

## 6.1 Political Parties: Organization & Function

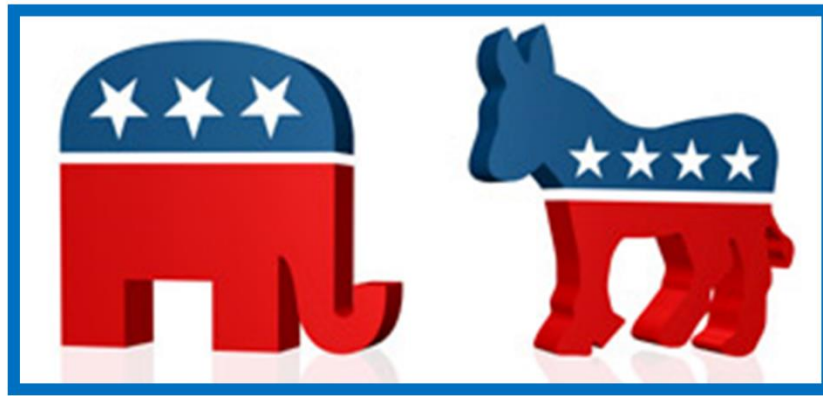


Image 6.1 Visual Representations of Political Party Symbols

Symbols of the two major political parties in the U.S.: the Republican Party symbolized by the elephant and the Democratic Party by the donkey. (Credit: modification of work—Rooster Teeth “Political Party Symbol Change” at <http://roosterteeth.com/forum/politics-%26-current-events/topic/2232075>)

### Learning Objectives

- Describe political parties and what they do.
- Describe the role of political parties in the nomination process.
- Describe party organization at the local, county, state and national levels.
- Describe the effects of winner-take-all elections.
- Compare plurality and proportional representation.
- Describe the institutional, legal, and social forces that limit the number of political parties.

Chart 6.1 Learning Objectives on the Role of Political Parties

While people love to criticize political parties, the reality is that the modern political system in a representative republic could not exist without them.

Collective action problems are very common in societies, as individuals, groups and entire societies try to solve problems or distribute scarce resources. There are many groups, all with opinions about what should be done and a desire to influence policy. But at some point, a society—operating in a representative republic--must find a way of taking all these opinions and turning them into solutions to real problems. That is where political parties come in. They offer the policy choices to address societal problems directly linked to potential policy makers who once elected will carry out solutions.

**Political parties** are organized groups of people with similar ideas or ideology about the function and scope of government, with shared policy goals that work together to elect individuals to political office, to

create and implement policies, to further an agenda, and to gain control of the government and the policy-making process. Parties gain control over the government by winning elections with candidates they officially sponsor or **nominate** for positions in government. Political parties nominate candidates to run many levels of government including the national level (Congress and the presidency) as well as state and local levels. They also organize political campaigns to encourage participation in the political process and mobilize voters for those candidates that they **nominate**.

In *Federalist No. 10*, written in the late eighteenth century, James Madison noted that the formation of self-interested groups, which he called factions, was both natural and inevitable in any society. Madison wrote in No. 10, “[...] liberty, which is essential to political life, [...] nourishes faction, [...] the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man [...] a zeal for different opinions concerning [...] government [...] an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power [...] have, in turn, divided mankind [...]” Interest groups and political parties are two of the most easily identified forms of faction in the United States.<sup>[1]</sup>

Political parties are points of access/linkage institutions available to the public, though they are not themselves government institutions. Neither interest groups nor political parties are directly mentioned in the U.S. *Constitution*. Their existence, however, is protected by the Bill of Rights’ First Amendment guarantee of freedom of assembly.

Where interest groups often work indirectly to influence our leaders, political parties are organizations that try to directly influence public policy through **nominating** and officially sponsoring members who seek to win and hold public office. This is a key difference. Interest groups do not officially nominate or nominate candidates for public office, although they may support them politically and even contribute dollars to their campaign.

Parties accomplish this by identifying and aligning sets of issues that are important to voters in the hopes of gaining support during elections. In this respect, parties provide **policy choices** to the electorate, something they are proposing that is in sharp contrast to their opposition.

These positions on these critical issues are often presented in campaign documents or political advertising. During a national presidential campaign, they also frequently reflect the **party platform**, which is adopted at each party’s presidential nominating convention every four years.

If successful, a party can create a large enough electoral coalition to gain control of the government. Once in power, the party is much more likely to be able to deliver, to its voters, the policy preferences they choose by electing its partisans to the government. Political parties **coordinate** among those who win public office from their party in order to work together to carry out party policy preferences.



You can read the full platform of the [Republican Party](#) and the [Democratic Party](#) at their respective websites. Or, check out the Green Party at <http://www.gp.org/platform> and the Libertarian Party at <https://www.lp.org/platform/>.

| List of Functions     | Description of the Functions of Political Parties                                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>nomination</b>     | officially sponsor individuals to elected office/with shared political beliefs           |
| <b>organization</b>   | organize political campaigns to win public office for nominated individuals              |
| <b>policy choices</b> | provide clear choices to voters of individuals nominated for office/differing viewpoints |
| <b>coordination</b>   | coordinate among members elected to office; develop public policy following principles   |

Chart 6.2 Functions of Parties and Descriptions of the Functions

If the purpose of political parties is to work together to create and implement policies by winning elections, how do they accomplish this task and who participates in the process? The answer was straightforward in the early days of the republic when parties were little more than electoral coalitions an elite political class, mostly in Congress, designed to help win House elections and the presidency focused on the national level of politics and issues.

However, as political parties realized that political success at the national level was dependent on political success at the state and local level, strategies and tactics changed. Moreover, changes in the electorate with broaden political participation in voting, forced the parties to become far more complex and mass organizations that operate on all levels in the U.S. political arena. Modern political parties consist of three components identified by political scientist V. O. Key: 1) the party organization (which helps to coordinate everything the party does in its quest to win elections for political office); 2) the party in the electorate (the voters); and 3) the party in office (the office holders). To understand how these various elements work together, we begin by thinking about a key first step in influencing policy—winning elections.

## Nomination Stage and the Political Party Role

Although the *Constitution* explains how candidates for national office are elected, it is silent on how those candidates are selected to run or **nominated**. Political parties have taken on the role of selecting or officially sponsoring nominees for offices, such as the presidency and seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Once nominated, the candidate is considered the official representative of the party for that public office, and the party supports that candidacy with the voters. Because there are no national laws and minimal national guidelines, there is much variation in the nomination process. States pass election laws and regulations, choose the selection method for party nominees, and schedule the election, but the process

also greatly depends on views of the respective political parties at the state level. States, through their legislatures, often influence the nomination method by paying for an election to help parties identify the nominee the voters prefer. Many states fund elections because they can hold several nomination races at once. In 2020, many voters—at the same time—had to choose a presidential nominee, U.S. Senate nominee, House of Representatives nominee, and state-level legislature nominee for their parties.

## Primary Elections

The most common method of picking a party nominee for state, local, and presidential contests is the **primary election**. In the primary election, voters cast a ballot to indicate which candidate they desire for the party nominee. The United States is unique among governments world-wide in using the election primary process as the driving force to decide who will be the nominee of a particular party. In most other countries, this decision of who to officially sponsor as a party nominee is made by small insider groups of party officials either by some form of central committee or convention.

Despite the ease of voting using a ballot, primary elections have several rules and variations that can still cause confusion for citizens. In a **closed primary**, only members of the political party selecting nominees may vote. A registered Green Party member, for example, is not allowed to vote in the Republican or Democratic primary. Parties often prefer this method, because it ensures the nominee is picked by voters who legitimately support the party.

An **open primary** allows all voters to vote. In this system, a Green Party member can pick either a Democratic or Republican ballot when voting. **Modified primary** (sometimes called semi-closed) allows independent voters, who are not affiliated with any political party, to enter the party primary of their choice.

For state-level office nominations, or the nomination of a U.S. Senator or House member, two states—California and Washington--use the top-two primary method. A **top-two primary**, sometimes called a **jungle primary**, pits all candidates against each other, regardless of party affiliation. The two candidates with the most votes become the final candidates for the general election. Thus, two candidates from the same party could run against each other in the general election. In one California congressional district, for example, four Democrats and two Republicans all ran against one another in the June 2012 primary.

The two Republicans received the most votes, so they ran against one another in the general election in November.<sup>[2]</sup> More often, however, the top-two system is used in state-level elections for non-partisan elections, in which none of the candidates are allowed to declare a political party.

## The Caucus System

Despite the common use of the primary election system, in 2016 fourteen some states used a caucus system.<sup>[3]</sup> A **caucus** is a meeting of party members in which decisions about party nominees are made

more informally than in primary election process. Caucuses are a form of town hall meeting at which voters get together to voice their preferences, rather than voting individually throughout the day. Caucuses are less expensive than primaries because they rely on voting methods such as dropping marbles in a jar, placing names in a hat, standing under a sign bearing the candidate's name, or taking a voice vote. Volunteers record the votes and no poll workers need to be trained or compensated. Moreover, like primary elections, caucuses can either be closed, open, or modified; thus, caucuses can sometimes be open to voters not aligned with the political party holding the caucus meeting. The caucus meeting system receives the most national media attention when it is part of the presidential nomination process. During the presidential nomination process, voters at the caucus select **delegates**, who represent their choice at the party's state- or national-level nominating convention. Very often this is a multiple step process whereby delegates selected at the first level of the caucus system then select delegates to conventions at the state level who eventually select delegates pledged to the national convention to cast the official vote for that state's choice for party nominee.

The Iowa Republican Presidential Caucus kicks-off the presidential nomination process generally in late January of a presidential election year and requires its members to go to special meeting places to express their preferences for a nominee and delegates pledged to a candidate. Although abandoned in 2024, the early Iowa Democratic presidential caucus was well-known for its spirited nature.

The caucus meeting system has its proponents and opponents. Many argue that it is more interesting than the primary and brings out more sophisticated voters, who then benefit from the chance to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. The caucus system is also more transparent than ballots. The local party members get to see the election outcome and pick the delegates who will represent them at the national convention.

Opponents point out that caucus meetings take two to three hours and are intimidating to less experienced voters. Voter turnout for a caucus is generally 20 percent lower than for a primary.<sup>[4]</sup>

## The Nomination Schedule

Regardless of which nominating system, the primary election or caucus, the states and parties choose, states must also determine which day they wish to hold their nomination. When the nominations are for state-level office, such as governor, the state legislatures receive little to no input from the national political parties. In presidential election years, however, the national political parties establish rules to govern the primary or election process and how candidates can acquire the necessary number of pledged delegates to the national convention to be officially nominated by their party.

Finally, the order in which the primary elections and caucus selections are held shape the overall race.<sup>[5]</sup> In the past, only Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina were given express permission by the national parties to hold presidential primaries or caucuses to allocate convention delegates in January or February. While this remains the schedule for the Republican party, the Democrat party national committee has established a preferred schedule with only South Carolina as an early primary state.

Notwithstanding the preferred Democrat party schedule, New Hampshire may still hold a Democrat primary since a mandated early date has been established by state law. On the other hand, the Iowa Democrat party has cancelled its caucus.

Generally, these three contests have played a major role in reducing the number of viable candidates running for the nomination with the relative ease of campaigning in smaller states.

In the past other states, especially large states like California, Florida, Michigan, and Wisconsin, often have been frustrated that they must wait to hold their presidential primary elections for delegates later in the season.

Their frustration is reasonable: candidates who do poorly in the first few primaries often drop out entirely, leaving fewer candidates to run in caucuses and primaries held later. In 2008, California, New York, and several other states disregarded the national party's guidelines and scheduled their primaries the first week of February.

In response, Florida and Michigan moved their primaries to January and many other states moved forward to March. This was not the first time states participated in **front-loading** and scheduled the majority of the primaries and caucuses at the beginning of the primary season. It was, however, one of the worst occurrences. When the national political parties want to prevent states from **front-loading**, they can change the state's delegate count, which increases or reduces the state's say in who becomes the presidential nominee. This may be the situation in New Hampshire in 2024 in the Democrat Party, although such punishments have not generally been carried out. The states recognize the calendar special status of those states holding January or February primaries or caucuses.

States have been **front-loading** since the 1976 presidential election, with the trend escalating from the 1992 election and later.<sup>[6]</sup> In the 2020 Democrat Party primary, 42% of pledged delegates were originally scheduled to be allocated by Super Tuesday. Although this schedule was somewhat modified because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was still essentially front-loaded.

The first major strategy to front-load was to hold an early March "Super Tuesday" primary with multiple state contests on the same date. This practice has so expanded that in 2016 twelve states held primaries on March 1 and sixteen states on March 3, 2020. In fact, in 2020 two states with exceptionally large delegations—California and Texas—held their primaries on "Super Tuesday." Usually, after "Super Tuesday," there is a clear leader among nominees of their respective parties.

For example, in 2020, Joe Biden had nearly an insurmountable lead among delegates. However, this is not always the case. The 2016 Republican presidential nomination campaign was somewhat unusual in that the early March primaries had not really established a clear favorite, although Donald Trump, the eventual nominee, had more pledged delegates than other candidates. This situation of no clear leader also occurred in the 2008 Democratic nomination battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

These rules and guidelines differ by party and can change over time. California, the state with the most Democrats, sent 548 delegates to the 2016 Democratic National Convention, while Wyoming, with far fewer Democrats, sent only 18 delegates.

The national committees of each party do not dictate to the states whether they should have a primary or a caucus or the voting eligibility rules (open, close, modified) that govern the state presidential nomination process. They have made rules on how the delegates should be divided among those who participate in the contest. That is, in the Democratic Party, candidates win delegates to the national convention in proportion to the outcome of the primary or caucus. This principle of proportional division of winners of 15% of the vote, governs all nomination contests in the Democratic Party. The rules are different in the Republican Party, where they allow winner-take-all delegate outcomes for contests after March 15 but restrict earlier primaries before that date to proportional division of those receiving at least 15% of the votes. In 2020 in the highly contested Democratic Party Presidential Nomination, the rule of proportional division of delegates coupled with increased number of “front-loaded” primaries and caucuses, suggested to some observers that it might take longer to identify a nominee for the party. <sup>[7]</sup>

In the case of the Democratic Party in recent presidential nomination cycles, the national committee has set aside approximately 15% of delegates as guaranteed delegate spots for key party officials—known as “Super-Delegates.” The Republican Party has no comparable set-aside provision. Therefore, in the Democratic Party nomination process an additional factor besides primaries and caucuses became important. That is, contenders for the 2016 party nomination had to seek support from 712 “Super-Delegates,” who are not pledged to support the candidate who happened to win the primary in the state where they reside.

