

One Big Party?

Time Needed: One to two class periods

Materials Needed:

Student Materials

Copy Instructions:

- Reading (*class set; 2 pages*)
- Activity pages (*class set; 2 pages*)

Learning Objectives Students will be able to:

- Define “political party.”
- Identify America’s two major political parties.
- Describe the roles of political parties.
- Explain what third parties are and the issues around ballot access for third parties.
- Identify ways that political parties influence public policy.

STEP BY STEP

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ANTICIPATE | the lesson by asking your class to name the two major political parties in the United States. Then ask whether they can name any other political parties. Assuming they have trouble with this, ask why they think it is so hard to name other parties. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> DISTRIBUTE | the reading pages to the class. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> READ | the pages with the class, pausing to discuss as appropriate. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CHECK | for understanding using the true/false informal assessment. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> DISTRIBUTE | the activity pages to the class. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ASSIGN | the activity pages. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> REVIEW | the answers to the worksheets with the class if you wish, pausing to discuss. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CLOSE | by asking students to silently recall one fact about third parties and one fact about the role of political parties in general. Have them share the facts they remember with a partner. Then, call on students to share what their partner thought of. |

One Big Party?

Name: _____

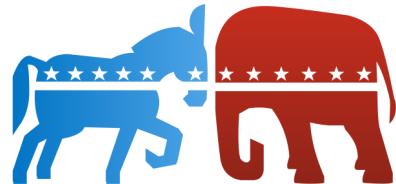


It's a Party...

...but not the kind with ice cream and cake. A **political party** is an organized group of people who share similar political views and work to influence the government in support of those views. *Political views* are a person's ideas about how the government should run and how the issues facing our country should be solved. Political parties fight to gain political power by having candidates elected to office. They exist at every level of government, from the national level to your very own neighborhood. By organizing into political parties, people have more power to influence government than if they acted alone.

The Big Two

In the United States, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are the two main political parties. Are there other parties? Sure. The U.S. technically has a multi-party system. But these two parties have gained so much power that almost every person elected to government office belongs to one of them. Most Americans identify with one of these two parties, but about 40% of Americans identify as **politically independent**, meaning they don't want to identify with any party. Most independents end up voting for either a Democrat or a Republican, and many "lean" toward one party of the other. Independents may be more open to supporting candidates from either party, and some independents are elected to office.



The donkey represents the Democratic Party

The elephant represents the Republican Party

Third Parties

Write-In Candidates

Most ballots include a place to write in the name of a candidate who is not on the ballot. This is one way you can vote for third-party candidates who don't have ballot access. You can also vote for Mickey Mouse or even yourself—but it might be a wasted vote!

Many political parties exist in the United States. Candidates for political office can represent any party, but that doesn't mean you'll see everyone's name on the ballot. Each state has rules about **ballot access**—allowing a political party to put a candidate on the ballot. Usually the rules involve getting a certain number of signatures from registered voters. These rules keep most third parties from even offering a candidate for voters to choose from. The Democratic and Republican parties have ballot access in all the states. The Libertarian Party is the largest third party, with ballot access for the presidential election in more than 30 states. As of 2015, the Green Party had ballot access in over 20 states, and the Constitution Party had access in over 10 states.

The Party Platform

One thing political parties have in common is that they stand for something. If you want to know what a party believes, its **platform** is a document that describes the party's views on all the major issues facing the nation. This set of statements is called a "platform" because it is the set of beliefs the political party stands on. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party keep their platforms broad and simple to attract as many supporters as possible. At first, it can be hard to tell the difference on some issues. Both parties might say they want better education or more jobs, but what does that mean? The party's platform explains what that party thinks "better" education looks like and how the jobs should be created. You can find a political party's platform by going to the party's website.

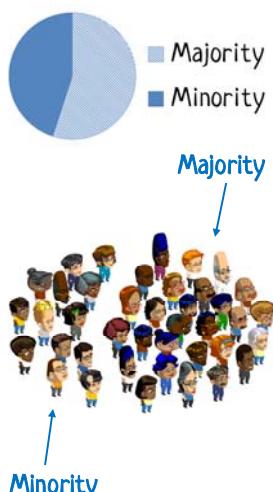


One Big Party?

