A **political party** is a group of people with broad common interests who organize to win elections, control government, and shape government policies.

**Political Party Systems**

Countries all across the world have political parties. Political parties play different roles in different countries depending on the kind of party system a country has.

**No-Party Systems**

Some countries have no political parties at all. Most of these countries are not democracies, so citizens have limited influence on government. For example, political parties are banned in the Middle East nation of Qatar. The nation is led by a monarch, who gets his position by birth and appoints most government officials.

**Single-Party (One-Party) Systems**

A few countries that are not democracies have a single-party system with one major political party. The party is the government in a one-party system. One-party systems are usually found in nations with authoritarian governments. Such parties often come to power through force. China is a communist state with one political party, called the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Technically there are a few other parties, but they are all controlled by the CCP. The Chinese government does not allow citizens to form parties that oppose the CCP. One-party systems also exist in non-Communist countries. In Iran, for example, religious leaders run the government. A government dominated by religion is called a **theocracy**.

**Multi-Party Systems**

Most countries have multi-party systems where three or more political parties share power. In many of these countries, lawmakers are elected by **proportional representation** where each party gets a number of seats that corresponds to the amount of support the party gets from voters. Almost all European governments work this way. In other countries, such as Japan and Australia, voters elect individual candidates to each seat. However the voting works, multi-party systems always have at least three parties with members elected to government office. There may be one or two parties with more support and influence, but many parties are represented. Often no party has a clear majority, so parties must work together in government. Several parties often combine to obtain a majority and form a **coalition government**. Coalitions often break down when disputes arise. As a result, multiparty systems are politically unstable.

**Two-Party Systems**

A few countries with multi-party systems have developed into a two-party system with two major political parties that hold most of the power. Other parties exist, and they sometimes gain enough support to win a few seats in the nation’s legislature, but they never get enough representation to have any national influence.

This is the least common system around the world — and it’s the one we have in the United States. Here, the vast majority of Americans identify with either the Democratic or Republican parties. The U.S. has many “third parties” that often put candidates on the ballot. Some are occasionally elected, but none of these parties has gained a foothold in national government.
Two-Party System

The United States has almost always had a two-party system. Most Americans support one of the two major parties.

There are four main reasons for a two-party system.

1. **History.** The fight over ratification of the Constitution led to our first two parties. Federalists wanted the new Constitution. Anti-federalists did not.

2. **Tradition.** Our nation started with two parties. People accept the system because it is the way it has always been.

3. **Elections.** Our electoral system helps keep the two-party system in place. Nearly all elections are in single-member districts where voters choose only one winner. Most Americans want their vote to “count.” So, they tend to ignore a minor party candidate who is not likely to win.

4. **Consensus.** The United States is a pluralistic society – one with many different groups. Yet Americans share a broad consensus on most important matters.

Organization of the Parties

Political parties may be large or small, national or local. Large political parties generally have millions of members and supporters. In democratic election campaigns, parties compete freely for votes. Such competition is one of the hallmarks of democracy.

**Party Membership:**

Americans can join political parties and become members. The major U.S. political parties are highly organized. Democrats and Republicans are organized into 50 state parties and thousands of local parties that operate independently of the national party. In addition, there are many third parties that people can join. However, Americans are not required to join a political party - they may remain independent and not support any particular party. More and more Americans are choosing to vote by candidate rather than party so more and more Americans are declaring themselves to be independents.

**Party Participation:**

People can vote for that party's candidates, they can give money to the party and its candidates, and they can volunteer in the party offices doing things like sending information to citizens, calling people encouraging them to vote, etc. To succeed, a political party must have many, many volunteers. Parties have volunteers working in offices at the county, state and national level. Between elections, these offices carry out the day-to-day functions of the party.
Party Organization:

1. **National** - each party has people who work at the national level to see that their candidates get elected to national offices.

The national party organization is made up of the national convention and the national committee. The *national convention* is a gathering of party members and local and state party officials. It meets every four years to nominate the party’s presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Between conventions the party’s *national committee* runs the party. The committee is a large group made up mostly of representatives from the 50 state party organizations. The national committee elects a party national chairperson.