In 2020, the Democratic Party changed the rules so that the “super-delegates” could not vote at the national convention on the initial vote—thus not potentially undermining the vote in the primary or caucus in the state where they reside. Thus, in 2020, “super-delegates” would have played a role in deciding the nominee of the Democratic Party only if no single candidate at the start of the convention had a majority of the delegates allocated through the primaries or caucuses. In 2020, because Joe Biden already had a majority of delegates prior to the convention, any potential role for “super-delegates” was eliminated.

## Changes in the Presidential Nominating Process

The rise of the presidential primary and caucus system as the main means by which presidential candidates are selected has had several anticipated and unanticipated consequences. For one, the campaign season has grown longer and more costly. In 1960, John F. Kennedy declared his intention to run for the presidency just eleven months before the general election. Compare this to 2020, where over 20 candidates announced their intention to run nearly two years before the 2020 general election. Today’s long campaign seasons are seasoned with an increasing number of debates among contenders for the nomination. In 2016, when the number of candidates for the Republican nomination became large and unwieldy, two debates among them were held, in which only those candidates polling greater

support were allowed in the more important prime-time debate. The runners-up spoke in the other debate.

For the 2020 Democratic Party nomination, the national committee established rules to host a series of debates with the first occurring in June of 2019 in two debates with 10 candidates of the total of twenty participating in each debate.

Finally, the process of going straight to the people through primaries and caucuses has created some opportunities for party outsiders to rise. Neither Ronald Reagan nor Bill Clinton was especially popular with the party leadership of the Republicans or the Democrats (respectively) at the outset. The outsider phenomenon has been most clearly demonstrated, however, in the 2016 presidential nominating process, as those distrusted by the party establishment, such as Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, who never before held political office, raced ahead of party favorites like Jeb Bush early in the primary process. Primaries offer tests of candidates' popular appeal, while state caucuses testify to their ability to mobilize and organize grassroots support among committed followers. Primaries also reward candidates in different ways, depending on the party rules and the date of the primary.

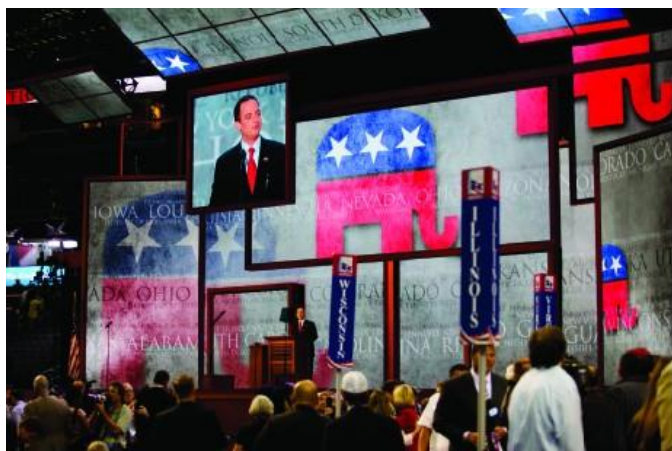
The rise of the primary has also displaced the convention itself as the place where party regulars choose their standard bearer. Once true contests in which party leaders fought it out to select a candidate, by the 1970s, party conventions often simply served to rubber-stamp the choice of the primaries. By the 1980s, the convention drama was gone, replaced by a long, televised commercial designed to extol the party's greatness. Without the drama and uncertainty, major news outlets have steadily curtailed their coverage of the conventions, convinced that few people are interested. The 2016 elections seem to support the idea that the primary process produces a nominee rather than party insiders. Outsiders Donald Trump on the Republican side and Senator Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side had much success despite significant concerns about them from party elites. Whether this pattern could be reversed in the case of a closely contested selection process remains to be seen.

### **The Political Party Role in the National Convention**

Party conventions are typically held between June and September, with state-level conventions earlier in the summer and national conventions later. Conventions normally last four to five days, with days devoted to platform discussion and planning and nights reserved for speeches. Local media covers the speeches given at state-level conventions, showing speeches given by the party nominees for governor and lieutenant governor, and perhaps important guests or the state's U.S. senators. The national media covers the Democratic and Republican conventions during presidential election years, mainly showing the speeches. Some cable networks broadcast delegate voting and voting on party platforms.

Members of the candidate's family and important party members will generally speak during the first few days of a national convention, with the vice-presidential nominee speaking on the next-to-last night and the presidential candidate on the final night. The two chosen candidates will then hit the campaign trail for the general election.

The party with the incumbent president holds the later convention, so in 2020, the Republicans held their convention after the Democrats. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, both national party conventions were shorter, and many parts of the conventions were held in a virtual environment. Only time will tell whether longer conventions and a more traditional format will return.



(a)



(b)

Image 6.2 Photos from Party Conventions

Reince Priebus, then chairman of the Republican National Committee, opens the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, on August 28, 2012 (a). Pageantry and symbolism, such as the flag motifs and political buttons shown on this Wisconsin attendee's hat (b), reign supreme during national conventions. (From OpenStax; Credit a, b: modification of work by Mallory Benedict/PBS NewsHour)

There are rarely surprises at the modern convention. Thanks to party rules, the nominee for each party is generally already clear. In 2008, John McCain had locked up the Republican nomination in March by having enough delegates, while in 2012, President Obama was an unchallenged incumbent and hence people knew he would be the nominee. The naming of the vice president is generally not a surprise either. Even if a presidential nominee tries to keep it a secret, the news often leaks out before the party convention or official announcement. In 2004, the media announced John Edwards was John Kerry's running mate. The Kerry campaign had not made a formal announcement, but an amateur photographer had taken a picture of Edwards' name being added to the candidate's plane and posted it to an aviation message board.

Despite the lack of surprises, there are several reasons to host traditional conventions. First, the parties require that the delegates officially cast their ballots. Delegates from each state come to the national party convention to publicly state who their state's voters selected as the nominee.

Second, delegates will bring state-level concerns and issues to the national convention for discussion. This list of issues that concern party members, like limiting abortions or removing restrictions on gun ownership, are called *planks*, and they will be discussed and voted upon by the delegates and party leadership at the convention. Just as wood planks make a platform, issues important to the party and party delegates make up the **party platform**.

The parties take the cohesive list of issues and concerns and frame the election around the platform. Candidates will try to keep to the platform when campaigning, and outside groups that support them, such as super PACs, may also try to keep to these issues.

## The Party Organization: Formal Structure of Party Activists

A significant subset of American voters views their party identification as something far beyond simply a shortcut to voting. These individuals get more energized by the political process and have chosen to become more active in the life of political parties. They are part of what is known as the party organization. The **party organization** is the formal structure of the political party, and its active members are responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates. It is a vital component of any successful party because it bears most of the responsibility for building and maintaining the party “brand.” It also plays a key role in helping select, and elect, candidates for public office.

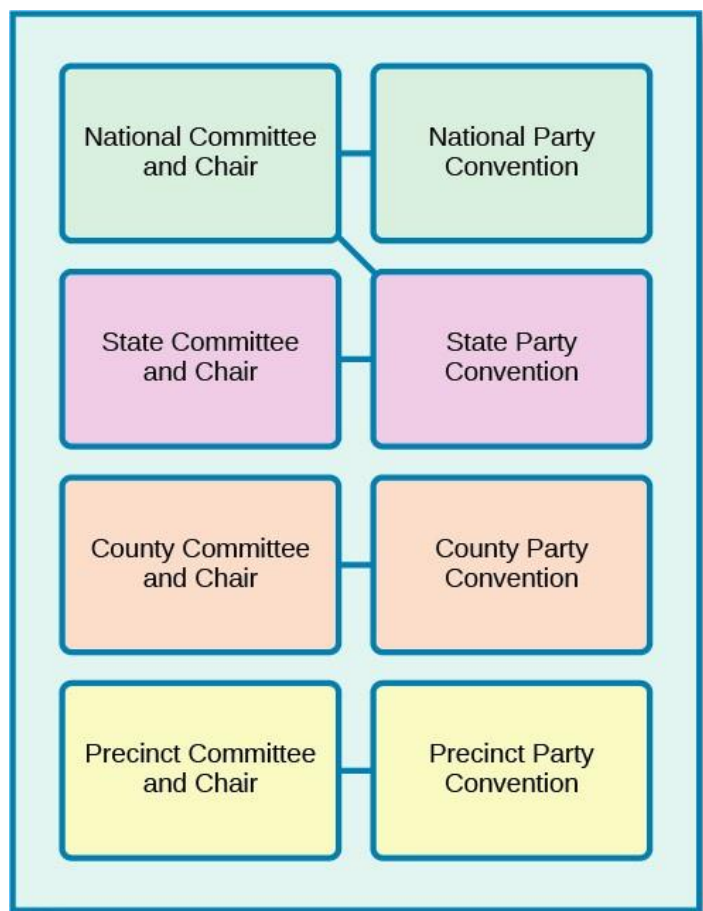


Chart 6.3 Illustrating Party Convention Structure

Political parties are bottom-up structures, with lower levels often responsible for selecting delegates to higher-level offices or conventions. Thus, even the county party can be said to be directed from smaller units, down to the precinct level. In some states, such as Texas, the county chairperson is selected by the precinct chairs who are themselves elected through primary elections of the party voters.

### Local Organizations

Since winning elections is the first goal of the political party, it makes sense that the formal party organization mirrors the local-state-federal structure of the U.S. political system. While the lowest level of party organization is technically the **precinct**, many of the operational responsibilities for local elections fall upon the county-level organization. The county-level organization is in many ways the workhorse of the party system, especially around election time. This level of organization frequently takes on many of the most basic responsibilities of a democratic system, including identifying and mobilizing potential voters and donors, identifying and training potential candidates for public office, and recruiting new members for the party. County organizations

are also often responsible for finding rank and file members to serve as volunteers on Election Day, either as officials responsible for operating the polls or as monitors responsible for ensuring that elections are conducted honestly and fairly. They may also hold regular meetings to provide members the opportunity to meet potential candidates and coordinate strategy. Of course, all this is voluntary and relies on dedicated party members being willing to pitch in to run the party.

## State Organizations

Most of the county organizations' formal efforts are devoted to supporting party candidates running for county and city offices. But a fair amount of political power is held by individuals in statewide office or in state-level legislative or judicial bodies. While the county-level offices may be active in these local competitions, most of the coordination for them will take place in the **state-level organizations**. Like their more local counterparts, state-level organizations are responsible for key party functions, such as statewide candidate recruitment and campaign mobilization. Most of their efforts focus on electing high-ranking officials such as the governor or occupants of other statewide offices (e.g., the state's treasurer or attorney general) as well as candidates to represent the state and its residents in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. The greater value of state- and national-level offices requires state organizations to take on several key responsibilities in the life of the party.



Visit the following [Republican](#) and [Democratic](#) sites to see what party organizations look like on the local level. Although these sites are for different parties in different parts of the country, they both inform visitors of local party events, help people volunteer to work for the party, and provide a convenient means of contributing to the party.

First, state-level organizations usually accept greater fundraising responsibilities than do their local counterparts. Statewide races and races for national office have become increasingly expensive in recent years. The average cost of a successful House campaign was \$2.4 million in 2020; for Senate races, it was \$27.2 million.<sup>[8]</sup> While individual candidates are responsible for funding and running their own races, it is typically up to the state-level organization to coordinate giving across multiple races and to develop the staffing expertise that these candidates will draw upon at election time. State organizations are also responsible for creating a sense of unity among members of the state party. Building unity can be very important as the party transitions from sometimes-contentious nomination battles to the all-important general election. The state organization uses several key tools to get its members working together towards a common goal. First, it helps the party's candidates prepare for state primary elections or caucuses that allow voters to choose a nominee to run for public office at either the state or national level.

Second, the state organization is also responsible for drafting a **state platform** that serves as a policy guide for partisans who are eventually selected to public office. These platforms are usually the result of a negotiation between the various coalitions within the party and are designed to ensure that everyone in the party will receive some benefits if their candidates win the election. Finally, state organizations hold a statewide convention at which delegates from the various county organizations come together to discuss the needs of their areas. The state conventions are also responsible for selecting delegates to the national convention.

The political platform adopted by an individual state organization will vary not only by party but also based upon the political culture of that state. In the 1960s, Daniel Elazar researched interviews, voting data, newspapers, and politicians' speeches. He determined that states had unique cultures and that different state governments instilled different attitudes and beliefs in their citizens, creating **political cultures**.

State political cultures can affect the ideology and opinions of those who live in or move to them. For example, opinions about gun ownership and rights vary from state to state. Polls show that 61 percent of all Californians, regardless of political party, stated there should be more controls on who owns guns.<sup>[9]</sup>

In contrast, in Texas, support for the right to carry a weapon is high. Fifty percent of self-identified Democrats—who typically prefer more controls on guns rather than fewer—said Texans should be allowed to carry a concealed weapon if they have a permit.<sup>[10]</sup> Within each political party, state political organizations will have different levels of strength and effectiveness reflecting not only the relevant strength of party identification in that state but also the number of public office holders from that state. Post 2016, for their part, Democrats surveying the condition of their party at the state level can see considerable weakness. According to Reid Epstein and Janet Hook of the *Wall Street Journal*, Democrats hold majorities in just 31 of 99 legislative chambers nationwide, having lost 958 seats since former president Obama took office in 2009. Just 43% of elected lawmakers in state legislatures are Democrats. They are less than a majority on state governorships. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a renewed effort to build stronger state organizations in the Democratic Party. Populist followers of Bernie Sanders have been mounting a sustained effort to work to take over the party from the bottom up. In fact, Sanders supporters seized control of state parties in Hawaii and Nebraska and have won party positions throughout the country.<sup>[11]</sup>

## National Party Organization

The local and state-level party organizations are the workhorses of the political process. They take on most of the responsibility for party activities and are easily the most active participants in the party formation and electoral processes. They are also largely invisible to most voters. The average citizen knows very little of the local party's behavior unless there is a phone call or a knock on the door in the days or weeks before an election. The same is largely true of the activities of the state-level party. Typically, the only people who notice are those who are already actively engaged in politics or are being targeted for donations. But most people are aware of the presence and activity of the national party organizations for several reasons. First, many Americans are more interested in the topics discussed at the national level than at the state or local level.

A second reason for the prominence of the national organization is that it usually coordinates the grandest spectacles in the life of a political party—the national conventions, where they officially nominate the party nominee for president of the United States. People may see or read an occasional story about the meetings of the state committees or convention but pay little attention. But the **national conventions** organized and sponsored by the national-level party, can dominate the national discussion for several weeks in summer.<sup>[12]</sup>

National party conventions culminate in the formal nomination of the party nominees for the offices of president and vice president, and they mark the official beginning of the presidential competition between the two parties.

National conventions are not the spectacles they once were, and this fact is almost certainly having an impact on the profile of the national party organization. Both parties have come to recognize the value of the convention as a medium through which they can communicate to the average viewer. To ensure that they are viewed in the best possible light, the parties have worked hard to turn the public face of the convention into a highly sanitized, highly orchestrated media event.

