The Two-Party System

Does the name Earl Dodge mean anything to you? Probably not. Yet Mr. Dodge has run for President of the United States six times. He was the presidential candidate of the Prohibition Party in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and most recently, 2004.

One reason Mr. Dodge is not very well known is that he belongs to a minor party, one of the many political parties without wide voter support in this country. Two major parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, dominate American politics. That is to say, this country has a two-party system. In a typical election, only the Republican or the Democratic Party’s candidates have a reasonable chance of winning public office.

Why a Two-Party System?

In some States, and in many local communities, one of the two major parties may be overwhelmingly dominant. And it may remain so for a long time—as, for example, the Democrats were throughout the South from the post-Civil War years to the 1960s. But, on the whole, and through most of our history, the United States has been a two-party nation.

A number of factors help to explain why America has had and continues to have a two-party system. No one reason alone offers a wholly satisfactory explanation for the phenomenon. Taken together, however, several reasons do add up to a quite persuasive answer.

The Historical Basis

The two-party system is rooted in the beginnings of the nation itself. The Framers of the Constitution were opposed to political parties. As you saw in Chapter 2, the ratification of the Constitution saw the birth of America’s first two parties: the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, and the Anti-Federalists, who followed Thomas Jefferson. In short, the American party system began as a two-party system.

The Framers hoped to create a unified country; they sought to bring order out of chaos. The symbols of the political parties turn up in many forms—especially in an election year.

Objectives

1. Identify the reasons why the United States has a two-party system.
2. Understand multiparty and one-party systems and how they affect the functioning of government.
3. Describe party membership patterns in the United States.

Why It Matters

The two-party system in the United States is a product of historical forces, our electoral system, and the ideological consensus of the American people. It provides more political stability than a multiparty system and more choice than a one-party system.

Political Dictionary

- minor party
- two-party system
- single-member district
- plurality
- bipartisan
- multiparty
- coalition
- one-party system

Consider these suggestions to manage extended class time:

Point out to students that while the United States has a two-party system, many democracies around the world have multiparty systems. (Refer students to Chapter 22 for examples.) Ask student groups to consider how political life in the United States might be different with a multiparty system. Have each group create a profile of a multiparty system. What would be the benefits and drawbacks to such a system?
Chapter 5  •  Section 2

Reading Strategy

Self-Questioning

Ask students to stop at each heading as they read the section. Have them turn each heading into a question that begins with What, How, or Why and then read to answer that question.

Point-of-Use Resources

Guided Reading and Review Unit 2 booklet, p. 4 provides students with practice identifying the main ideas and key terms of this section.

Lesson Planner For complete lesson planning suggestions, see the Lesson Planner booklet, section 2.

Political Cartoons See p. 19 of the Political Cartoons booklet for a cartoon relevant to this section.

Section Support Transparencies Transparency 22, Visual Learning; Transparency 121, Political Cartoon

Voices on Government

Mary Matalin is a leading Republican campaign consultant. She worked in the Bush campaign in 2000 and 2004. She was an Assistant to the President and Counselor to the Vice President from 2001 to 2003. Here, she comments on political campaigns from the inside:

“Politics is about winning. . . . Participating in a presidential campaign full-time, as a professional, is very emotional and very draining. You don’t want to put that much effort into a race unless you have a real chance. . . . In the culture of campaigns it’s not ideological. Most of us have a philosophical grounding—we’re working for Republicans only—but in terms of issues the differences between candidates are often pretty small.”

Evaluating the Quotation

How does Matalin’s view of political campaigns fit in with what you have read about the two major parties?

Answer to . . .

Evaluating the Quotation She emphasizes that while the two major parties are not radically different, they take their competition seriously.

Organizing Information

To make sure students understand the main points of this section, you may wish to use the double web graphic organizer to the right.

Tell students that a double web graphic organizer can be used to compare and contrast two topics. Have students use the double web to compare two-party systems with multiparty systems.

