

## Political Parties

The United States has a two-party system. Candidates who want to be elected have little choice but to run as Democrats or Republicans. Among voters, though, party identification has been slipping. Fewer and fewer voters are willing to identify themselves with one of the major parties. Rather, they identify themselves simply as independents. Fifty years ago, only 20 percent of voters were independents. Today, almost 40 percent of voters identify themselves as independents. This percentage is higher than the percentage of voters that identify with either of the major parties.

### Some Americans Are Worried about the Weakening of the Two Major Parties

The "old guards" of the two major political parties are not happy. Increases in the number of independents have weakened the effectiveness of the two major parties. Voters no longer want to vote a *straight ticket*. That is, they do not want to vote for all of the candidates of one party during any election. Often, for example, people vote for a Democrat for president and a Republican for Congress, or vice versa. This is called split-ticket voting.

Those in favor of maintaining the strength of the two major parties have an important argument on their side. They contend that only a strong party has a chance of creating significant policy changes. The party in power, according to these people, needs a strong show of support by Americans. Only then can it deal from a position of strength when it has to make new policies in response to changes in America and abroad. If the parties continue to lose the loyalty of the voters, perhaps fewer and fewer important policy changes will occur.

### Others Welcome the Weakening of the Two Major Parties

Some people welcome the rising number of independents and the weakening of the two major political parties. This group argues that the major parties have not kept up with changing times. They also contend that there is no longer any clear-cut distinction between the two parties. Therefore, there are no compelling reasons for voters to identify with one or the other of these parties. Increasingly, claim these individuals, both parties seem to be dominated by interest groups.

In any event, candidates running for office at any level no longer have to depend on their parties to the extent they did in the past. They can now make their own arrangements for campaign advertising and fund-raising. They can, and do, hire professional campaign managers. If candidates do not really need political parties to help them get elected, why do voters need the parties?

In spite of the growing number of independents, the Democrats and Republicans are not about to disappear. The parties may become weaker, but all that means is that working for major political parties may not guarantee the rewards that existed in the past.

## Political Parties

Political parties are the most representative, inclusive organizations in the United States. They are made up of citizens who may differ in race, religion, age, and economic and social background, but who share certain perspectives on public issues and leaders. Parties are the engines that drive the machinery of elections: They recruit candidates for office, organize primary elections so that party members can select their candidates for the general election, and support their candidates who reach the general election. Parties also write platforms, which state the direction that party members want the government to take. Parties have traditionally played a crucial role in educating Americans about issues and in getting out the vote.

For most of America's history, a competitive two-party system has prevailed, and third parties have been the exception. This is a result of the U.S. electoral system in which the winner takes all. Since there is no proportional representation, losers get nothing. Thus a vote for a third party is usually a lost vote.

Originally the Founders opposed political parties, believing them to be factions intent on manipulating the independent will of voters. But by the early 19th century political parties had become the most important political organizations in the United States. They made certain that their members got to the polls. They also organized members of Congress into stable voting blocs based on party affiliation. These blocs united the legislators and helped the president create a party alliance between the executive and legislative branches. Since the mid-1850s, when the Republican Party was formed, the two major parties in the United States have been the Republican and the Democratic parties. The Democratic Party traces its beginnings to the Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans.

In the 19th century, political parties were powerful enough that they could often motivate voting turnouts of over 80 percent. Today, parties are less important. Slightly more than one-third of all Americans call themselves independents with no party affiliation, and voting in presidential contests—which traditionally have the highest turnout—has declined to 50 percent. At the same time, the platforms of the two major parties have shifted towards vague, moderate positions in order to appeal to the largest number of voters. As a result, the major parties may appear so similar that many voters lose interest.