Speakers are often required to have their speeches pre-screened to ensure that they do not deviate from the party line or run the risk of embarrassing the eventual nominee—whose name has often been known by all for several months. And while protests still happen, party organizations have become increasingly adept at keeping protesters away from the convention sites, arguing that safety and security are more important than First Amendment rights to speech and peaceable assembly. For example, protesters were kept behind concrete barriers and fences at the Democratic National Convention in 2004.<sup>[13]</sup>

With the advent of cable TV news and the growth of internet blogging, the major news outlets have found it unnecessary to provide the same level of coverage they once did. Between 1976 and 1996, ABC and CBS



**Image 6.3 Photo of Barack Obama at the Democrat National Convention**

U.S. President Barack Obama accepts the 2012 U.S. Democratic presidential nomination during the final session of Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, September 6, 2012.  
(Credit: REUTERS/Jim Young)

cut their coverage of the nominating conventions from more than fifty hours to only five. NBC cut its coverage to fewer than five hours.<sup>[14]</sup> One reason may be that the outcomes of nominating conventions are also typically known in advance, meaning there is no drama. Today, the nominee's acceptance speech is expected to be no longer than an hour, so it will not take up more than one block of prime-time TV programming.

And even though the media is paying less attention, key insiders and major donors often use the convention as a way of gauging the strength of the party and its ability to effectively organize and coordinate its members.

They are also paying close attention to the rising stars who are given time at the convention's podium, to see which can connect with the party faithful.

Most observers credit Barack Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention with

bringing him to national prominence.<sup>[15]</sup> Although he was only a candidate for a U.S. Senate seat at the time, his address caught the attention of the Democratic establishment and ultimately led to his emergence as a viable presidential candidate just four years later.

## The Two-Party System

Political parties exist for the purpose of winning elections in order to influence public policy. This requires them to build coalitions across a wide range of voters who share similar preferences. Winning elections and implementing policy would be hard enough in simple political systems, but in a country as complex as the United States, political parties must take on great responsibilities to win elections across the many local, state, and national governing bodies. Indeed, political differences between states and local areas can contribute much complexity.

If a party stakes out issue positions on which few people agree and therefore builds too narrow a coalition of voter support, the party may find itself marginalized. But if the party takes too broad a position on issues, it might find itself in a situation where the members of the party disagree with one another, making it difficult to pass legislation, even if the party can secure victory.

Throughout the history of the United States, the political arena has been dominated by a series of two main parties with a periphery of third parties also involved in the process.

One of the cornerstones of a vibrant representative republic is citizens' ability to influence government through voting. For that influence to be meaningful, citizens must send clear signals to their leaders about what they wish the government to do. It only makes sense, then, that voters have several clearly differentiated options available to them at the polls on Election Day. Having these options means voters can select a candidate who more closely represents their own preferences on the important issues of the day. It also gives individuals who are considering voting a reason to participate. After all, you are more likely to vote if you care about who wins and who loses. The existence of two major parties, especially in our present era of strong parties, leads to sharp distinctions between the candidates and between the party organizations.

## Election Rules and the Two-Party System

The **two-party system** came into being because the structure of U.S. elections, with one seat tied to a geographic district, tends to lead to dominance by one of two major political parties. Even when there are other options on the ballot, most voters understand that minor parties have no real chance of winning even a single office. Hence, they vote for one candidate of the two major parties to support a potential winner. Of the 535 members of the House and Senate, only a handful identify as something other than Republican or Democrat. Third parties have fared no better in presidential elections. No third-party candidate has ever won the presidency.

Several reasons have been suggested to explain why the structure of U.S. elections has resulted in a two-party system. The most frequent explanation has been the process used to select its representatives. First, most elections at the state and national levels are **winner-take-all**: The candidate who receives the greatest overall number of votes wins. **Winner-take-all** elections with one representative elected for one geographic district allow voters to develop a personal relationship with "their" representative to the government. They know exactly whom to blame, or thank, for the actions of that government. Since

voters do not like to waste votes, third parties must convince voters they have a real chance of winning races before voters will take them seriously. This is a tall order given the vast resources and mobilization tools available to the existing parties.

In a system in which individual candidates compete for individual seats representing unique geographic districts, a candidate must receive a fairly large number of votes to win. A political party that appeals to only a small percentage of voters will always lose to a party that is more popular.<sup>[16]</sup>

**Winner-take-all** systems of electing candidates to office, which exist in several countries other than the United States, can require that the winner receive either the majority of votes or a plurality of the votes. U.S. elections are based on plurality voting.

First-Past-the-Post Ballot

United States Congress

Legislative District #22

Vote for One:

☐

Tom Jones

Republican Party

☐

Mary Miller

Democratic Party

☐

Phillip Thomas

Green Party

☐

Celeste Newman

Libertarian Party

Image 6.4 Examples of Types of Ballots

**Plurality voting** has been justified as the simplest and most cost-effective method for identifying a victor in a democracy. A single election can be held on a single day, and the victor of the competition is easily selected.

**Plurality voting**, commonly referred to as **first-past-the-post**, is based on the principle that the individual candidate with the most votes wins, whether he or she gains a majority (51 percent or greater) of the total votes cast.

Proportional Representation Ballot

United States Congress

For 4 Legislative Seats

Vote for Party List of Candidates

☐

Democratic Party

Mary Miller

Kevin Marini

John Rothenberg

Martha Lopez

☐

Libertarian Party

Celeste Newman

Stuart Messer

Susan Meerman

George Williams

☐

Republican Party

Tom Jones

Michael Correnti

Maria Alvarado

Robert Masugi

☐

Green Party

Phillip Thomas

Celine Woods

Richard Foster

Guadalupe Ruiz

Abandoning **plurality voting**, even if the winner-take-all election were kept, would almost certainly increase the number of parties from which voters could choose. The easiest switch would be to a majoritarian voting scheme, in which a candidate wins only if he or she enjoys the support of a majority of voters. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round of voting, a run-off election is held among the top contenders. Some states conduct their primary elections within the two major political parties in this way.

Because second-place (or lower) finishers will receive no reward for their efforts, those parties that do not attract enough supporters to finish first at least some of the time will eventually disappear because their supporters realize they have no hope of achieving success at the polls.<sup>[17]</sup> The failure of third parties to win and the possibility that they will draw votes away from the party the voter had favored before—resulting in a win for the party the voter liked least—makes people hesitant to vote for the third party's candidates a second time.

This has been the fate of all U.S. third parties—the Populist Party, the Progressives, the Dixiecrats, the Reform Party, and others.

Third parties, often born of frustration with the current system, attract supporters from one or both existing parties during an election but fail to attract enough votes to win. After the election is over, supporters experience remorse when their least-favorite candidate wins instead. For example, in the 2000 election, Ralph Nader ran for president as the candidate of the Green Party. Nader, a longtime consumer activist concerned with environmental issues and social justice, attracted many votes from people who usually voted for Democratic candidates.

This has caused some to claim that Democratic nominee Al Gore lost the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush, because Nader won Democratic votes in Florida that might otherwise have gone to Gore.<sup>[18]</sup>

None of these alternatives to the two major political parties had much success at the national level, and most are no longer viable parties. All faced the same fate. Formed by charismatic leaders, each championed a relatively narrow set of causes and failed to gain broad support among the electorate.

Once their leaders had been defeated or discredited, the party structures that were built to contest elections collapsed. And within a few years, most of their supporters were eventually pulled back into one of the existing parties. In the long run, however, many third parties have brought important issues to the attention of the major parties, which then incorporated these issues into their platforms.

| Official Ballot<br>Municipal Elections                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                            |        |                                                                           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| <b>INSTRUCTIONS TO VOTERS</b><br><br><b>Mark Your Choices by Filling in the Numbered Boxes Only</b><br><br>Fill in the number one <b>1</b> box next to your first choice; fill in the number two <b>2</b> box next to your second choice; fill in the number three <b>3</b> box next to your third choice, and so on. You may fill in as many choices as you please. Fill in no more than one box per candidate. Fill in no more than one box per column. | <b>Candidates for City Council District One<br/>(Three to be elected.)</b> |        | <i>Only one vote per candidate</i><br><br><b>Only one vote per column</b> |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Douglas Campbell                                                           | Dem.   | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Martha Dains                                                               | Rep.   | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Terry Graybeal                                                             | Reform | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Robert Gomez                                                               | Dem.   | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Cynthia Daniels                                                            | Indep. | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Robert Higgins                                                             | Rep.   | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Write In                                                                   |        | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Write In                                                                   |        | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Write In                                                                   |        | 1                                                                         | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

Image 6.5 Example of Municipal Ballot

Sample Single Transferable/Choice Voting Ballot—illustrates how candidates are all listed in the same place on the ballot and voters rank candidates by preference. This type of voting system creates an alternative to a run-off and supports majoritarian choices rather than plurality winners. Credit: FairVote.org educational resources at [www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org).

## A Proportional Electoral System

In a **proportional electoral system**, however, parties advertise who is on their candidate list and voters pick a party. Then, legislative seats are doled out to the parties based on the proportion of support each party receives. While the Green Party in the United States might not win a single congressional seat in some years thanks to **plurality voting**, in a **proportional system**, it stands a chance to get a few seats in the legislature regardless.

For example, assume the Green Party gets 7 percent of the vote. In the United States, 7 percent will never be enough to win a single seat, shutting the Green candidates out of Congress entirely, whereas in a proportional system, the Green Party will get 7 percent of the total number of legislative seats available. Hence, it could get a foothold for its issues and perhaps increase its support over time. But with plurality voting, it does not stand a chance. Moving to a **proportional electoral system** would involve the abandonment of the **winner-take-all** approach and would increase the number of parties in the U.S. system.

One proposal to implement proportional representation in the United States would be to allocate legislative seats based on the national level of support for each party’s presidential candidate, rather than on the results of individual races. If this method had been used in the 1996 elections, 8 percent of the seats in Congress would have gone to Ross Perot’s Reform Party because he won 8 percent of the votes cast. Even though Perot himself lost, his supporters would have been rewarded for their efforts with representatives who had a real voice in government. And Perot’s party’s chances of survival would have greatly increased. However, this proposal would be a major constitutional change requiring successful passage of a constitutional amendment.

## Why does the United States have a two-party system?

Electoral representation systems are not the only reason the United States has a two-party system. We need only look at the number of parties in the British or Canadian systems, both of which are **winner-take-all plurality systems** like that in the United States, to see that it is possible to have more than two parties while still directly electing representatives.

The two-party system is rooted in U.S. history. From the first parties to our current situation, no more than two major parties ever formed. Instead of parties arising based on region or ethnicity, various regions and ethnic groups sought a place in one of the two major parties. What are other possible explanations? Scholars of voting behavior have suggested at least three other characteristics of the U.S. system which explain the persistence of our two-party system.

| United States: Reason for Two Party System                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| winner-take-all plurality voting for elected representation (local, state, national) |
| the Electoral College voting system with winner-take-all electoral votes per state   |
| campaign and election laws that favor two parties                                    |
| demobilized ethnic groups                                                            |

Chart 6.4 Reasons for Two-Party System

The United States has a presidential system in which the winner is selected through the Electoral College. The winner-take-all system also applies. In all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), the total of the state's electoral votes go to the candidate who wins the plurality of the popular vote in that state.

Even if a new, third party is able to win the support of a lot of voters, it must be able to do so in several states in order to win enough electoral votes to have a chance of winning the presidency.<sup>[19]</sup>

In addition, party success is strongly influenced by local election laws. Someone must write the rules that govern elections, and those rules help to determine outcomes.

In the United States, such rules have been written to make it easy for existing parties to secure a spot for their candidates in future elections. But some states create significant burdens for candidates who wish to run as independents or who choose to represent new parties. For example, one common practice is to require a candidate who does not have the support of a major party to ask registered voters to sign a petition. Sometimes, thousands of signatures are required before a candidate's name can be placed on the ballot; but, a small third party that does not have large numbers of supporters in some states may not be able to secure enough signatures for this to happen.<sup>[20]</sup>



Visit [Fair Vote](#) for a discussion of ballot access laws across the country.

Given the obstacles to the formation of third parties, it is unlikely that serious challenges to the U.S. two-party system will emerge. But this does not mean that we should view it as entirely stable either. The U.S. party system is technically a loose organization of fifty different state parties and has undergone several considerable changes since its initial consolidation after the Civil War. Third-party movements may have played a role in some of these changes and resulted in a shifting of party loyalties among the U.S. electorate.

Besides the existence of the Electoral College and local and state election laws, political scientist Gary W. Cox has also suggested that the relative prosperity of the United States and the relative unity of its citizens have prevented the formation of "large dissenting groups" that might give support to third parties.<sup>[21]</sup> This is similar to the argument that the United States does not have viable third parties, because none of its regions is dominated by mobilized ethnic minorities that have created political parties in order to defend and to address concerns solely of interest to that ethnic group. Such parties are common in other countries.

## Political Parties: Questions to Consider

1. Could the modern political system exist without political parties?
2. Why have political parties become so highly structured?
3. What is the difference between a “closed” primary versus and “open” primary? What is the argument advanced for each type?

1. *As entire societies try to solve problems, there are many groups, all with opinions about what should be done. But at some point, a society operating as representative democracy must find a way of taking all these opinions and turning them into solutions to real problems. That is where political parties come in. Political parties build coalitions across a wide range of voters who share similar preferences. They offer competing policy choices to address societal problems directly linked to potential policy makers who once elected by majority will carry out solutions.*
2. *Structure offers better organization and potentially better advocacy and achievement of policy goals at all levels of government. As political parties realized that political success at the national level was dependent on political success at the state and local level, strategies and tactics changed. Moreover, changes in the electorate with broaden political participation in voting, forced the parties to become far more complex and mass organizations that operate on all levels in the U.S. political arena*
3. *A “closed” primary means that the nomination process is restricted to party members only. It is said to build and reinforce strong party ties and prevent the invasion into the party’s selection process of non-party members. An “open” primary allows party crossovers (those from other parties) or independents to vote in the party nomination process of a particular party. This potentially is said to lead to mental commitments to the party that carries over to the general election.*

### Terms to Remember

**caucus**—a form of candidate nomination that occurs in a town-hall style format rather than a day-long election; usually reserved for presidential elections

**closed primary**—an election in which only voters registered with a party may vote for that party’s candidates

**delegates**—party members who are chosen to represent a particular candidate at the party’s state- or national-level nominating convention

**party platform**—the collection of a party’s positions on issues it considers politically important

**political parties**—organizations made up of groups of people with similar interests that try to directly influence public policy through their members who seek and hold public office

**platform**—the set of issues important to the political party and the party delegates

**plurality voting**—the election rule by which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of vote share

**proportional representation**—a party-based election rule in which the number of seats a party receives is a function of the share of votes it receives in an election

**third parties**—political parties formed as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic parties, also known as minor parties

**top-two primary**—a primary election in which the two candidates with the most votes, regardless of party, become the nominees for the general election

**two-party system**—a system in which two major parties win all or almost all elections

**winner-take-all system**—all electoral votes for a state are given to the candidate who wins the most votes in that state

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## 6.2 Political Parties: The Party-in-the-Electorate



Image 6.6 Photos from National Conventions

Democratic National Convention with President Obama and Candidate Clinton (left) and Republican National Convention showing last minute opposition to the Trump nomination (right).  
Credit: (right) modification of work by "PBS NewsHour" (left) also by "PBS NewsHour" from 18 July 2016 and pbs.org

### Learning Objectives

- Ability to differentiate between the party in the electorate and the party organization.
- Discuss the importance of voting in a political party organization.
- Discuss the concepts of party alignment and realignment.