Teaching Tip A template for this graphic organizer can be found in the Section Support Transparencies, Transparency 2.

The Force of Tradition

Once established, human institutions are likely to become self-perpetuating. So it has been with the two-party system. The very fact that the nation began with a two-party system has been a leading reason for the retention of a two-party system. Over time, it has become an increasingly important, self-reinforcing reason.

The point can be made this way: Most Americans accept the idea of a two-party system simply because there has always been one. This inbred support for the arrangement is a principal reason why challenges to the system—by minor parties, for example—have made so little headway. In other words, America has a two-party system because America has a two-party system.

The Electoral System

Several features of the American electoral system tend to promote the existence of but two major parties. That is to say, the basic shape, and many of the details, of the election process work in that direction.

The prevalence of single-member districts is one of the most important of these features. Nearly all of the elections held in this country—from the presidential contest on down to those at the local levels—are single-member district elections. That is, they are contests in which only one candidate is elected to each office on the ballot. They are winner-take-all elections. The winning candidate is the one who receives a plurality, or the largest number of votes cast for the office. Note that a plurality need not be a majority, which is more than half of all votes cast.

The single-member district pattern works to discourage minor parties. Because only one winner can come out of each contest, voters usually face only two viable choices: They can vote for the candidate of the party holding the office, or they can vote for the candidate of the party with the best chance of replacing the current officeholder. In short, most voters think of a vote for a minor party candidate as a “wasted vote.”

Another important aspect of the electoral system works to the same end. Much of American election law is purposely written to discourage non-major party candidates. Republicans and Democrats regularly act in a bipartisan way in

*Nearly all election law in this country is State, not federal, law—a point discussed at length in the next two chapters. But, here, note this very important point. Nearly all of the nearly 7,400 State legislators—nearly all of those persons who make State law—are either Democrats or Republicans. Only a handful of minor party members or independents now sit, or have ever sat, in State legislatures.
The American Ideological Consensus

Americans are, on the whole, an ideologically homogeneous people. That is, over time, the American people have shared many of the same ideals, the same basic principles, and the same patterns of belief. This is not to say that Americans are all alike. Clearly, this is not the case. The United States is a pluralistic society—one consisting of several distinct cultures and groups. Increasingly, the members of various ethnic, racial, religious, and other social groups compete for and share in the exercise of political power in this country. Still, there is a broad consensus—a general agreement among various groups—on fundamental matters. Nor is it to say that Americans have always agreed with one another in all matters. Far from it. The nation has been deeply divided at times: during the Civil War and in the years of the Great Depression, for example, and over such critical issues as racial discrimination, the war in Vietnam, and abortion. Still, note this very important point: this nation has not been regularly plagued by sharp and unbridgeable political divisions.

The 2004 presidential election offered a striking illustration of the point. George W. Bush and John Kerry were on the ballots of all 50 States and the District of Columbia. None of the several other serious presidential hopefuls made the ballot everywhere in 2004. To this point, non-major party candidates have made it to the ballot everywhere in only seven presidential elections. The Socialist Party’s Eugene V. Debs was the first to do so, in 1912. The Socialist candidate in 1916, Allan L. Benson, also appeared on the ballots of all of the then 48 States. In 1980 Ed Clark, the Libertarian nominee, and independent John Anderson, and in 1988 Lenora Fulani of the New Alliance Party made the ballots of all 50 States and the District of Columbia. So, too, did Libertarian Andre Marrou and independent Ross Perot in 1992. Every ballot contained the names of Libertarian Harry Browne and the Reform Party’s Ross Perot in 1996. In 2004 Libertarian Michael Badnarik was on the ballot in 48 States and the District of Columbia. Michael Peroutka of the Constitution Party was listed in 38 States, and the Green Party’s nominee, David Cobb, in 28. All of the other minor party aspirants fell far short of those totals, however. (Independent candidate Ralph Nader made it to the ballots of 34 States in 2004.)

