

10 January 2007

Political Parties in the United States

Two-party system dominating U.S. politics since the 1860s

Washington -- When America's founders wrote the U.S. Constitution in 1787, they did not envision political parties playing a role in the government. Rather, they expected constitutional provisions such as separation of powers, checks and balances, federalism and indirect election of the president by an electoral college would deter the formation of parties.

Despite these provisions, the United States in 1800 became the first nation to develop political parties organized on a national level and to transfer executive power from one party to another via an election. By the 1830s, political parties were an established part of the U.S. political environment.

Today, the Republican and Democratic parties are the two main political parties in the United States. Most elected officials serving as president, congressional representative, state governor or state legislator are members of one of these parties. The Republicans and Democrats have dominated American politics since the 1860s, and every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or Democrat.

In the 110th Congress, which convened January 4, the House of Representatives has 233 Democrats and 202 Republicans. The Senate has 49 Democrats, 49 Republicans and two independents, both of whom will meet to determine and implement policy (caucus) with the Democrats.

In a November 2006 Gallup Poll (a leading barometer of public opinion operated by the Gallop Organization), approximately 59 percent of Americans identified themselves as either Republicans or Democrats. Those who say they are independents normally have partisan leanings and often are more loyal to one of these two political parties than to the other.

The most common method for electing national and state legislators in the United States is the "single-member" district system. This means that whoever receives a plurality of the vote (that is, the greatest number of

votes in any given voting district) is elected. Unlike proportional systems, the single-member district arrangement permits only one party to win in any given district. The single-member system thus creates incentives to form two broadly based parties with sufficient popular appeal to win legislative district pluralities.

Support for American parties is multiclass and broadly based. With the exception of African-American voters -- about 88 percent of whom voted for the Democratic candidate in the 2004 presidential election -- both the Republican and Democratic parties draw significant levels of support from virtually every major U.S. socioeconomic and ethnic group.

DIVERSITY WITHIN PARTY RANKS THE NORM IN U.S. SYSTEM

Compared to political parties in other democratic nations, political parties in the United States tend to have relatively low internal unity and lack strict adherence to an ideology or set of policy goals. Generally, Republicans have tended to support limiting federal powers and protecting the authority of state and local governments, to take a conservative approach to taxation and spending, and to oppose government interference with free enterprise. In contrast, Democrats have tended to take a more expansive view of the powers of the federal government, to support raising and spending money to address social ills on a national basis, and to favor federal regulation as a tool to improve business practices. But these are broad generalizations: In U.S. politics, "conservative" Democrats and "moderate" or even "liberal" Republicans are not unusual.

The major focus for both political parties is winning elections and controlling the personnel of government. Given their broad sources of support in the electorate and their need to operate within an ideologically moderate society, American parties tend to adopt centrist policy positions and demonstrate a high level of policy flexibility. This enables the Republicans and the Democrats to tolerate great diversity within their ranks.

U.S. presidents cannot assume that their party's members in Congress will be loyal supporters of presidential programs, nor can party leaders in

Congress expect all member of their party to vote along party lines. In addition, national party organizations do not involve themselves routinely in party affairs at the state level.

Although American parties tend to be less ideologically cohesive and programmatic than parties in many democracies, they do play a major and often decisive role in shaping public policy.

ROLE OF "THIRD" PARTIES

Despite broad political influence of the Democratic and Republican parties, so-called "third" parties and independent candidates remain a feature of American politics. Most third parties have tended to flourish for a single election and then die, fade, or be absorbed into one of the major parties.

There is evidence that third parties can have a major impact on election outcomes. For example, a third-party candidate might draw votes more votes away from the candidate of the party more closely aligned with to the position of the third-party candidate, thus enabling the other party to win the election – often without receiving a majority of the vote.

Public opinion surveys since the 1990s consistently have shown a high level of popular support for the concept of a third party. But in spite of such support for a third party, these parties face many obstacles. The most significant is the fear among voters that if they vote for a third-party candidate, they, in effect, will be "wasting" their votes. Voters have been shown to engage in strategic voting by casting ballots for their second choice when they sense that a third-party candidate has no chance of winning.

The preceding article was adapted from the publication article "[Political Parties in the United States](#)" by John F. Bibby in the electronic journal, [United States Elections 2004](#).

(Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)