Politics and Elections

By Greg Timmons

Kerry Gordonson, Editor
Justin Coffey, Editor
Dr. Aaron Willis, Project Coordinator
Christina Trejo, Editorial Assistant

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Politics and Elections

The Origins of Political Parties

- Madison's view of "faction"
- First U.S. political parties: Federalists and Anti-Federalists
- Battle began over a strong central government vs. states' and individual rights

"Congressional Pugilists," a 1798 political cartoon

2

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a faction as "a group of persons forming a cohesive, usually contentious minority within a larger group." The interaction between such groups constitutes factionalism, the foundation of American politics: groups of people, cohesive due to their shared beliefs, struggling to be heard and striving for control of government. It brings into question whether anything would get done if all members of the government constantly argued and schemed. James Madison characterized factions as "adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" and felt that in a democracy, if a majority faction gained power it would pose a grave threat to individual rights and liberties. However, he also recognized the inevitability of factions in a diverse country whose citizens had freedoms of expression, assembly, and petition—as well as a voice in determining their elected officials. Madison argued that having representative democracy and encouraging the U.S. to develop as a large, diverse republic would prevent a "tyranny of the majority" from forming. Many of the Founders shared Madison's opinions and held a deep distrust of "faction"; however, this did not prevent them forming what would essentially become America's first political parties.

The first political parties to arise in the United States were the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The two groups emerged in the late 1780s during the battles over whether to ratify the new Constitution. Those who supported the Constitution came to be called "Federalists." They sought a strong central government to help administer the entire nation. Those who opposed this plan became known as the "Anti-Federalists." They saw the Constitution as giving too much power to the central government and felt it posed a danger to both states' rights and individual rights.

The Origin of Political Parties:
Hamilton vs. Jefferson

Hamilton	Jefferson
• Strong federal government	• Limited national authority
• Rule by elite	• Believed in ability of farmers and common people to rule themselves
• Loose interpretation of Constitution	• Strict interpretation of Constitution
• Favored national bank	• Favored payment of national debt, not state debts
• Favored paying state debts	• Opposed national bank
• Supported merchants, landowners, investors, wealthy	• Tended to support France in foreign affairs
• Tended to support Britain in foreign affairs	• Followers formed the Democratic-Republican Party, which eventually became the Democratic Party
• Followers formed the Federalist Party, which eventually became the Republican Party	

3

During George Washington's first term in office, the seeds of political faction emerged from his own cabinet when a philosophical feud developed between Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton favored a nation ruled by "elitists," whom he considered better educated and therefore better suited to lead. Jefferson, on the other hand, believed that the "common man"—meaning farmers and tradesmen—were best suited to rule.

Part of this feud grew from Hamilton's financial plans as Treasury secretary. In particular, the two men clashed over Hamilton's plan to create a national bank, which he hoped would provide for a uniform currency, stabilize the nation's weak economy, and encourage economic growth and development—especially the development of manufacturing. While Hamilton believed the national bank was constitutional under the so-called "elastic clause" (which allowed Congress to make any laws that were "necessary and proper" for the government to function effectively), Jefferson held a stricter interpretation of the clause and asserted that the only way to create a national bank was by constitutional amendment.

Hamilton and Jefferson's feud laid the groundwork for what eventually became the nation's first political parties: the Federalist Party arose around Hamilton and his followers, and the Democratic-Republican Party supported Jefferson and his followers. America's relations with the two leading European superpowers at the time, France and Britain, added foreign policy to the breach between the two parties. Federalists supported strong relations with Britain to maintain and improve trade. Democratic-Republicans favored firm ties with France, due partly to Jefferson's past experience with the French government as U.S. ambassador, as well as to a sense of loyalty to the country that had proven indispensable to America during the Revolution.
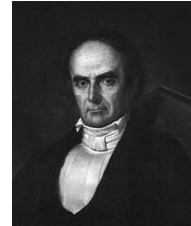
The Evolution of Political Parties

- Federalist Party: first U.S. political party
- Democratic-Republicans formed in opposition to the Federalists
- Democratic Party developed from the Democratic-Republicans
- Whig Party arose to counter the Democratic Party

Henry Clay

Andrew Jackson
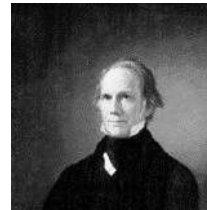
Daniel Webster   4

In time, the two political parties gained popular support and translated their visions for the nation's future into policy. The Federalist Party withered away after John Adams' failed attempt at winning a second term in 1800, and Democratic-Republicans won the presidency in every election from 1800 to 1824. With the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828, Democratic-Republicans became known simply as the Democratic Party. The Democrats opposed the commercial aristocracy of the New England states, as well as land ownership as a qualification to vote. A complex coalition of different factions, the Democrats included farmers and free laborers in both urban and rural areas; also, many Southern plantation owners supported the party because of its policies favoring farming and the "common man."

In response to the Democratic Party's dominance, a loose coalition of fiscal conservatives and Southern states' rights proponents formed the Whig Party in 1834, taking their name from the British political party that opposed the monarchy. Among the American Whig Party's more prominent members were Senators Henry Clay of Kentucky and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts (and for a time, a congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln). During its existence, the party also enjoyed the participation of several war heroes, including Zachary Taylor, Winfield Scott, and William Henry Harrison. Harrison and Taylor won the elections of 1840 and 1848, respectively, but both died in office and their successors did not fare well as presidents. The Whigs favored internal improvements and economic development, and appealed to the professional and business classes of society in towns and cities. Protestant fundamentalist elements introduced a moralistic tone to the party's philosophy, calling both for schools to teach moral values and for the national prohibition of alcohol.