Interpret Political Cartoons What does the cartoon imply about what parties—and candidates—stand for?

And I promise to always be loyal to my party, even if I have to change parties to do it!

Prefering for Standardized Tests

Have students read the passages under The American Ideological Consensus on pp. 121–122 and then answer the question below. Which sentence best describes consensus in the United States?

A. Americans generally agree on basic political issues.
B. Sharp political divisions in the nation make consensus difficult.
C. All Americans hold the same political views.
D. Consensus has produced two major parties that are exactly alike.
**Multiparty Systems**

Some critics argue that the American two-party system should be scrapped. They would replace it with a multiparty arrangement, a system in which several major and many lesser parties exist, seriously compete for, and actually win, public offices. Multiparty systems have long been a feature of most European democracies, and they are now found in many other democratic societies elsewhere in the world.

In the typical multiparty system, the various parties are each based on a particular interest, such as economic class, religious belief, sectional attachment, or political ideology. Those who favor such an arrangement for this country say that it would provide for a broader representation of the electorate and be more responsive to the will of the people. They claim that a multiparty system would give voters a much more meaningful choice among candidates and policy alternatives than the present two-party system does.

Clearly, multiparty systems do tend to produce a broader, more diverse representation of the electorate. At the same time, that strength is also a major weakness of a multiparty system. It often leads to instability in government. One party is often unable to win the support of a majority of the voters. As a result, the power to govern must be shared by a number of parties, in a coalition. A coalition is a temporary alliance of several groups who come together to form a working majority and so to control a government.

Several of the multiparty nations of Western Europe have long been plagued by governmental crises. They have experienced frequent changes in party control as coalitions shift and dissolve. Italy furnishes an almost nightmarish example: It has had a new government on the average of once every year ever since the end of World War II.

Historically, the American people have shunned a multiparty approach to politics. They have refused to give substantial support to any but the two major parties and their candidates. Two of the factors mentioned above—single-member districts and the American ideological consensus—seem to make the multiparty approach impossible in the United States.
One-Party Systems

In nearly all dictatorships today, only one political party is allowed. That party is the party of the ruling clique. For all practical purposes, it is quite accurate to say that in those circumstances the resulting one-party system is really a “no-party” system.

In quite another sense, this country has had several States and many local areas that can be described in one-party terms. Until the late 1950s, the Democrats dominated the politics of the South. The Republican Party was almost always the winner in New England and in the upper Midwest.

Effective two-party competition has spread fairly rapidly in the past 30 years or so. Democrats have won many offices in every northern State. Republican candidates have become more and more successful throughout the once “Solid South.” Nevertheless, about a third of the States can still be said to have a modified one-party system. That is, one of the major parties regularly wins most elections in those States. Also, while most States may have vigorous two-party competition at the Statewide level, within most of them are many areas dominated by a single party.

Party Membership Patterns

Membership in a party is purely voluntary. A person is a Republican or a Democrat, or belongs to a minor party, or is an independent—belonging to no organized party—because that is what he or she chooses to be. 2

Remember, the two major parties are broadly based. In order to gain more votes than their opponents, they must attract as much support as they possibly can. Each party has always been composed, in greater or lesser degree, of a cross section of the nation’s population. Each is made up of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; whites, African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities; professionals, farmers, and union members. Each party includes the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly; city-dwellers, suburbanites, and rural residents among its members.

It is true that the members of certain segments of the electorate tend to be aligned more solidly with one or the other of the major parties, at least for a time. Thus, in recent decades, African Americans, Catholics and Jews, and union members have voted more often for Democrats. In the same way, white males, Protestants, and the business community have been inclined to back the GOP. 3 Yet, never have all members of any group tied themselves permanently to either party.

Individuals identify themselves with a party for many reasons. Family is almost certainly the most important among them. Studies show that nearly two out of every three Americans follow the party allegiance of their parents.