Chart 6.5 Learning Objectives on Party Organization and Alignment

### The Party-In-The-Electorate: The Voters

A key fact about the U.S. political party system is that it is all about the votes. If voters do not show up to vote for a party's candidates on Election Day, the party has no chance of gaining office and implementing its preferred policies.

For much of their history, the two major parties have been adapting to changes in the size, composition, and preferences of the U.S. electorate. It only makes sense, then, that parties have found it in their interest to build a permanent and stable presence among the voters.

By fostering a sense of loyalty, a party can insulate itself from changes in the system and improve its odds of winning elections. The **party-in-the-electorate** are those members of the voting public who consider themselves to be part of a political party and/or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other. What it means to be part of a party depends on where a voter lives and how much he or she chooses to participate in politics. At its most basic level, being a member of the party-in-the-electorate simply means a voter is more likely to voice support for a party. These voters are often called **party identifiers**, since they usually represent themselves in public as being members of a party, and they may attend some party events or functions. Party identifiers are also more likely to provide financial support

for the candidates of their party during election season. This does not mean self-identified Democrats will support *all* the party's positions or candidates, but it does mean that, overall, they feel their wants or needs are more likely to be met if the Democratic Party is successful. **Party identifiers** make up most of the voting public. Gallup, the polling agency, has been collecting data on voter preferences for the past several decades.

Its research suggests that historically, over half of American adults have called themselves “Republican” or “Democrat” when asked how they identify themselves politically. Gallup found in a survey conducted from June 1-22, 2023, that 27% of Americans identified with the Democrats, 25 % with Republicans, and 44% as independents. The number of real independents can be deceptive; because, even among self-proclaimed independents, the overwhelming majority claims to lean in the direction of one party or the other, suggesting they behave as if they identified with a party during elections even if they preferred not to publicly pick a side. Partisan support is so strong that, in the poll about 88 percent of respondents said they either identified with or, if they were independents, at least leaned toward one of the major political parties. At the time of the 2022 mid-term election, the party and party leaner total was 90% of respondents. Generally, this number declines in non-election years.<sup>[1]</sup>

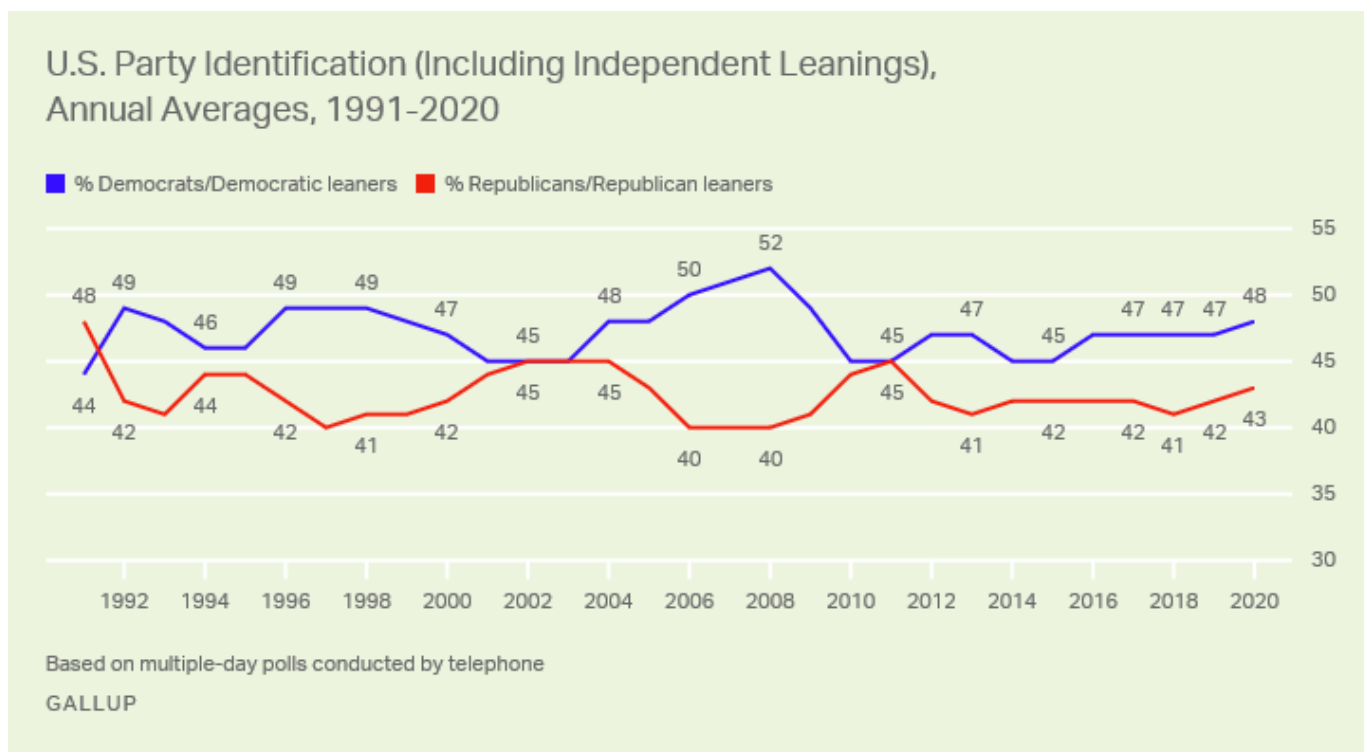


Chart 6.6 Line Graph on Party Identification

Credit: Gallup; “Party ID Average for 2020 Winds Up Similar to Prior Years,” at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/328310/party-average-2020-winds-similar-prior-years.aspx>

**Party affiliation** is not quite the same thing as party membership. People may call themselves Republicans or Democrats without being registered as a member of the party, and the Republican and Democratic parties do not require individuals to join their formal organization in the same way that parties in some other countries do. Many states require voters to declare a party affiliation before participating in primaries, but primary participation is irregular and infrequent, and a voter may change

his or her identity long before changing party registration. For most voters, party identification is informal at best. It does matter, however, because party identification guides some voters, who may know little about an issue or candidate, in casting their ballots. If, for example, someone thinks of him- or herself as a Republican and always votes Republican, he or she will not be confused when faced with a candidate, perhaps in a local or county election, whose name is unfamiliar. If the candidate is a Republican, the voter will likely cast a ballot for him or her. Party ties can manifest in other ways as well. The actual act of registering to vote and selecting a party reinforces party loyalty. Moreover, while pundits and scholars often deride voters who blindly vote their party, the selection of a party in the first place can be based on issue positions and ideology. In that regard, voting your party on Election Day is not a blind act—it is a shortcut based on issue positions.

## Party Ideology and Polarization

As identified in a prior discussion of political ideology, the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism, while not representing the entire spectrum of U.S. political ideologies are predominately concentrated where conservatives find their major home in the Republican Party while liberals primarily associate with the Democrat Party. A Pew Research Center study found 71% of conservatives either directly identified or leaned to the Republican party while 82% of liberals either identified or leaned to the Democrat party.<sup>[2]</sup>

In considering libertarianism and populism, these ideologies historically add many libertarians to the Republican ranks and populists divided between Democrat and Republican ranks. The Pew study found

51% of Libertarians either identify or lean to the Republican party, while allegiance of populists somewhat depended on whether it was a social issue or an economic issue.<sup>[3]</sup>

The 2016 and 2020 elections offered a partial variation to this general pattern with a not insignificant number of those adhering to populist viewpoints voting for the Republican Party standard bearer, Donald Trump.

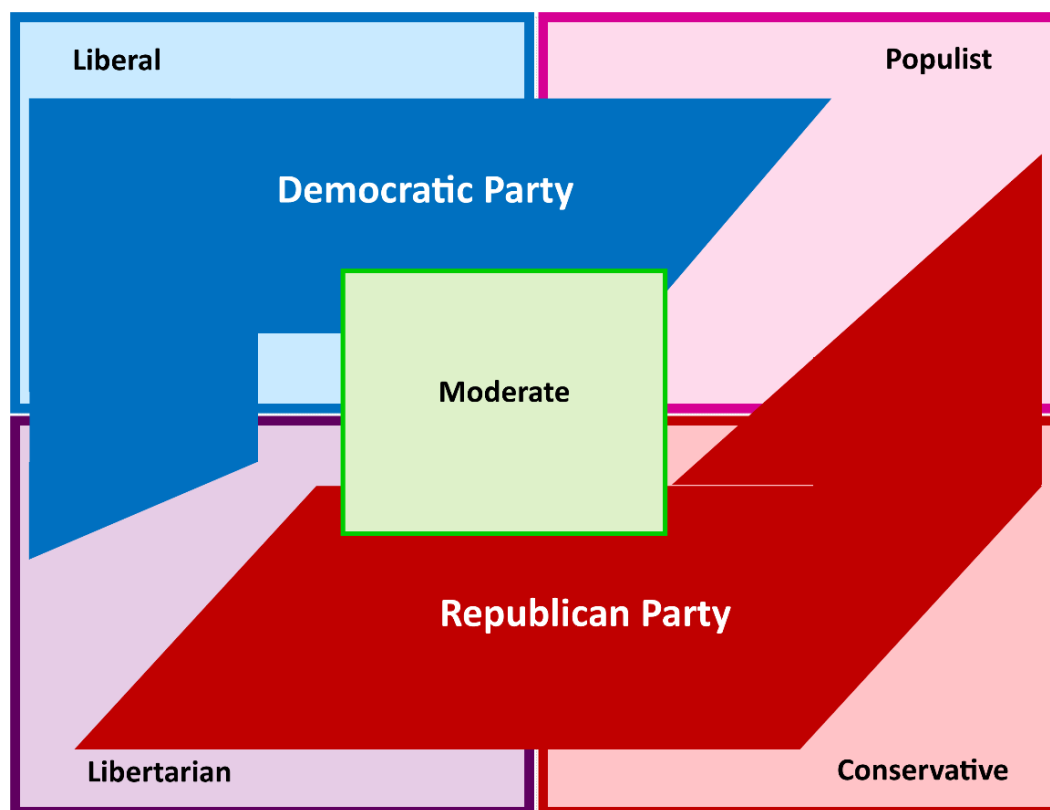


Chart 6.7 Graphic of Party Ideological Leanings

Since most U.S. voters identify themselves as independent of either party and often as moderates,<sup>[4]</sup> the historical tendency has been for the two parties to compete for “the middle” while also trying to mobilize their more ideological loyal bases.

In fact, within this unaffiliated independent group, “48%” identified themselves as “moderates,” and only “30%” as “conservative” while “20%” identified as “liberal” in a January 2022 Gallup Poll. Although in smaller percents, both Republicans and Democrats had those who called themselves “moderates.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Using the chart above, it might be assumed that the two parties would try to appeal to voters toward the center where ideological lines intersect. However, there is evidence that the political party adherents (symbolized in the chart above by party shape) are moving farther apart, making appeals to moderates more difficult. Today, polling organizations have noticed that citizens’ beliefs have become far more polarized, or widely opposed, over the last decade.<sup>[4]</sup>

To track this polarization, Pew Research conducted a study of Republican and Democratic respondents over a twenty-five-year span. Every few years, Pew would poll respondents, asking them whether they agreed or disagreed with “48 value” statements. These statements are referred to as “value questions” or “value statements,” because they measure what the respondent values.

Examples of statements include “Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good,” “Labor unions are necessary to protect the working person,” and “Society should ensure all have equal opportunity to succeed.”

After comparing such answers for twenty-five years, Pew Research found that Republican and Democratic respondents are increasingly answering these questions very differently. This is especially true for questions about the government and politics.

In 1987, 58 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement that the government controlled too much of our daily lives. In 2012, 47 percent of Democrats and 77 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement. This is an example of polarization, in which members of one party see government from a very different perspective than the members of the other party.<sup>[5]</sup>

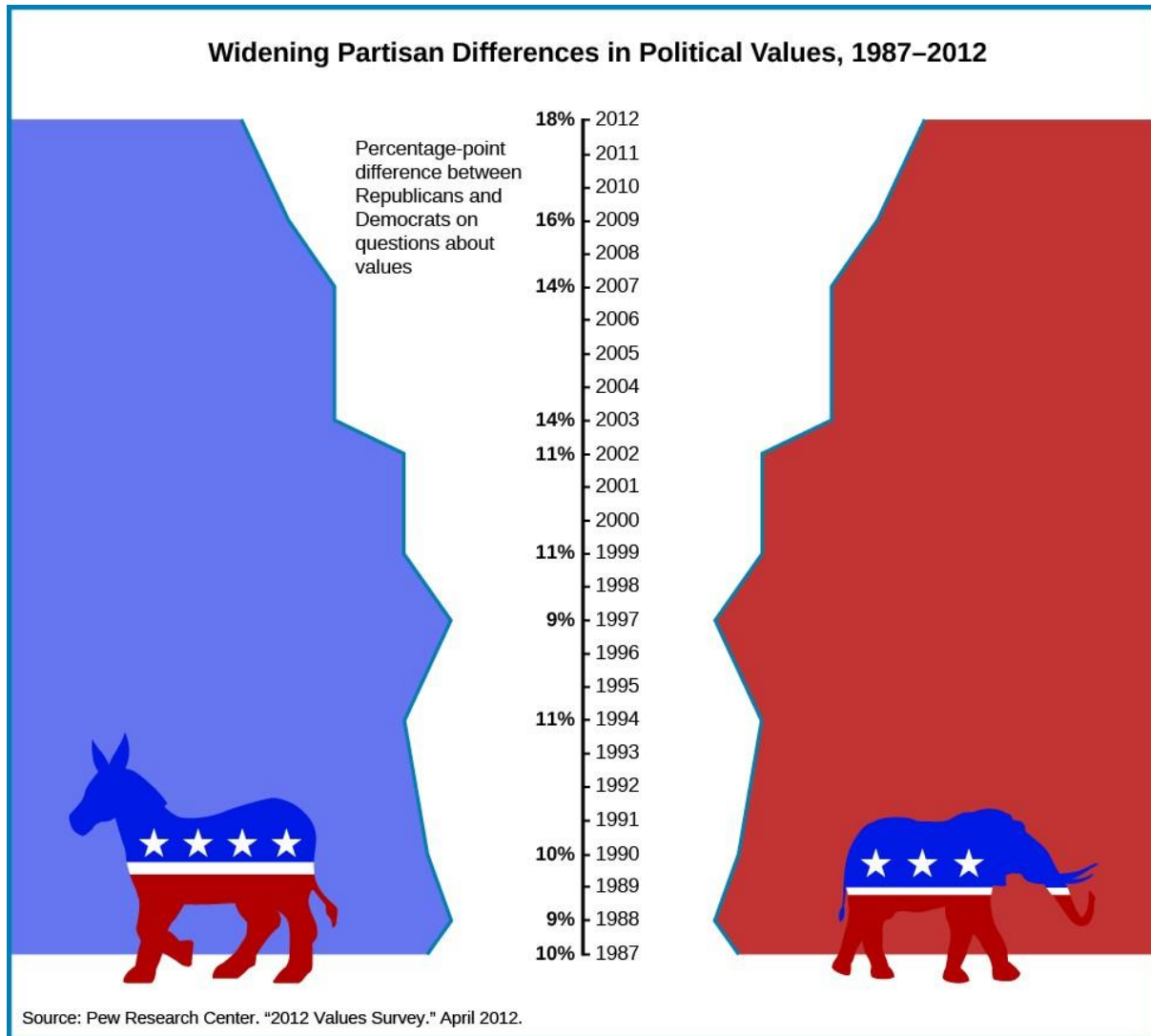


Chart 6.8 Graph of Partisan Differences

Over the years, Democrats and Republicans have moved further apart in their beliefs about the role of government. In 1987, Republican and Democratic answers to forty-eight values questions differed by an average of only 10 percent, but that difference has grown to 18 percent over the last twenty-five years.