2. **State** – In each state the most important part of a party is the *state central committee*. This usually is composed of representatives from the party’s county organization. The state central committee chooses the party state chairperson. They work to ensure that their party’s candidates get elected at the state and national level of government.

3. **Local** – the local county level group runs the party’s county committee. The county committee chooses a chairperson to handle the county party’s daily affairs.
   a. **Congressional District** – states are divided into congressional districts for electing members to the US House of Representatives. Some states also use these districts to help determine electoral votes for President.
   b. **Ward** - several party precincts then join together to form a ward or county-level group. They work to get their party’s candidates elected to county-level and state-level offices.
   c. **Precinct** - this is the basic local unit - a voting district made up of a few hundred voters. All voters cast their ballots at the same polling place. Each precinct has a precinct captain who organizes all of the volunteers.

Functions of Parties

Political parties are the only American institutions that do the following important tasks:

1. **Recruiting Candidates**
   
   Political parties are often election, rather than issue, oriented. This helps the Republicans and Democrats maintain their status as major parties.

2. **Educating the Public**

   Each party publishes its position on important issues, such as the economy and social issues. Some people do not know much about the issues or a candidate’s background. Political parties simplify elections by helping such people decide how to vote. Voters know generally how a candidate stands on an issue just because he or she is a Democrat or a Republican.
3. **Operating the Government**
Members of Congress and the state legislatures support their party’s positions when considering legislation. The party also links a president or governor and the legislature. He or she works through party leaders in the legislature to promote programs.

4. **Dispensing Patronage**
Political parties also give out *patronage* to their members. This is doing favors to reward party loyalty. The favors often include jobs, contracts, and appointments to government jobs.

5. **“Watchdog” - The Loyal Opposition**
The party out of power in the legislative or executive branch assumes the role of “watchdog” over government. It observes the party in power, criticizes it, and offers solutions to political problems. This makes the party in power more aware of the will of the people.

6. **Reduction of Conflict**
A party encourages groups to compromise and work together. An outcome of this process is that parties encourage government to use policies with mass appeal. Also, thanks to parties, the transfer of power takes place peacefully when one party loses control of the government.

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### Minor Parties

A **third party** is any party other than one of the two major parties. Third parties are also called **minor parties** because they rarely win major elections. Third parties believe that neither major party is meeting certain needs. Minor parties generally fall into the following categories:

1. **Single-Issue Party:** focuses on one major social, economic, or moral issue. For example, in the 1840s the Liberty Party formed to take stronger stands against slavery.

2. **Ideological Party:** focuses on overall change in society. Ideological parties such as the Socialist Labor Party and the Communist Party USA demand government ownership of factories, transportation, resources, farmland, and other means of production and distribution. The Libertarian Party calls for reduced government and increased personal freedom.

3. **Splinter Party:** The splinter party splits away from one of the major parties due to a major disagreement. For example, in 1912 former president Theodore Roosevelt led a group out of the Republican Party to form the Progressive, or Bull Moose, Party.

### The Roles of Minor Parties:

1. **Sources of New Political Ideas**
Many of the new ideas in politics originate from minor parties. As their following grows, the major parties will take notice and start incorporating those ideas into their platforms to win back support.

2. **Indicators of Change**
The growth of minor parties indicate change that a major party needs to make ideological changes in order to maintain their base of supporters.

3. **Spoilers in keeping a Major Party from Winning an Election**
Minor parties have influenced the outcome of national elections. The Bull Moose Party drew so many Republicans away from President William Howard Taft in 1912 that Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson was elected. Some believe Ross Perot’s Reform Party candidacy may have helped Bill Clinton win in 1992.
The leaders of the American Revolution did not like the idea of parties and political battles between parties. Upon his retirement from public life in 1796, George Washington warned Americans against "faction" (parties). James Madison thought parties were probably necessary, although he did not entirely approve of them. Alexander Hamilton thought that faction was a vice to be guarded against at all times. Thomas Jefferson declared in 1789, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." Nevertheless, the men who held these views founded the first two great American political parties.

**Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians: 1790-1828**

Hamilton and other leaders who wanted a strong central government banded together to put over their policies. In 1787 they began calling themselves the **Federalists**. This was the first United States political party. In 1796, anti-Federalists gathered around Jefferson. The **Anti-Federalist** party was re-named as the **Republican Party** reflecting the ideals of Republicanism supporting states’ rights and a strict interpretation of the Constitution. The Federalists tried to discredit the Republican Party by naming them **Democratic-Republicans** to convey the extreme and radical actions taken in the name of democracy during the French Revolution. However, the Jeffersonian Republicans admired the strong anti-monarchist sentiments of the French and their belief of the principle of government by the people - so the name "Democratic-Republican" stuck. Northern businessmen, bankers, and merchants supported the Federalists. They believed in a strong national (or federal) government. The Democratic-Republican Party drew its followers from planters, small farmers, and artisans. These people wanted government to leave them alone as much as possible. They wanted to limit the federal government’s power and leave the most power in the hands of state and local governments.

By 1820, American political life was being influenced by sharp differences of opinion between sections of the country. The slave-holding planters of the South, the frontier farmers of the West, and the manufacturing and banking industries based in the North each wanted the government to follow a different course of action.

**Jackson Democrats: 1828-1860**

In 1828, Andrew Jackson, a Democratic-Republican from Tennessee, was elected president. His party had great support in the South and West. Jackson changed the party’s name to **Democrats**. People who had once been Federalists joined with anti-Jackson Democrats to form the **National Republican** or **Whig Party**. Between 1836 and 1852, Whigs gave Democrats strong opposition.

**Lincoln Republicans: 1860-1932**

Antislavery forces and Free Soil forces (a group founded in Buffalo, New York) formed the **National Union Party** based the beliefs of national interest above sectional interests and states' rights. It was organized in 1854 in opposition to the extension of slavery and eventually emerged as the **Republican Party**. The Republicans ran their first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont, in 1856. By 1860, strong antislavery feeling helped Republicans capture the presidency for Abraham Lincoln.

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The now-famous **Democratic donkey** was first associated with Democrat Andrew Jackson’s 1828 presidential campaign. His opponents called him a jackass (a donkey), and Jackson decided to use the image of the strong-willed animal on his campaign posters. Later, cartoonist Thomas Nast used the Democratic donkey in newspaper cartoons and made the symbol famous.

Nast invented another famous symbol—the **Republican elephant**. After the Republicans lost the White House to the Democrats in 1877, Nast drew a cartoon of an elephant walking into a trap set by a donkey. He chose the elephant to represent the Republicans because elephants are intelligent but easily controlled.
The defeat of the Southern Confederacy weakened the Democrats, who were associated in voters' minds with the Southern cause. For many years the Republicans were the major party. They favored business interests and high tariffs (taxes on imports). The Democrats supported free trade. They attracted farmers and the immigrants who poured into the country between the Civil War and the turn of the century.

**Roosevelt Democrats 1932-1980**

The Great Depression weakened the Republicans and returned power to the Democrats. The presidential election of 1932 brought in Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal programs. Roosevelt Democrats thought that the federal government must actively help people who had been hurt by the Depression. Under the New Deal the government passed economic relief measures, social security, laws helping unions, and other bills. Republicans thought the government was taking too much power and moving the country toward a welfare state.

**Reagan Republicans 1980-2004**

By the 1980s the American attitudes changed. They wanted a less involved government, so they elected Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. Yet the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and his reelection in 1996, largely due to the vote of the “Reagan Democrats,” pulled the Democrats away from welfare state policies and closer to the mainstream – the popular view of Americans.

**Present Day Democrats and Republicans**

Today both parties agree in general on social security, unemployment insurance, basic foreign policy, and civil rights. The issues on which they disagree often are not goals as much as means: how best to keep the economy growing, protect the environment, and maintain a strong national defense. In general, Republicans tend to oppose government programs as solutions to national problems. Democrats tend to believe that government can and should act for the greater good.

**Democrat and Republican Constituencies**

A constituency is a body of voters that elected a representative to a political office. Statistically, specific groups of people tend to vote Democrat while other groups tend to vote Republican.

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<th>Demographic Groups</th>
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*Source: PEW Research Center for Political Surveys 2014*