Name:

Political Parties Support Candidates

In the U.S., you'll be most aware of political parties during an election season. **Candidates** who are running for political office almost always declare themselves a member of a political party. By doing this, a candidate gains support from the political party and makes it easier for voters to figure out what the candidate believes in and where they stand on the issues. At the same time, political parties fight hard to get candidates from their party elected. Party committees at the local, state, and national level work to support their candidates by raising money, campaigning, educating voters, and urging people to vote on election day.



Political Parties Work Inside Government

Candidates who are elected to office work to pass laws and solve problems. While each government official has his or her own views, the laws and solutions they support usually align with their political party's platform. In the U.S. Congress and in state legislatures, the balance of power between Republicans and Democrats can determine which laws get passed. The **majority party**—the one with the most elected members—can most easily influence laws by getting all its members to vote the same way on a bill. This isn't always easy, because members of one political party don't necessarily agree on all the issues. But in American politics, it's common for most lawmakers from one party to vote the same way. Meanwhile, the **minority party** works to promote the views of its supporters by forcing compromise with the majority party. If the minority party is successful, this can create laws that are balanced between the two parties' viewpoints.

In the executive branch, the president and state governors almost always belong to a political party. Like lawmakers, their views usually align with their political party's platform. A president or governor works for the people, not a party, but he or she may be very committed to advancing the party's goals. He or she does not make laws, but is key in developing **public policy**—the stand the government takes about how issues should be handled. A president or governor's policies are usually in line with their political party's platform. A president or governor who belongs to the same party as the minority in the legislature may also disagree with many laws passed by the majority and may veto those laws.



Political Parties and You

You've probably already seen political parties in action. During elections, political parties work to influence voters by distributing information about candidates and issues. Next time you see a campaign ad on television, look closely at the fine print at the bottom and you might see that a political party has funded the ad. But beware: All the information a political party distributes is *biased* toward its own views. That means information from political parties should not be your only source of information about candidates and issues.

When you register or preregister to vote, the application will probably let you check a box to join a political party. Joining a political party isn't a requirement, and even if you check a box you can still vote for anyone you want. During a presidential election, in many states party membership lets you participate in that state's primary election or caucus to help decide who your party's presidential candidate will be. Some states let you participate even if you don't belong to a party.

Informal Assessment: True/False

Directions: Read each statement aloud to the class. For each one, have the students answer simultaneously by saying “True” or “False” out loud or by showing you thumbs-up for true and thumbs-down for false. Listen or watch for a mix of answers, indicating confusion. Use each statement as a springboard for quick discussion/review before moving on.

1. Each person has his or her own political views. (T — political views are a person’s ideas about how the government should run and how the issues facing our country should be solved.)
2. By forming a political party, people gain more influence over government by banding together with others. (T)
3. People who are politically independent are members of both the Republican and Democratic parties. (F — they don’t identify with any party)
4. No independent has ever been elected to office. (F — independents are sometimes elected to office)
5. All political parties have equal access to put candidates on the ballot. (F — there are rules that determine which parties can have ballot access)
6. The Republican and Democratic parties have ballot access in all states. (T)
7. The Green Party is the third largest party in terms of ballot access. (F — the Libertarian party has the third largest ballot access)
8. A party platform is a stage where candidates stand when they speak to crowds. (F — it is a document that describes the party’s views on most issues)
9. You can usually find a party’s platform on the party’s website. (T)
10. A candidate is a date that is covered in chocolate or some other candy coating. (F — a candidate is a person running for political office)
11. Political parties work at all levels of government—national, state, and local. (T)
12. In the U.S. Congress and most state legislatures, Republicans and Democrats are split into a majority party and a minority party. (T — depending on which party has more people elected to office)
13. The president or governor’s political party has no effect on the lawmaking process. (F — it can make things smoother or more difficult depending on whether he/she is the same party as the majority party)
14. Information distributed by a political party gives you a balanced perspective that looks at issues from all sides. (F — information from political parties is biased)
15. You can only vote for a candidate who is the same party as the party you’re registered with. (F — you can vote for anyone on the ballot)
16. When you register to vote, you must join a political party. (F — you don’t have to join)

One Big Party?