According to some scholars, shifts led **partisanship** to become more polarized than in previous decades, as more citizens began thinking of themselves as conservative or liberal

rather than moderate.<sup>[6]</sup>

Committed **partisanship**, which is the tendency to identify with and to support (often blindly) a particular political party, alienates some Americans and particularly younger adults<sup>[7]</sup> who feel that elected representatives should vote in support of the nation's best interests instead of voting in the way their party wishes. When elected officials ignore all factors other than party position on an issue, some voters become disheartened while others become polarized.

George Washington warned against such extreme partisanship (see "Consider the Original" below). Moreover, some analysts suggest that it is distrust and even dislike of the opposing party even more than an ideological commitment to their own party that is at the heart of most partisanship among voters.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Consider the Original

### Excerpt from a Transcript of President George Washington's Farewell Address (1796)

[...] All obstructions to the execution of the laws, all combinations and *associations*, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the constituted authorities, are destructive of this fundamental principle, and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize *faction*, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a *party*, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different *parties*, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests.

However combinations or *associations* of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion [...].

President George Washington's Farewell Address (1796); at <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=15>; emphasis added; full transcript at <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=15&page=transcript>

Chart 6.9 Excerpt from George Washington

## Critical Elections and Realignment

If voters' preferences remained stable for long periods of time, and if both parties did a good job of competing for their votes, we could expect Republicans and Democrats to be reasonably competitive in any given election. Election outcomes would probably be based on the way voters compared the parties on the most important events of the day rather than on electoral strategy based on socio-demographic factors. There are many reasons we would be wrong in these expectations, however. First, the electorate is not entirely stable. Each generation of voters has been a bit different from the last. It sometimes happens that over a series of elections, parties may be unable or unwilling to adapt their positions to broader socio-demographic or economic forces.

Parties need to be aware when society changes. If leaders refuse to recognize that public opinion has changed, the party is unlikely to win in a future election. Groups that have felt that the party has served their causes in the past may decide to look elsewhere if they feel their needs are no longer being met. Either way, the party system will be upended as a result of a **party realignment**, or a shifting of party allegiances within the electorate.<sup>191</sup>

The 1932 election is considered an example of a **critical election**, one that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances. Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) won the election with almost 58% of

the popular vote and 472 electoral votes, compared to incumbent Herbert Hoover's 59 electoral votes. FDR had determined that his best path toward victory was to create a new coalition based not on region, but on the suffering of those hurt the most during the Great Depression. Thus, after the 1932 election, the political parties were largely identified as being divided by differences in their members' socio-economic status and their views on economic issues. That is, those who would most benefit from changing the economic system usually favored Democrat candidates. Urban based labor union members, ethnic Catholics, and others at the lower end of the socio-economic scale become critical parts of a FDR coalition. These groups were coupled with the historical support of the Democratic Party in the South. Based on this political alignment, the Democratic Party won five consecutive presidential elections and was able to build a political coalition of northern liberals and southern conservatives that dominated Congress into the 1990s, including holding an uninterrupted majority in the House of Representatives from 1954 to 1994.

Most elections are not **critical elections** but are known as **maintaining elections** in which the coalitions of population groups and geographic regions supporting one political party's presidential candidate over the other party's candidate remain somewhat stable. Even in maintaining elections, political analysts will look for shifts from previous elections. Only if the shifts seem to endure for several elections might it be concluded that another electoral realignment has occurred. The 1932 realignment of the parties faced the tension of changing demographic, social and economic challenges that had consequences for Democrats. All these changes particularly impacted a critical element of the 1932 FDR Democratic Party coalition—the **solid south** support for the party, but also the support for the Democrat Party nationwide.

As the South emerged from the adverse economic conditions of the Depression post World War II, the economy broadly diversified away from a predominately rural economy. This brought a large influx of Northerners migrating south to take advantage of these improved economic conditions, along with new attitudes about the role of business and government. These changes were first evident in growing Republican strength in southern cities and in newly emerging suburbs populated by a professional business class, all occurring during the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>[10]</sup>

Republican presidential candidates first broke through the solid south in so-called border states such as Virginia and Tennessee; but, Republicans also made inroads in Florida with its large number of northern and midwestern retirees as well as in Texas—due largely to economic changes.<sup>[11]</sup>

Nationwide, the improved economic conditions, coupled with the movement to the suburbs, diluted the strength of the urban based elements of the FDR coalition. A growing suburban vote, which tended to be Republican was a counter-balancing factor to the FDR Democrat Party coalition during the later half of the twentieth century. However, in recent elections during the first decades of the twenty-first century, new shifts in the suburban electorate have demonstrated that this past consistent Republican support has waned.<sup>[12]</sup>

As African Americans became an increasingly important part of the Democratic coalition in northern and Midwestern states in the 1940s through the 1960s, the party took steps to support civil rights.<sup>[13]</sup>

This occurred as many southern blacks had migrated north in search of jobs and better educational opportunities for their children, as well as to avoid many of the then legal racial segregation restrictions placed on them in the South. As civil rights reform moved to the national stage; strong rifts between northern liberal Democrats and southern conservative Democrats, who opposed civil rights, began to emerge.<sup>[14]</sup> Southern Democrats became increasingly convinced that national efforts to achieve racial integration were violating state sovereignty and existing social norms. Because of issues of civil rights, several “deep south” states saw southern Democrats, known as Dixiecrats, support third party presidential candidates in several elections. Following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, these “deep south” states failed to support Democratic Party presidential candidates in future elections. Despite these defections at the presidential level, strong local and state organizations allowed conservative Democrats throughout the South to retain control of most local and state offices as well as U.S. House and Senate seats up to the 1990s.<sup>[15]</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of non-economic issues further frayed the strength of the Democratic Party coalition. These included social and cultural issues such as abortion and gun control. The rise of organized political opposition by Evangelicals and Catholics on the abortion issue became an important factor in weakening the Democratic coalition not only in the South but throughout the nation. The 1960s saw a jump in violent crime, urban street riots, and protests over the Vietnam War, which gave rise to concerns over the basic social order. The national Democrat Party position on the war conflicted with southern conservative foreign policy beliefs about communism and the generally pro-military tradition prevalent in the South.<sup>[16]</sup> Thus, for a variety of reasons, by the 1970s, many southern voters began to slowly shift allegiance to the Republican Party, whose conservative ideology they shared—including opposition to the growing encroachment of the national government into what they viewed as state and local matters.<sup>[17]</sup> Almost fifty years after it had begun, a realignment of the two political parties resulted, with urban areas and the Northeast now solidly Democratic, and the South and rural areas overwhelmingly voting Republican. The result today is a political system that provides Republicans with considerable advantages in rural areas and most parts of the South.<sup>[18]</sup> Democrats dominate urban politics. However, there was no single critical election that led to this current alignment of political parties. That is to say realignment happened gradually, as economic and socio-demographic conditions changed--especially after the 1968 election with the rise of non-economic social issues.<sup>[19]</sup>

| Factors Leading to the Decline of the 1932 Democrat Coalition                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. improved economic conditions in the South                                                         |
| 2. rise of a business professional class                                                             |
| 3. Northern and Midwestern migration to the South                                                    |
| 4. African-American and Black migration North and increased influence in Democrat Party in the North |
| 5. conflict over civil rights                                                                        |
| 6. rise of non-economic social issues such as abortion                                               |
| 7. adoption of anti-war platform with division on foreign policy goals                               |

Chart 6.10 Factors Leading to Decline of Democrat Coalition

## Recent Presidential Elections and Demographic Alignments

A look at the 2012 presidential election shows how the opinions of different demographic groups vary.

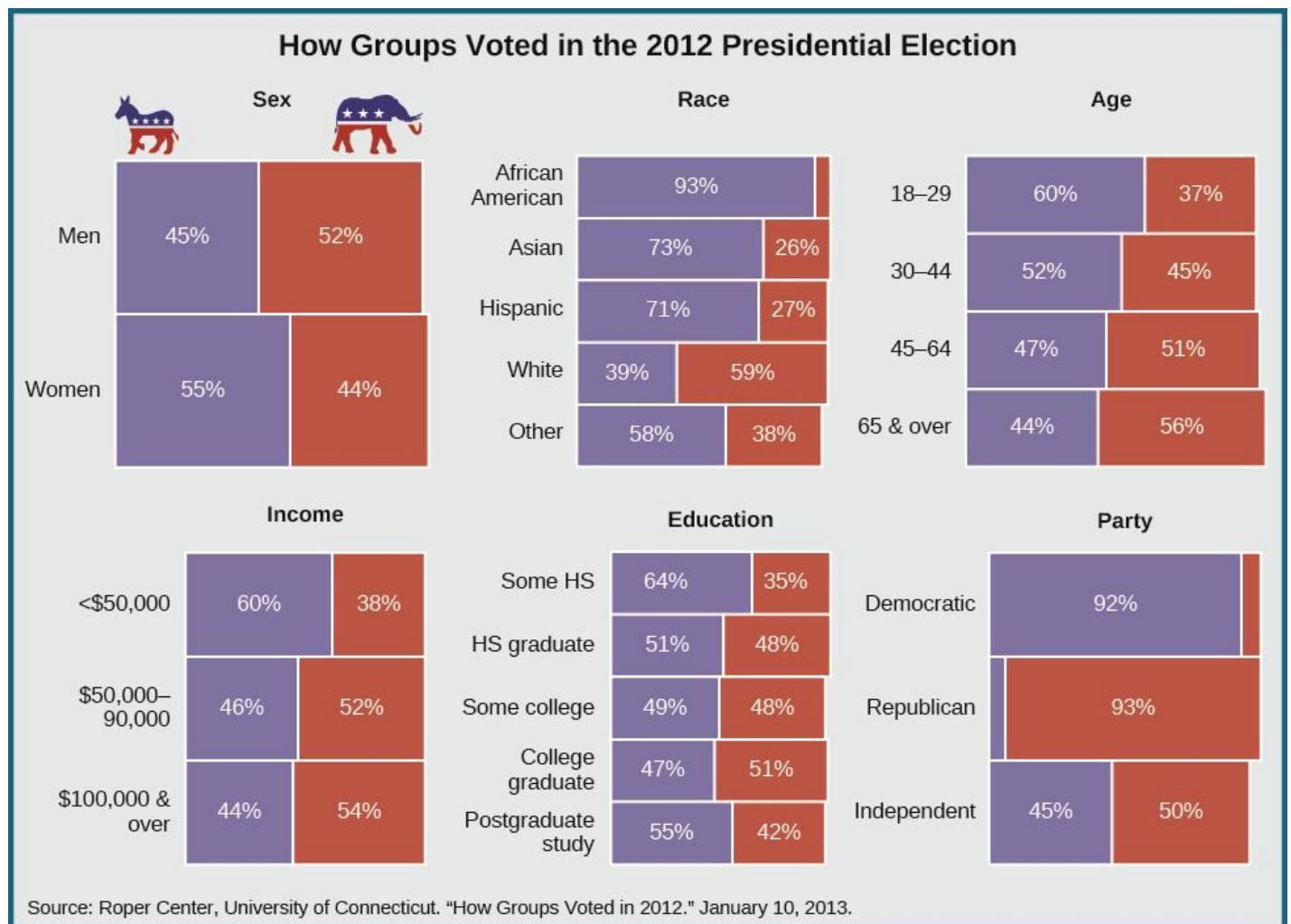


Chart 6.11 Voting Group Comparison for 2012 Election

Breaking down voters by demographic groups may reveal very different levels of support for presidential candidates among the groups.

The 2012-2020 election results show clear advantages for Democratic candidates among women and for Republican candidates among males, indicating a gender gap between the parties.

