

U.S. Political Parties Enjoy Rich History

Party development responded to a need in the political system

Washington -- When most people around the world think of elephants and donkeys, they simply picture jungle and farm animals. In the United States, however, these two beasts of burden bring to mind the country's two major political parties.

Since the middle of the 19th century, the elephant has been the symbol of the Republican Party, President Bush's party, which also is known as the GOP (Grand Old Party). The donkey symbolizes the Democratic Party, which currently is the majority party in the U.S. Congress.

These are the two parties that dominate U.S. politics. Dozens of smaller parties exist, but their primary influence now occurs when they divert key votes from one of the major parties' candidates during elections.

The Democrats date back to 1800 and the election of Thomas Jefferson as the United States' third president. The nation's first two presidents were members of the now-defunct Federalist Party. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, was the first Republican elected to the office.

At the founding of the United States, the Constitution gave no role to political parties. When voting was restricted to an elite group of male property owners in the early days of the republic, there was little need to establish broad-based political organizations. But as the nation grew and more citizens gained the right to vote, the need arose to mobilize voters. Political parties filled that role, becoming a firmly established part of the political landscape.

The current Democratic Party originally was known as the Republicans, then took the name Democratic-Republicans and in the 1830s became the Democrats. Around the same time, opposition forces formed the Whig Party, which elected several presidents before disbanding. In the 1850s, core members of the Whigs joined others in opposition to the Democrats to form the current Republican Party.

Approximately two-thirds of Americans now consider themselves to be Republicans or Democrats, and thus can vote in state primary elections to nominate their party's candidates.

There is no requirement for any American to belong to a political party. Indeed, about one-third of citizens list themselves as Independents, free of any organized group. These citizens vote in general elections, but generally are not allowed to participate in the party-run state primaries, meaning they cannot vote to nominate a party's candidate or select the state's delegates to the party's national convention.

At the Democratic and Republican national conventions in summer 2008, delegates from each state will cast votes reflecting the results of their states' primary elections and determine the two party's candidates.

The broad-based participation in the nomination process means party leaders have limited control over the selection of candidates. Candidates have to build their own campaign organizations to raise funds and solicit support.

But affiliation with one of the two major parties is a good place to start building that support. Since U.S. presidential elections are determined by the Electoral College -- with each state assigned a number of electoral votes based on its population and the popular vote winner in each state taking all of that state's electoral votes -- it is difficult for a smaller party to make a significant showing in the face of the two major parties' national fundraising capabilities and grassroots support.

Historically, third parties have played an important role in influencing political trends. The American Independent Party in 1968 advocated toughness in fighting crime, and the Republican Party adopted that idea in its own platform (the principles a party supports) -- leading to a crime control act passed by Congress. The Socialist Party supported the creation of a fund to compensate the unemployed in the 1920s. This prompted the Democrats to establish unemployment insurance and the Social Security Act of 1935. In the late 1800s, the Prohibition Party, formed primarily to push

for a ban on the sale, manufacture and transport of alcoholic beverages, also promoted women's right to vote. Subsequent support by both Republicans and Democrats led to the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 1919 banning alcoholic beverages and the 19th Amendment in 1920, giving women the right to vote. The 18th Amendment was repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment to the Constitution.

The two major parties' influence extends beyond the presidency, dominating as well the Congress, the state governorships and state legislatures. Even at the local level, while some cities and counties hold nonpartisan elections, Democratic and Republican forces control the political machinery.

Today, the Democratic Party is considered the more liberal of the two, and party leaders believe government has an obligation to provide social and economic support programs for those who need them. The more conservative Republican Party advocates smaller government and counts on the growth of private enterprise to make citizens less dependent.

Some Americans are uncomfortable with the power exercised by political parties and believe they do more to confuse issues than clarify them. These voters may retaliate by splitting their ballots -- voting for candidates of different parties in the same election.

The two parties are in a constant battle for swing voters -- those who are inclined to switch parties from one election to the next. But in the end, the elephant and the donkey will continue to dominate U.S. politics for the foreseeable future.

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