Name: _____

A. Vocabulary.

Match each key term with its definition.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| _____ 1. political party | A. Allowing a political party to put a candidate on the ballot |
| _____ 2. write-in candidate | B. A person's ideas about how government should run and how issues should be solved |
| _____ 3. public policy | C. A candidate whose name a voter must hand-write on the ballot |
| _____ 4. minority party | D. Political party with the most elected members |
| _____ 5. third party | E. The stand the government takes about how issues should be handled |
| _____ 6. platform | F. A political party other than Republican or Democratic |
| _____ 7. political views | G. An organized group of people who share similar political views and work to influence government |
| _____ 8. ballot access | H. Set of statements describing a party's views on major issues |
| _____ 9. candidate | I. Political party that does not have a majority of the elected members |
| _____ 10. majority party | J. A person running for political office |

B. Registered Voter!

Read each registered voter's statement. Then, decide how each voter is probably registered. Be careful—some have more than one correct possibility! Mark all that you think could apply.

1)

I am committed to my political party.



2)

I don't agree with either the Republicans or Democrats all of the time, so I don't want to commit to either one.



3)

Seeing my party candidates win elections is less important than supporting a party I truly believe in.



4)

I don't like America's two-party system. More parties should have a chance to be heard.



5)

I don't fully agree with my party's platform, but I want to support a party that has power and influence.



6)

My party may not be powerful right now, but if nobody joins, it will never gain influence.



- Independent
- Third Party
- Republican/Democrat

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C. Five Roles of Political Parties. Read each example of political parties at work. Decide which of the five roles the example best illustrates. Write the underlined letter in the button next to the example. You may have more than one answer.



Support Candidates



Influence Laws & Policy



Unite Levels of Government



Create Balance



Influence Voters

1. ___ Party leaders meet with a senator who is not supporting the party's platform on environmental issues.
2. ___ A party's state office asks party members to write their legislators and ask them to vote "no" on a state tax bill.
3. ___ A party's state office runs a phone bank before the election to call party supporters and remind them to support the party's candidates.
4. ___ A party's state office hosts a conference for state and local officials to discuss the party's goals for the state.
5. ___ A committee of legislators from one party meets to draft a law that will be acceptable to everyone in the party.
6. ___ A group of legislators from the minority and majority parties meets to discuss compromise after a failed vote on a budget bill.
7. ___ A political party pays for a series of televised attack ads against a candidate from the other party.
8. ___ A political party holds a huge convention to nominate and celebrate the party's presidential candidate.
9. ___ A state governor meets with a city mayor and state senator from the same party to discuss the governor's policy on education.
10. ___ The president refuses to sign a bill passed by the opposing party and meets with legislators to discuss possible changes.
11. ___ Party volunteers spend a Saturday afternoon at the park handing out party-sponsored voting guides.
12. ___ A new law passes the Senate, where one party has a majority, but fails in the House of Representatives, where the other party has a majority.

D. A Two-Party System? The U.S. has lots of parties, but it is often considered a two-party system. Draw lines to match the characteristics of a two-party system to the statistics about U.S. voters.

In two party systems...

- Citizens may be frustrated or dissatisfied with the two major parties.
- Third parties rarely gain enough support to win elections.
- Most citizens identify with one of the two major parties.

In the United States...

- In 2015, 55% of Americans personally identified as either a Republican or a Democrat.
- In 2014, 58% of Americans thought a third major party was needed and 35% didn't.
- In July 2012, 7% of Americans planned to vote for a third-party presidential candidate.

One Big Party?

Name: **** TEACHER GUIDE ****

A. Vocabulary. Match each key term with its definition.

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