# How Groups Voted in the 2016 Presidential Election

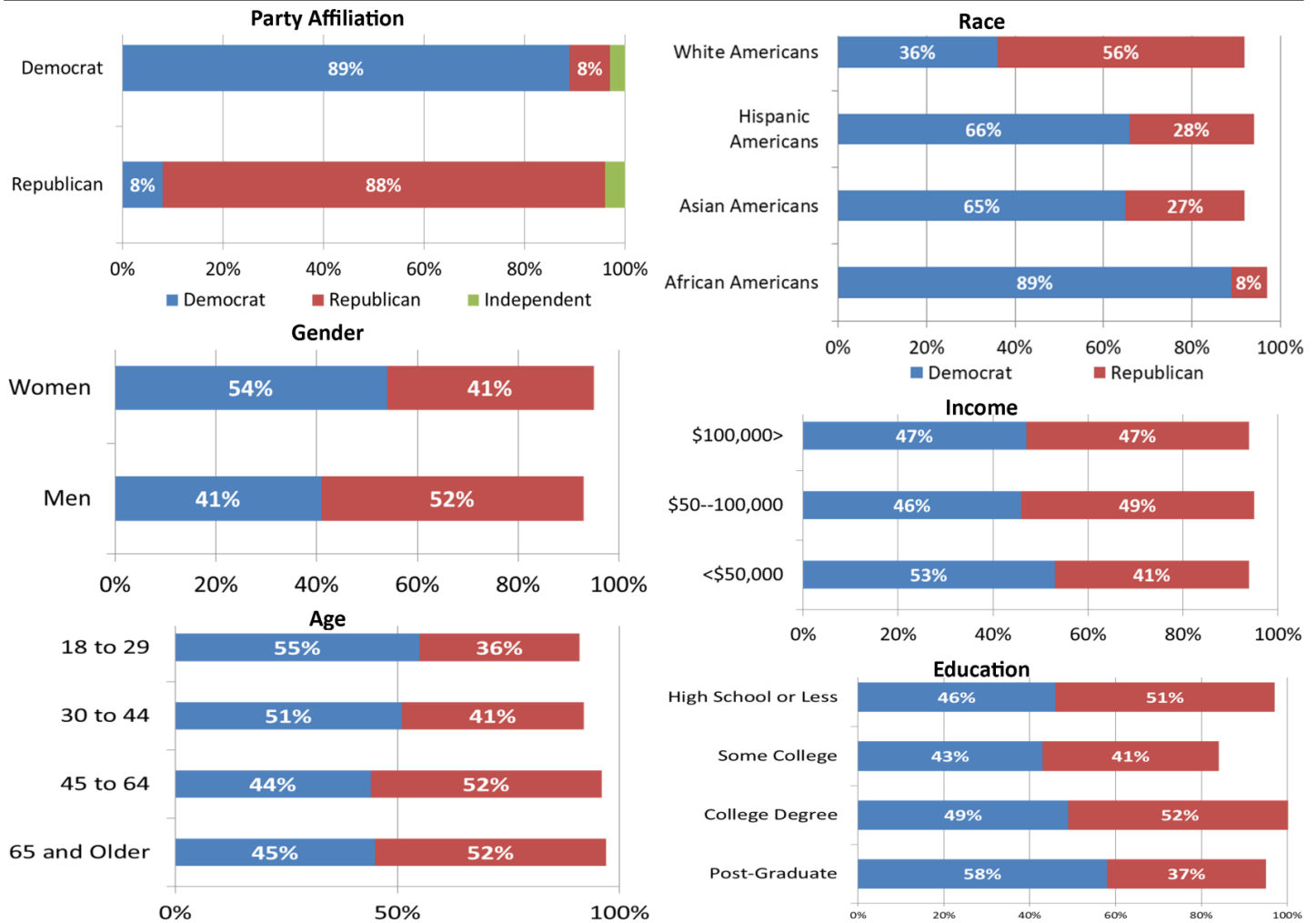


Chart 6.12 Voting Groups in 2016 Election

In 2016, the gender gap existed among voters with Democrat Hillary Clinton winning females 54% to 41%, but Democrats continued to show weakness among males with Clinton losing to Trump 41% to 52%—an eleven point gap. In the 2020 election, statistics indicate the female gender gap widened a further 15 points between Biden and Trump (57% to 42%) with the gap among males narrowing slightly to 8 points (45% for Biden to 53% for Trump).<sup>[20]</sup>

Over time, the United States has become more socially liberal, especially on topics related to race and gender; and millennials—those aged 18 to 34—are more liberal than members of older generations and show a pattern of voting Democratic.<sup>[21]</sup> For example, in 2016, age mattered as one significant set of groups—only “36%” percent of voters under thirty voted for Trump, whereas “55%” percent voted for Clinton. While this margin was down from 2012 when candidate Barak Obama received 60% of this group’s votes, Joe Biden received 60% in 2020 reaffirming the Democrat advantage among younger voters.<sup>[22]</sup>

Racial groups also varied in their support of the candidates over these three presidential elections. In 2016 “89%” of African Americans and “66%” percent of Hispanics voted for Clinton/Kane instead of Trump/Pence.<sup>[23]</sup> Conversely, “56%” of white voters supported Trump.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton won 66% of Hispanic votes, which was lower than the 71% of Hispanics voting for Obama in 2012, despite record turnout of Latinos.<sup>[24]</sup> Also, African American support for the Democratic Party in 2016 remained very strong but was lower than the 93% given to President Obama during his 2012 reelection campaign.

In 2020, Democrat Joe Biden maintained high margins among both African Americans and Hispanics, but he had slightly reduced margins from 2016. That is, President Donald Trump increased his voting percentages of each of these groups, moving from 8% to 12% among African Americans and Winning 32% of Hispanic votes in 2020 when his prior percentage was 28%.<sup>[25]</sup>

One of the most significant changes in both 2016 and 2020 occurred when comparing voting by educational background. Democrats continued, in fact increased from past elections, their positive margins with those having post-graduate study; but they also increased among the college educated.<sup>[26]</sup>

A very traditional Democratic group—those with high school education or less—was lost both in 2016 and 2020 to Republicans, with Trump gaining 51% of this group in 2016 and 54% in 2020. When the data is differentiated for both elections by race and education, the Trump support among those without a college degree was surprising to most analysts. In both elections, 66% of all whites without college degrees supported Trump and 71% of white, non-college men supported Trump.<sup>[27]</sup> While Democrats continue to win the majority of those in the lowest income bracket (under \$50,000 per year), the margin has dropped from 2012.<sup>[28]</sup>

Following the traditional pattern, identified party voters did support their own party’s candidate although in 2016 only by a slightly reduced margin, indicating some greater support for third party candidates. Despite a heated nomination fight among Republicans, the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, still received an estimated 88% of all those who identified themselves with the Republican Party.<sup>[29]</sup>

Based upon data from the National Exit Poll, both the 2016 and 2020 elections showed continuity and change in voting among socio-economic groups. It is obviously too early to determine whether the changes are permanent, leading to a new voting coalition for both parties; or, whether it is an exception to normal voting patterns.<sup>[30]</sup>

| 2020 Election            |        |                             |        |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|--------|
| Group Voting Preferences |        |                             |        |
| Biden Advantage          |        | Trump Advantage             |        |
| Black/African-American   | 87-12% | White/Caucasian             | 58-41% |
| Hispanic/Latino          | 65-32% |                             |        |
| Ages 18-29               | 60-36% | Age 65+                     | 52-47% |
| Women                    | 57-42% | Men                         | 53-45% |
| College Graduates        | 55-43% | White Non-College Graduates | 67-32% |
| Under \$50,000 Income    | 55-44% | Above \$100,000 Income      | 54-42% |

Chart 6.13 Voting Groups in 2020 Election

## General Elections and Political Party Strategy

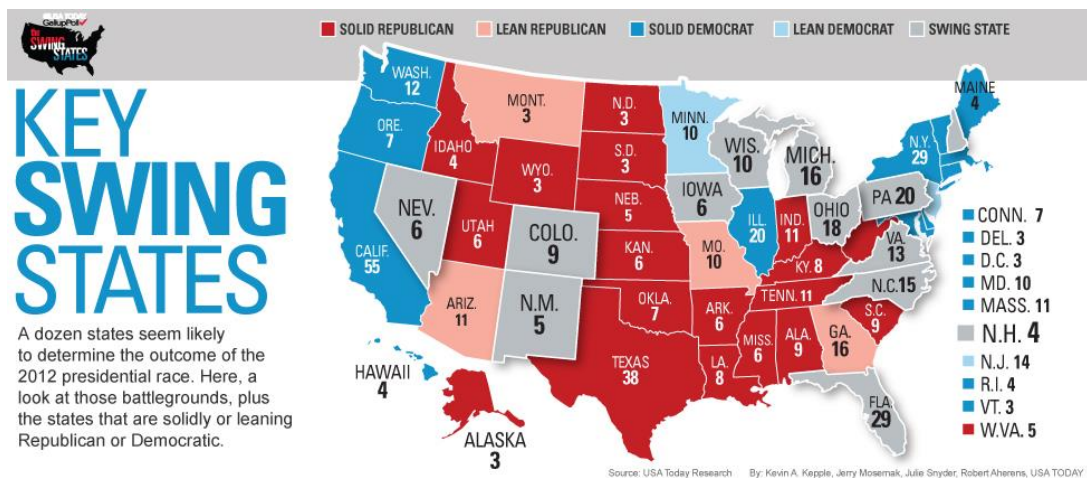


Chart 6.14 Map of Political Party Leanings

Credit for Map: USA Today Research by Kevin A. Kepple, Jerry Mosemak, Julie Snyder, Robert Aherens, USA TODAY

The **general election** campaign period occurs between mid-August and early November. These elections are simpler than primaries and caucuses because there are only two major party candidates and a few minor party candidates. About 50 percent of voters will make their decisions based on party

membership, so the candidates will focus on winning over independent voters and visiting **swing states** where the election is close.<sup>[3]</sup> Since the United States has a presidential system in which the winner is selected indirectly by a group of electors known collectively as the Electoral College, a situation with “swing states” has arisen. The electoral system is mainly winner-take-all except for two states (Maine and Nebraska), where the total of the state’s electoral votes go to the candidate who wins the plurality of the popular vote in the state. This has led to campaigns where the objective is to earn 270 electoral votes with primary focus on states that are considered “swing states,” in which the state winner is unclear

because neither political party is dominate in that state. Essentially, the other states are either solid or strongly leaning to one party or the other. In recent election cycles, 12 swing states have emerged, although in 2020 two “lean Republican states” (Arizona and Georgia) were considered “swing states.”

## Political Parties: Questions to Consider

1. What do we mean by the “party-in-the-electorate”?
2. Gallup Polls show most voters identify as “independents,” yet the number of real independents is much smaller. Why?
3. What are the two primary ideological groups that comprise the Democrat Party and the two primary groups that comprise the Republican Party?
4. What evidence have polling organizations identified to demonstrate citizen belief in the electorate becoming more polarized?
5. The 1932 presidential election is considered a “critical election” that lead to a realignment of party allegiances in the electorate. What were some key elements of the political coalition that emerged?

1. *Members of the voting public who consider themselves to be part of a political party, often called party identifiers, who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other*
2. *Because even among self-proclaimed independents, the overwhelming majority lean in the direction of one party or the other*
3. *The Democrats are comprise of liberals and populists; and the Republicans of conservatives and libertarians*
4. *Republicans and Democrats have moved further apart in their beliefs about the role of government; specific value statements regarding these roles*
5. *Voters in the southern region of the United States along with urban based union members, ethnic Catholics, and others at the lower end of the socio-economic scale became critical to the coalition*

### Terms to Remember

**critical election**—an election that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances and party affiliation

**maintaining election**—an election in which the coalitions of population groups and geographic regions supporting one political party remain somewhat stable

**party affiliation**—political party to which an individual identifies

**party-in-the-electorate**—party identifiers, members of the voting public who consider themselves to be part of a political party and consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other

**partisanship**—tendency to identify with and support a particular political party

**party realignment**—a shifting of party affiliation within the electorate

**party organization**–the formal structure of the political party and the active members responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates

**political parties**–organizations made up of groups of people with similar interests that try to directly influence public policy through their members who seek and hold public office

**swing states**–states, in a presidential election year, which neither of the two major political parties are able to dominate; and, therefore the state winner of the electoral votes are unclear until votes are tabulated; non-swing states are solidly leaning to one party or the other

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## 6.3 Political Parties:

### The Party-in-Government & Divided Government



Image 6.7 Politicians Greet Heroes of Law Enforcement

In a rare instance of united rather than divided government, members of both major political parties put aside partisan differences to show support for those injured at the Republican party practice session earlier in the week. “Republicans and Democrats came together. Not just for a baseball game. We came together to express our gratitude to law enforcement, show our support for those who were injured, and also to unite as a nation in the face of such tragedy,” wrote Speaker Paul Ryan about the 2017 Congressional Baseball Game on June 16, 2017. He is seen in this photo thanking Special Agent Crystal Griner of the Capitol Police. (Credit: Paul Ryan at <https://www.speaker.gov/video/we-are-united-2017-congressional-baseball-game>)

### Learning Objectives

- Compare the perspectives of the party-in-government and the party-in-the-electorate.
- Discuss the problems and benefits of divided government.
- Define party polarization.
- List the main explanations for partisan polarization.
- Explain the implications of partisan polarization for the party-in-government.

Chart 6.15 Learning Objectives on Divided Government and Polarization

### The Party-in-Government: Party Members Holding Public Office

One of the first challenges facing the **party-in-government**, or the party identifiers who have been elected or appointed to hold public office, is to achieve their policy goals. One problem facing the **party-in-government** relates to the design of the country’s political system.

The U.S. government is based on a complex principle of separation of powers, with power divided among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. The system is further complicated by federalism, which relegates some powers to the states, which also have separation of powers. This complexity creates several problems for maintaining party unity. The biggest is that each level and unit of government has different constituencies that the office holder must satisfy. The person elected to the White House is more beholden a national constituency than are members of the House or Senate, because members of Congress must be reelected by voters in very different states, each with its own more local constituencies and state-level and county-level parties. Some of this complexity is eased for the party that holds the executive branch of government. Executive offices are typically more visible to the voters than the legislature, in no small part because a single person holds the office. Voters are more likely to show up at the polls and vote if they feel strongly about the candidate running for president or governor, but they are also more likely to hold that person accountable for the government's failures.<sup>14</sup>

Members of the legislature from the executive's party are under a great deal of pressure to make the executive look good, because a popular president or governor may be able to help other party members win office. Even so, partisans in the legislature cannot be expected to simply obey the executive's orders. First, legislators may serve a constituency that disagrees with the executive on key matters of policy. If the issue is important enough to voters, as in the case of gun control, healthcare, or abortion rights, an office holder may feel his or her job will be in jeopardy if he or she too closely follows the party line, even if that means disagreeing with the executive.

A second challenge is that each house of the legislature has its own leadership and committee structure, and those leaders may not be in total harmony with the president. Key benefits like committee appointments, leadership positions, and money for important projects in their home district may hinge on legislators following the lead of the party. These pressures are particularly acute for the **majority party**, so named because it controls more than half the seats in one of the two chambers. The Speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader, the majority party's congressional leaders, have significant tools at their disposal to punish party members who defect on a vote. Finally, a member of the **minority party** must occasionally work with the opposition on some issues in order to accomplish any of his or her constituency's goals.

This is especially the case in the Senate, which is a super-majority institution. Sixty votes (of the 100 possible) are required to get anything accomplished, because Senate rules allow individual members to block legislation via holds and filibusters. The only way to block the blocking is to invoke *cloture*, a procedure calling for a vote on an issue, which takes 60 votes.



The political **parties in government** must represent their parties and the entire country at the same time. One way they do this is by creating separate governing and party structures in the legislature, even though these are run by the same people. Check out some of the more important leadership organizations and their partisan counterparts in the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) leadership.

