it make sense for every voter to join a political party? Party membership enables one to vote in that party's primary election where its candidates for general elections are chosen. In states that hold what are called "closed" or "semi-closed" primaries, however, individuals cannot participate unless registered as a member of a political party ([Congressional and Presidential Primaries: Open, Closed, Semi-Closed, and Others](#)). Still to be able to vote in a primary is not the only reason to belong or not belong to a political party. Many people valued being associated with other individuals who share similar views on political, social and economic matters.

Young People and Political Party Membership

What about young people and political party membership? The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University found that although young people tend to be excited about political change that enthusiasm does not carry over to joining a political party. Rather than seek out membership, young people express disinterest and distrust toward political parties and the larger electoral process ([Young People's Ambivalent Relationship with Political Parties](#), *CIRCLE*, October 24, 2018).

Media Literacy Connections: Designing a Website for a New Political Party

In theory, multiple political parties give voters multiple choices during elections. In 2020, there were 21 Presidential candidates on the ballot in Vermont and Colorado and in all other states voters could choose between 3 and 13 different candidates.

In reality, though, candidates from parties other than the Democratic or Republican parties have only a small chance of winning a state-wide election (Independent Senators [Bernie Sanders](#) of Vermont and [Angus King](#) of Maine are exceptions to that statement). In Minnesota, for example, the Legal Marijuana Now Party candidate for U.S. Senate won 185,064 votes (5.77% of all votes cast) while the winner, Democrat Tina Smith, received 1,566,522 votes (48.81% of total votes).

Still, this does not mean that supporting a third party candidate means "wasting" one's vote on someone who cannot win an election. Multiple political parties raise public awareness of issues facing society which can lead to social, economic, and political change.

In politics today, a new political party needs to utilize social media to communicate with voters. A party website can serve as a hub or home base for information, showcasing the party's logo, highlighting its policies, introducing its candidates, and raising funds to support itself and its efforts. In this activity, you get to design a website for a new political party.

- [Activity: Design a Website for a new Political Party](#)

Suggested Learning Activities

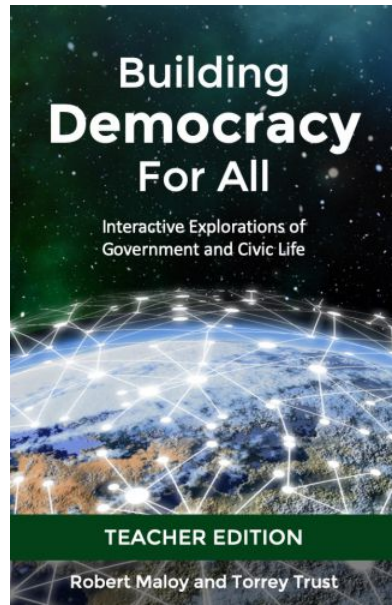
- **State Your View:**
 - Do you plan to join a political party when registering to vote? Why or Why Not?
- **Learn Online:**
 - Take a [2020 Political Quiz](#) from Isidewith.com to establish which political party aligns to your views on important issues.
- **Argue for Joining and Not Joining a Political Party**
 - What do you see as 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*. Equity Press.
<https://equitypress.org/democracy>