

One Big Party?

Name: _____

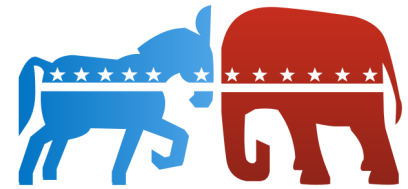


It's a Party...

...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 or 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*

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!

Third Parties

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.

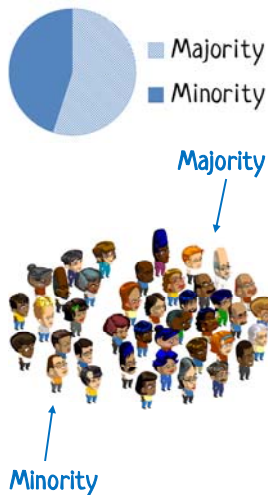


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Political Parties Support Candidates

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.

- ✓ Democratic?
- ✓ Republican?
- ✓ Independent?
- ✓ Libertarian?
- ✓ Green?
- ✓ Constitution?
- ✓ Other?