1 In most States a person must declare a preference for a particular party in order to vote in that party’s primary election. That declaration is usually made as a part of the voter registration process, and it is often said to make one “a registered Republican (or Democrat).” The requirement is only a procedural one, however, and wholly a matter of individual choice.

2 GOP is common shorthand for the Republican Party. The initials stand for Grand Old Party, a nickname acquired in the latter part of the 19th century. The nickname may owe its origins to British politics. Prime Minister William Gladstone was dubbed “the Grand Old Man,” often abbreviated “GOM,” by the English press in 1882. Soon after, “GOP” appeared in headlines in the New York Tribune, the Boston Post, and other American papers.

3 Dictator Joseph Stalin, who was both leader of the Communist Party and premier of the Soviet Union, ruthlessly crushed all political opposition. Critical Thinking Why might silencing other political points of view be a disadvantage to a government?

Differentiated Instruction

Ask students to create a two-column chart with these headings: Democrats and Republicans. In the left-hand margin students should write the following categories: social welfare, race, gender, religion, income level, unions, business, government involvement. Have students look for these context clues in the text, and next to each, record what is said in the text about either party, or both. ELL

Background Note

In multiparty parliamentary systems, the largest parties are often unable to command a majority of representatives in the parliament, and are forced to form coalitions with smaller parties in order to govern. Thus, a party that receives only a few percent of the popular vote may end up in a partnership that runs the country! In the 2005 federal elections in Germany, for example, no one party won a majority of the 614 Bundestag seats. As a result, neither the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) nor the Social Democratic Party (SPD) could form a majority government, even with their traditional partners (the CDU allied with the Christian Social Union and the Free Democratic Party, and the SPD traditionally joined with the Green Party). Intense negotiations began. In the end, Angela Merkel was confirmed as leader of a surprising Grand Coalition composed of the CDU (180 seats), Christian Social Union (46 seats), and SPD (222 seats). This was an unusual partnership, however, since the CDU and the SPD had historically been opposed on many issues.

Answer to . . .

Critical Thinking Possible answer: A government that does not consider all viewpoints can never have the broad support of all the people, and could be unstable.
**Point-of-Use Resources**


- **Quiz** Unit 2 booklet, p. 5 includes matching and multiple-choice questions to check students’ understanding of Section 2 content.

- **Presentation Pro CD-ROM** Quizzes and multiple-choice questions check students’ understanding of Section 2 content.

**Answers to . . .**

### Section 2 Assessment

1. Historical precedents, tradition, an electoral system that promotes dominance by two major parties, and ideological consensus.

2. The U.S. is pluralistic because it has several distinct cultures and groups, but Americans have reached consensus on many matters, for example, having a two-party system.

3. (a) A multiparty system has several major and minor parties that all compete for public office. (b) Some people favor it because it provides a broader representation of the electorate and gives voters more choices.

4. Factors include family tradition, significant political or societal events, economic status, age, place of residence, level of education, and occupation.

5. That parties and the Americans supporting them have reached consensus on maintaining a strong two-party system.

6. Ads will vary, but should include the distinguishing factors discussed in the text.

**Interpreting Tables** Which of the minor parties shown in the table has the most specific platform?

Major events can also have a decided influence on the party affiliation of voters. Of these, the Civil War and the Depression of the 1930s have been the most significant in American political history.

Economic status also influences party choice, although generalizations are quite risky. Historically, those in higher income groups are more likely to be Republicans, while those with lower incomes tend to be Democrats.

Several other factors also affect both party choice and voting behavior, including age, place of residence, level of education, and work environment. Some of those factors may conflict with one another in the case of a particular individual—and they often do. Therefore, predicting how a person or group will vote in any given election is a risky business, which keeps the pollsters and the analysts busy until the votes are counted.

**Progress Monitoring Online**

For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
Web Code: mqa-2052