The Evolution of Political Parties (continued)


An 1860 campaign poster for Abraham Lincoln

- The Republican Party rose from the ashes of the Whig Party
- The Democratic Party lost influence from its association with the Southern states during the Civil War
- The Republican Party became the dominant party in the second half of the 19th century
- The Democratic Party regained support via the reform movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

5

The Whig Party met its demise because of the issue of expansion of slavery into the territories. Deep cracks in the party among pro- and anti-slavery factions emerged along regional lines. For the 1852 election, Whig Party leaders denied the incumbent Millard Fillmore the nomination and instead ran General Winfield Scott, thinking that another war hero could come in to save the day. He lost decisively to Democratic nominee Franklin Pierce. Within four years, the Whigs had disintegrated into several smaller parties.

The Republican Party emerged in the 1850s as a coalition of former Whigs, Northern Democrats, and "Free Soilers" (those opposed to extending slavery into the territories). The party's early political philosophy combined the Whig-style economic policies with a strong antislavery focus. At its formation, the party's drew most of its support from the Northwest and Midwest. Many in 1856 considered the party's stand against slavery too radical in a decade where politicians had compromised numerous times in order to avoid conflict between the North and the South. However, Republican Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 with only a minority of the popular vote (he didn't even appear on many ballots in the South), civil war became all but a certainty. The Republicans controlled the government through the Civil War and dominated during Reconstruction; Democrats, on the other hand, became identified with the defeated South and saw their national influence greatly reduced once the war had ended. After Reconstruction, the Democrats began to rebuild their reputation and gather support, and during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Democrats forged a new identity as the party of reform. Incorporating the ideals of the Progressive Party (a "third party," to be discussed later), Democrats pushed for better working conditions for factory workers as well as for social services for the urban poor.

The Role of Political Parties

- Parties organize individuals with similar ideas who work to effect political change
- Citizens may freely choose their party affiliation, or opt to have none at all
- Parties can represent a wide variety of interests
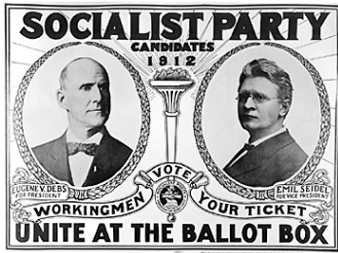- Parties aim to elect people to government who will help pass laws in their favor
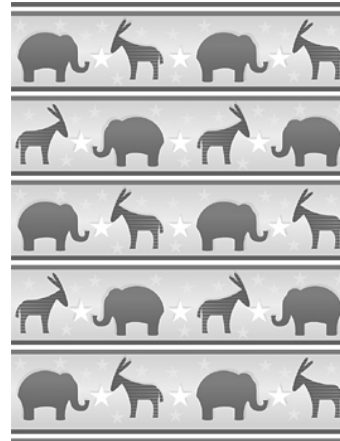
6

Political parties are organizations made up of individuals with similar views on public issues who work to put their ideas into effect through governmental action. In the United States, involvement with a political party is voluntary, and citizens can join any political party they choose.

A political party tries to shape government based on the party's political philosophy and the principles for which it stands. For instance, some parties favor helping the poor or disadvantaged and want to provide health and education benefits to all Americans. Others want to implement policies that help businesses grow and protect the country with a strong military. Others may look for better ways to protect the environment, keep the United States out of foreign conflicts, or simply lessen the government's role in citizens' lives. These parties not only seek to influence governmental decision making, they also strive to elect the very people who make policy decisions and pass laws.

Third Parties in a Two-Party System

- Usually form in opposition to one or both major parties
- Have had great influence without ever winning the presidency
- Bring attention to important public issues ignored by the major parties
- Complaints about third parties:
  – They take votes away from major candidates with similar positions
  – Supporting a third-party candidate "wastes" one's vote[7]

Third-party poster from the 1912 presidential campaign

Besides the two major parties, third parties have formed throughout the nation's history. They usually come into being in the same way the Democratic-Republican, Whig, and Republican parties did: out of opposition to one (or both) of the major parties. While no third-party candidate has ever won the presidency, many third-party politicians have been elected to local, state, and (occasionally) to national office. Third parties have had great influence on American elections, sometimes forcing the major political parties to take stronger stands on issues they had previously ignored.

Third parties occasionally face accusations of causing problems with the electoral process. One such allegation is that third parties "take votes away" from one of the major parties by promoting similar issues. While it's difficult to know why a voter chooses a candidate from a third party instead of a major party, in some cases third parties have contributed to the defeat of major-party candidates. Most third-party advocates contend that the major parties are never entitled to anyone's vote and that people may vote freely and independently for the candidate of their choice. People often vote for third-party candidates, they say, because that candidate delivered his or her message more passionately or effectively. Another criticism of third parties claims that voting for third-party candidates "wastes" a vote because these politicians don't have a realistic chance of winning. Some political experts counter this criticism by contending that many third-party voters likely wouldn't have voted at all if the third party didn't exist, and that third parties therefore can help increase participation in the political process.

Historically, the more votes a third party receives, the more the major parties pay attention to the issues that it advocates. Often a third party's success lies in bringing the public's attention to an issue previously ignored or deemed insignificant. Seeing a third party confront an issue and get its message across to voters, a major party may find reason to adopt the issue and make it fit to its philosophy, or else adjust its philosophy to incorporate the issue.