To achieve their policy goals in Congress, elected members hold organization meetings particularly at the start of each session of Congress and occasionally throughout the session.

Republican meetings are called party conferences and Democrat meetings are called party caucuses. Members of each party meet in these closed sessions and discuss what items to place on the legislative agenda and make decisions about which party members should serve on the committees that draft proposed laws. Party members also elect the leaders of their respective parties in the House and the Senate, and their party **whips**. Leaders serve as party managers and are the highest-ranking members of the party in each chamber of Congress. The party **whip** ensures that members are present when a piece of legislation is to be voted on and directs them how to vote. The whip is the second-highest ranking member of the party in each chamber. Thus, both the Republicans and the Democrats have a leader and a whip in the House, and a leader and a whip in the Senate. The leader and whip of the party that holds the majority of seats in each house are known as the majority leader and the majority whip. The leader and whip of the party with fewer seats are called the minority leader and the minority whip. The party that controls the majority of seats in the House of Representatives also elects someone to serve as Speaker of the House. People elected to Congress as independents (that is, not members of either the Republican or Democratic parties) must choose a party to conference or caucus with. For example, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who ran for Senate as an independent candidate, caucuses with the Democrats in the Senate and ran for the presidency as a Democrat in both 2016 and 2020.

In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties (APSA) published an article offering a criticism of the current party system. The parties, it argued, were too similar. Distinct, cohesive political parties were critical for any well-functioning democracy. First, distinct parties offer voters clear policy choices at election time. Second, cohesive parties could deliver on their agenda, even under conditions of lower bipartisanship. The party that lost the election was also important to democracy because it served as the "loyal opposition" that could keep a check on the excesses of the party in power. Finally, the paper suggested that voters could signal whether they preferred the vision of the current leadership or of the opposition. This signaling would keep both parties accountable to the people and lead to a more effective government, better capable of meeting the country's needs.

But, the APSA article continued, U.S. political parties of the day were lacking in this regard. Rarely did they offer clear and distinct visions of the country's future, and, on the rare occasions they did, they were typically unable to enact major reforms once elected. Indeed, there was so much overlap between the parties when in office that it was difficult for voters to know whom they should hold accountable for bad results. The article concluded by advocating a set of reforms that, if implemented, would lead to more distinct parties and better government. While this description of the major parties as being too similar may have been accurate in the 1950s; that is no longer the case.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Problem of Divided Government

The problem of majority versus minority politics is particularly acute under conditions of **divided government**. Divided government occurs when one or more houses of the legislature are controlled by the party in opposition to the executive. Unified government occurs when the same party controls the executive and the legislature entirely.

Divided government can pose considerable difficulties for both the operations of the party and the government. It makes fulfilling campaign promises extremely difficult, for instance, since the cooperation (or at least the agreement) of both Congress and the president is typically needed to pass legislation. Furthermore, one party can hardly claim credit for success when the other side has been a credible partner, or when nothing can be accomplished. Party loyalty may be challenged too, because individual politicians might be forced to oppose their own party agenda if it will help their personal reelection bids.

Divided government can also be a threat to government operations, although its full impact remains unclear.<sup>[3]</sup> For example, when the divide between the parties is too great, government may shut down. A 1976 dispute between Republican president Gerald Ford and a Democrat-controlled Congress over the issue of funding for certain cabinet departments led to a ten-day shutdown of the government (although the federal government did not cease to function entirely). But beginning in the 1980s, the interpretation that Republican president Ronald Reagan's attorney general gave to a nineteenth-century law required a complete shutdown of federal government operations until a funding issue was resolved.<sup>[4]</sup>

Clearly, the parties' willingness to work together and compromise can be a very good thing. However, the past several decades have brought an increased prevalence of divided government. Since 1969, the U.S. electorate has sent the president a Congress of his own party in less than one-half of all congressional elections. During George W. Bush's first administration, the Republican majority was so narrow that a combination of resignations and defections gave the Democrats control before the next election could be held.

Over the short term, however, divided government can make for very contentious politics. A well-functioning government usually requires a certain level of responsiveness on the part of both the executive and the legislative branches. This responsiveness is hard enough if government is unified under one party. During the presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977–1980), despite the fact that both houses of Congress were controlled by Democratic majorities, the government was shut down on five occasions because of conflict between the executive and legislative branches.<sup>[5]</sup>

Shutdowns are even more likely when the president and at least one house of Congress are of opposite parties. During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, for example, the federal government shut down eight times; on seven of those occasions, the shutdown was caused by disagreements between Reagan and the Republican-controlled Senate on the one hand and the Democrats in the House on the other, over such issues as spending cuts, abortion rights, and civil rights.<sup>[6]</sup> More such disputes and government shutdowns took place during the administrations of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, when different parties controlled Congress and the presidency.

For the first few decades of the current pattern of divided government, the threat it posed to the government appears to have been muted by a high degree of **bipartisanship**, or cooperation through compromise.

Many pieces of legislation were passed in the 1960s and 1970s with reasonably high levels of support from both parties. Most members of Congress had relatively moderate voting records, with regional differences within parties that made bipartisanship on many issues more likely.



Image 6.8 President Reagan and Speaker O'Neil

In the early 1980s, Republican President Ronald Reagan (left) and Democratic Speaker of the house Tip O'Neil (right) worked together to pass key pieces of legislation, even though they opposed each other on several issues. (Credit: OpenStax; Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum)

For example, until the 1980s, northern and Midwestern Republicans were often progressive, supporting racial equality, workers' rights, and farm subsidies. Southern Democrats were frequently quite socially and racially conservative and were strong supporters of states' rights. Cross-party cooperation on these issues was frequent. But in the past few decades, the number of moderates in both houses of Congress has declined. This has made it more difficult for party leadership to work together on a range of important issues, and for members of the minority party in Congress to find policy agreement with an opposing party president.

## The Implications of Polarization

The past thirty years have brought a dramatic change in the relationship between the two parties as fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have been elected to office. As political moderates, or individuals with ideologies in the middle of the ideological spectrum, leave the political parties at all levels, the parties have grown farther apart ideologically, a result called **party polarization**.

In other words, at least organizationally and in government, Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly dissimilar from one another. In the party-in-government, this means fewer members of Congress have mixed voting records; instead they vote far more consistently on issues and are far more likely to side with their party leadership.<sup>[7]</sup>

It also means a growing number of moderate voters aren't participating in party politics. Either they are becoming independents, or they are participating only in the general election and are therefore not helping select party candidates in primaries.

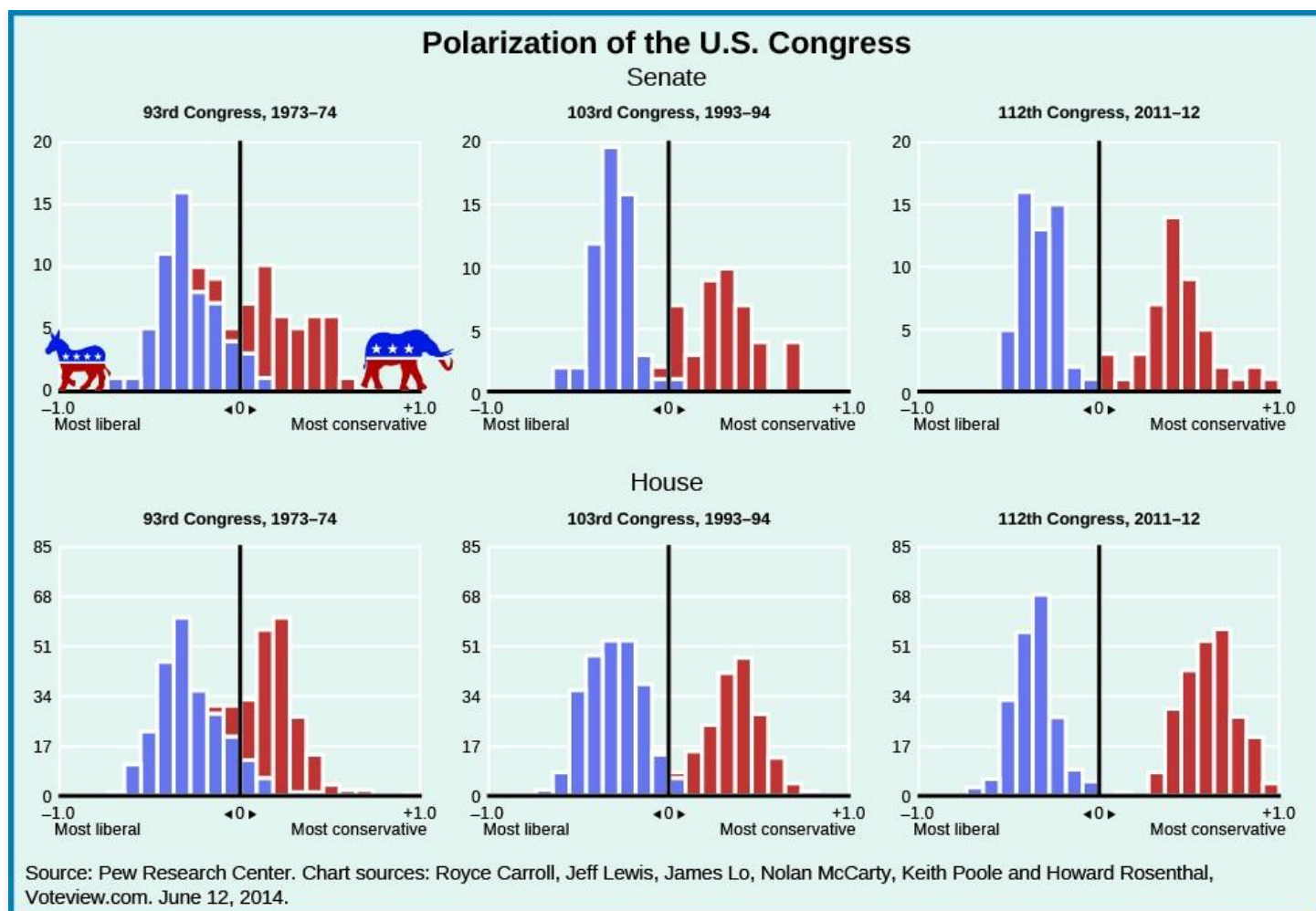


Chart 6.16 Bar Graphs Illustrating Polarization in Congress

The number of moderates has dropped since 1973 as both parties have moved toward ideological extremes.

What is most interesting about this shift to increasingly polarized parties is that it does not appear to have happened as a result of the structural reforms recommended by APSA. Rather, it has happened because moderate politicians have simply found it harder and harder to win elections. There are many conflicting theories about the causes of polarization, some of which we discuss below. But whatever its origin, party polarization in the United States does not appear to have had the net positive effects that the APSA committee was hoping for. Except for providing voters with more distinct choices, positives of polarization are hard to find. The negative impacts are many. For one thing, rather than reducing interparty conflict, polarization appears to have only amplified it. For example, the Republican Party (or

the GOP, standing for Grand Old Party) has historically been a coalition of two key and overlapping factions: smaller government/pro-business social conservatives. The GOP has held the coalition of these two groups together by opposing new social welfare programs designed to redistribute wealth while at the same time arguing for laws preferred by traditional social value conservatives. But it was also willing to compromise with more moderate/pro-business Democrats, often at the expense of social issues, prioritizing economic issues over social issues.

Beginning in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, born in part from a combination of an older third-party movement known as the Libertarian Party and a newly emerging, self-proclaimed, “Tea Party Movement,” a much more hostile view emerged toward government and government intervention in all forms. Taxation and the regulation of business were seen as a threat to capitalism and democracy. Although an anti-tax faction within the Republican Party has existed for some time, some factions of the Tea Party movement also became active at the intersection of religious liberty and social issues, especially in opposing such initiatives as same-sex marriage and abortion rights.<sup>[9]</sup> They argued that government, both directly and by neglect, threatened the ability of traditional value conservatives to observe their moral beliefs.

While the Tea Party movement and not a separate political party, 86 percent of those who identify with the movement voted in 2012 for Republicans.<sup>[9]</sup> Some members of the Republican Party are closely affiliated with the movement, and before the 2012 elections, Tea Party activist Grover Norquist exacted promises from many Republicans in Congress that they would oppose any bill that sought to raise taxes.<sup>[10]</sup> The Tea Party Movement remains active in the Republican party although less visible.

Movements on the left have also arisen. The Occupy Wall Street movement was born of the government’s response to the Great Recession of 2008 and its assistance to endangered financial institutions, provided through the Troubled Asset Relief Program, TARP. The Occupy Movement believed government moved swiftly to protect the banking industry from the worst of the recession but largely failed to protect the average person, thereby worsening the growing economic inequality in the United States.

While the Occupy Movement itself has largely fizzled, the anti-business sentiment to which it gave voice continues within the Democratic Party, and many Democrats have proclaimed their support for the movement and its ideals, if not for its tactics.<sup>[11]</sup> Bernie Sanders’ presidential run made these topics and causes even more salient, especially among younger voters. Their popularity and the growing visibility of race and social identity issues in the United States have helped sustain a movement toward the left wing of the Democratic Party. In addition to the call for greater intervention in the economy, there has been a demand within the Democrat party for higher social welfare programs following the George Floyd killing and the meeting of concerns of the LGBTQ movement.

## The Causes of Polarization

Scholars agree that some degree of **polarization** is occurring in the United States, even if some contend it is only at the elite level. But they are less certain about exactly why, or how, polarization has become such a mainstay of American politics. Several conflicting theories have been offered. The first and perhaps best

argument is that polarization is a party-in-government phenomenon driven by a decades-long sorting of the voting public, or a change in party allegiance in response to shifts in party position.<sup>[12]</sup> According to the sorting thesis, before the 1950s, voters were mostly concerned with state-level party positions rather than national party concerns. Since parties are bottom-up institutions, this meant local issues dominated elections; it also meant national-level politicians typically paid more attention to local problems than to national party politics.

But over the past several decades, voters have started identifying more with national-level party politics, and they began to demand their elected representatives become more attentive to national party positions. As a result, they have become more likely to pick parties that consistently represent national ideals, are more consistent in their candidate selection, and are more willing to elect office-holders likely to follow their party's national agenda. One example of the way social change led to party sorting revolves around race.

A second possible culprit in increased polarization is the impact of technology on the public square. Before the 1950s, most people got their news from regional newspapers and local radio stations. While some national programming did exist, most editorial control was in the hands of local publishers and editorial boards. These groups served as a filter of sorts as they tried to meet the demands of local markets.

Television was a powerful tool, with national news and editorial content that provided the same message across the country. All viewers saw the same images of the women's rights movement and the war in Vietnam. The expansion of news coverage to cable, and the consolidation of local news providers into big corporate conglomerates, amplified this nationalization. Average citizens were just as likely to learn what it meant to be a Republican from a politician in another state as from one in their own, and national news coverage made it much more difficult for politicians to run away from their votes. The information explosion that followed the heyday of network TV by way of cable, the Internet, and blogs has furthered this nationalization trend.

A final possible cause for polarization is the increasing sophistication of **gerrymandering** or the manipulation of legislative districts—redrawing district lines to improve political power, which occurs following the **census** count of U.S. citizens. According to the gerrymandering thesis, the more moderate or heterogeneous a voting district, the more moderate the politician's behavior once in office. Taking extreme or one-sided positions on many issues would be hazardous for a member who needs to build a diverse electoral coalition. If the district has been drawn to favor a political party or group, it now is necessary for the elected official to serve only the portion of the constituency that dominates.

Gerrymandering is a centuries-old practice. There has always been an incentive for legislative bodies to draw districts in such a way that sitting legislators have the best chance of keeping their jobs. But changes in law and technology have transformed gerrymandering from a crude art into a science. The first advance came with the introduction of the "one-person-one-vote" principle by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962.

Before then, it was common for many states to practice **redistricting**, or redrawing of their electoral maps, *only* if they gained or lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. This can happen once every ten years as a result of a constitutionally mandated **reapportionment** process, in which the number of House seats given to each state is adjusted to account for population changes.

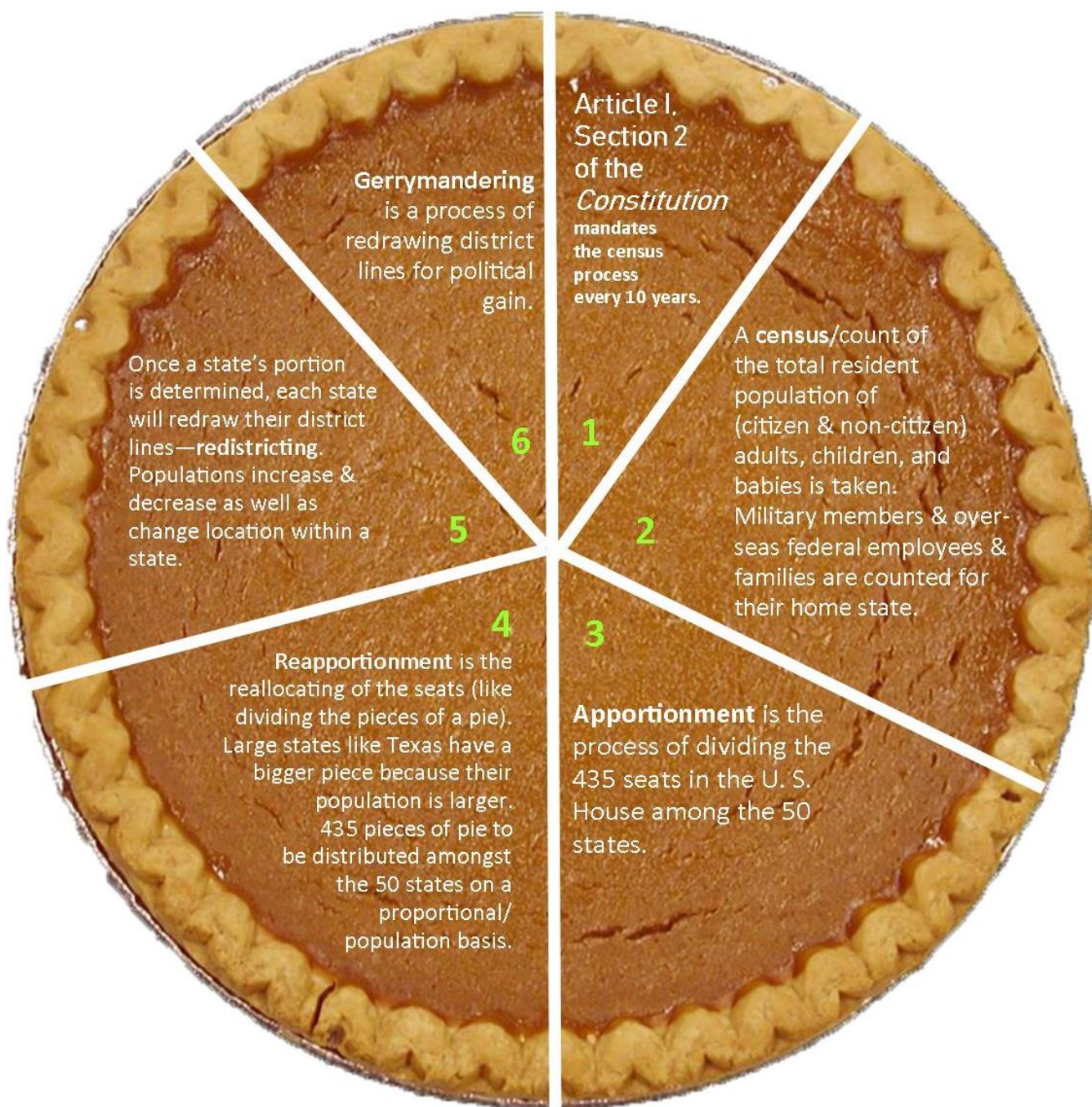


Chart 6.17 Pie Chart illustrating the Apportionment Process

But if there was no change in the number of seats, there was little incentive to shift district boundaries. After all, if a legislator had won election based on the current map, any change to the map could make losing seats more likely. Even when reapportionment led to new maps, most legislators were more concerned with protecting their own seats than with increasing the number of seats held by their party.

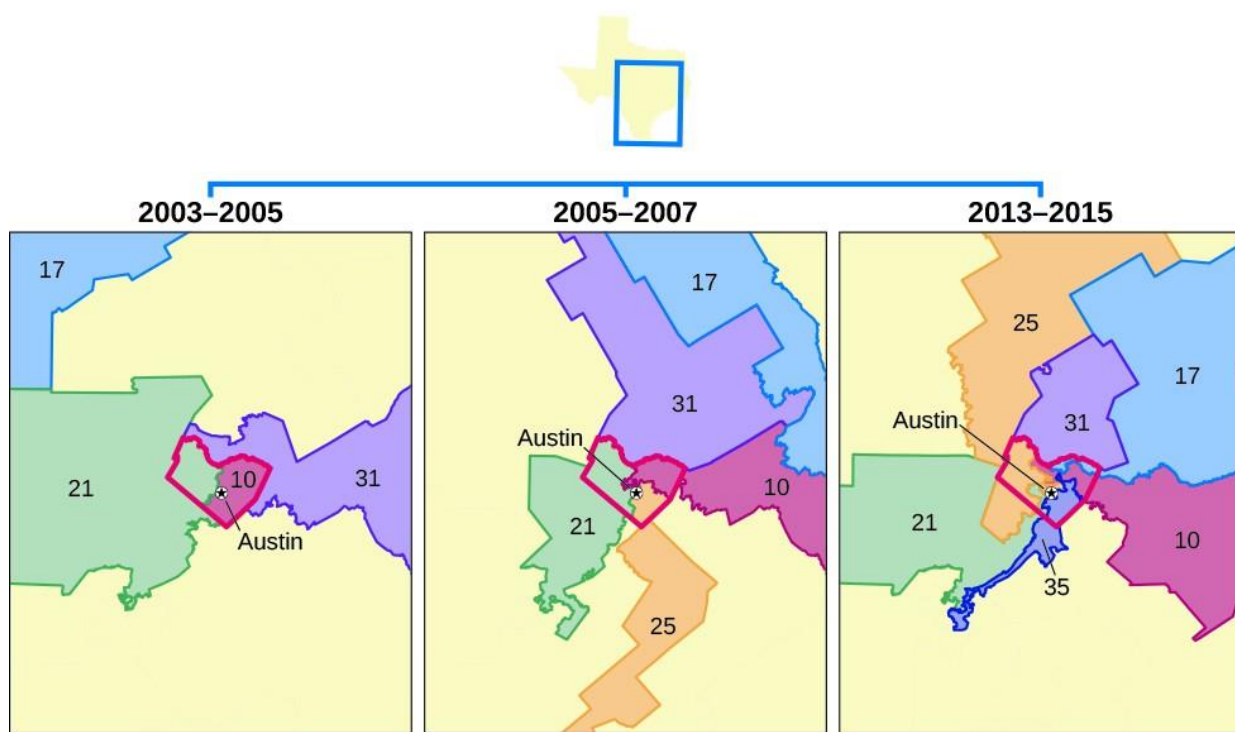
As a result, some districts had gone decades without significant adjustment, even as the U.S. population changed from largely rural to largely urban. By the early 1960s, some electoral districts had populations several times greater than those of their more rural neighbors.

However, in its one-person-one-vote decision in *Reynolds v. Simms* (1964), the Supreme Court argued that everyone's vote should count roughly the same regardless of where they lived.<sup>[13]</sup> Districts had to be adjusted so they would have roughly equal populations.

Several states therefore had to make dramatic changes to their electoral maps during the next two redistricting cycles (1970–1972 and 1980–1982). Map designers, who were no longer certain how to protect individual party members, changed tactics to try and create **safe seats** so members of their party could be assured of winning by a comfortable margin. The basic rule of thumb was that designers sought to draw districts in which their preferred party had a 55 percent or better chance of winning a given district, regardless of which candidate the party nominated.

Of course, many early efforts at post-*Reynolds* gerrymandering were crude since map designers had no good way of knowing exactly where partisans lived. At best, designers might have a rough idea of voting patterns between precincts, but they lacked the ability to know voting patterns in individual blocks or neighborhoods. They also had to contend with the inherent mobility of the U.S. population, which meant the most carefully drawn maps could be obsolete just a few years later. Designers were often forced to use crude proxies for party, such as race or the socio-economic status of a neighborhood. Some maps were so crude they were ruled unconstitutionally discriminatory by the courts.

#### Gerrymandering in Austin, TX, 2003–2015



Examples of gerrymandering in Texas, where the Republican-controlled legislature redrew House districts to reduce the number of Democratic seats by combining voters in Austin with those near the border, several hundred miles away. Today, Austin is represented by six different congressional representatives.

Chart 6.18 Gerrymandering Illustration

Proponents of the gerrymandering thesis point out that the decline in the number of moderate voters began during this period of increased redistricting. But it was not until later, they argue, that the real effects could be seen. A second advance in redistricting, via computer-aided map making, truly transformed gerrymandering into a science. Refined computing technology--the ability to collect data about potential voters--and the use of advanced algorithms have given map makers a good deal of certainty about where to place district boundaries to best predetermine the outcomes. These factors also provided better predictions about future population shifts, making the effects of gerrymandering more stable over time. Proponents argue that this increased efficiency in map drawing has led to the disappearance of moderates in Congress.

According to political scientist Nolan McCarty, there is little evidence to support the redistricting hypothesis alone. First, he argues, the Senate has become polarized just as the House of Representatives has, but people vote for Senators on a statewide basis.

There are no gerrymandered voting districts in elections for senators. Research showing that more partisan candidates first win election to the House before then running successfully for the Senate, however, helps us understand how the Senate can also become partisans.<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, states like Wyoming and Vermont, which have only one Representative and thus elect House members on a statewide basis as well, have consistently elected people at the far ends of the ideological spectrum.<sup>[15]</sup> Redistricting did contribute to polarization in the House of Representatives, but it took place largely in districts that had undergone significant change.<sup>[16]</sup> Furthermore, polarization has been occurring throughout the country, but the use of increasingly polarized district design has not. While some states have seen an increase in these practices, many states were already largely dominated by a single party (such as in the Solid South) but still elected moderate representatives. Some parts of the country have remained closely divided between the two parties, making overt attempts at gerrymandering difficult. But when coupled with the sorting phenomenon discussed above, redistricting probably is contributing to polarization, if only at the margins.

## THE POLITICS OF REDISTRICTING

Voters in several states have become so worried about the problem of gerrymandering that they have tried to deny their legislatures the ability to draw district boundaries. The hope is that by taking this power away from whichever party controls the state legislature, voters can ensure more competitive districts and fairer electoral outcomes. In 2000, voters in Arizona approved a referendum that created an independent state commission responsible for drafting legislative districts. But the Arizona legislature fought back against the creation of the commission, filing a lawsuit that claimed only the legislature had the constitutional right to draw districts. Legislators asked the courts to overturn the popular referendum and end the operation of the redistricting commission. However, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the authority of the independent commission in a 5–4 decision titled *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission* (2015).<sup>[17]</sup>

Currently, only five states use fully independent commissions—ones that do not include legislators or other elected officials—to draw the lines for both state legislative and congressional districts. These

states are Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, and Washington. In Florida, the League of Women Voters and Common Cause challenged a new voting districts map supported by state Republicans, because they did not believe it fulfilled the requirements of amendments made to the state constitution in 2010 requiring that voting districts not favor any political party or incumbent.<sup>[18]</sup>



Think you have what it takes to gerrymander a district? Play the [redistricting game](#) and see whether you can find new ways to help out old politicians.

## Political Parties: Questions to Consider

1. Is it preferable for the US government to have unified party control or divided government? Explain why.
2. What is the difference between a majority and a minority party?
3. Does gerrymandering lead to increased polarization?

1. *Open to debate: Unified party control makes government function more efficiently in many ways. For example, it is easier to enact legislation if the president and the majority in both houses of Congress are members of the same party and share the same political goals. On the other hand, divided government can provide a check on the President's agenda which may not be favored by the majority of voters who elected the members of the body of Congress from the party that differs from the President. The voters from this party may well have different political goals than the party of the President.*
2. *numbers; who holds the majority of elected seats*
3. *In summary There is little evidence to support gerrymandering as the only cause of polarization, but it appears to have an effect in some states and at the margins but must be coupled with other factors such as increased voter sorting following the switching of party allegiances based upon the nationalization of political issues.*

## Terms to Remember

**bipartisanship**—a process of cooperation through compromise

**census**—counting citizens for purposes of representation in the U. S. House and the Electoral College; data collected every 10 years to allow for reapportionment of House seats

**divided government**—a condition in which one or more houses of the legislature is controlled by the party in opposition to the executive

**gerrymandering**—the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate

**moderate**—an individual who falls in the middle of the ideological spectrum

**majority party**—the legislative party with over half the seats in a legislative body, and thus significant power to control the agenda

**minority party**–the legislative party with less than half the seats in a legislative body

**party identifiers**–individuals who represent themselves in public as being part of a party

**party-in-the-electorate**–members of the voting public who consider themselves part of a political party or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other

**party-in-government**–party identifiers who have been elected to office and are responsible for fulfilling the party's promises

**party polarization**–the shift of party positions from moderate towards ideological extremes

**reapportionment**–the reallocation of House seats between the states to account for population changes

**redistricting**–the redrawing of electoral maps

**safe seat**–district drawn so members of a party can be assured of winning by a comfortable margin

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