

Reading Through History



What is a
Political Party?

Political Parties
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Political Parties

There are two main political parties in the United States, the Republicans and the Democrats. What is a political party? Why are there only two main parties?

A political party is a group of people who have joined together because they share common principles, common beliefs, and common values, and they seek to control government by winning elections. Members of a party work to convince the government to adopt laws, regulations, and programs which reflect their party's beliefs. Political parties have a long history, both in the United States and in other countries as well.



The United States has what is known as a two party system. A two party system is a political structure in which only two political parties have a genuine chance of winning elections. However, it does not mean that only two parties are allowed to exist, as there are numerous other smaller parties.

The two party system developed in Great Britain. In the latter half of the 1600s, and throughout the 1700s, two political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, emerged and established themselves as the dominant parties. This long-standing tradition of two main parties probably led to the eventual adoption of a similar system in the United States.

Initially, the Founding Fathers intended for the American government to avoid politics. In fact, in his farewell address, George Washington warned against the existence of political parties, suggesting that such organizations were the "enemies of government" and would only distract government from its intended purpose. However, early political disagreements gave rise to the Federalist Party and Democratic-Republican Party. Since that time, the United States has nearly always had two dominant parties. Currently, the two main political parties in the United States are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

Every political party has what is known as a platform. A platform is a public statement of the party's main beliefs and guiding principles. Each of the stated principles of a platform is known as a plank. Party platforms can be rather lengthy, with modern parties having hundreds of planks. The party will adopt or update its platform every four years at the party's national convention.

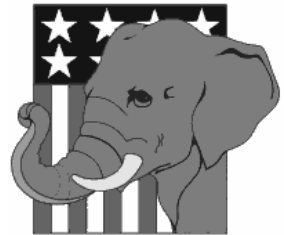
Words to watch for:

politics platform

plank grassroots

Political parties serve a wide variety of purposes. One of the most important functions a party serves is to nominate candidates. This helps a voter narrow his or her choices. Instead of voters studying a potentially limitless field of candidates, each party selects nominees. This allows the voter to focus attention on two or three candidates and make a more informed decision.

Another function of political parties is to inform voters. Whether it's through local, grassroots involvement such as letter writing campaigns, or party leaders speaking on television, parties attempt to let the general public know what's going on. This could also take the form of passing out flyers or pamphlets, or staging a large protest rally.



The party that is in power can also set the agenda. This means that the party leaders will establish a course for the nation to follow. Whether it is a good course, or a bad course, would likely determine how long that particular party stayed in power.

One final function of political parties is to serve as a watchdog. Both parties do an effective job of watching the other to make sure they are doing the things they are supposed to. If one party becomes corrupt, the other will surely inform the public.

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ Which of the following best defines a political party?
 - a. a group of people who have joined together
 - b. a group of people who share common beliefs and values
 - c. a group of people who seek to gain enormous profits
 - d. a group of people with common beliefs and values who seek to control government by winning elections

2. _____ Which of the following best defines a two party system?
 - a. a system in which only one party has a genuine chance at winning an election
 - b. a system in which only two parties have a genuine chance at winning an election
 - c. a system in which only two parties are legally allowed to exist
 - d. a system which does not favor any party over any other

3. _____ Which of the following statements best describes how George Washington felt about political parties?
 - a. Washington believed that political parties were a vital part of a functioning government.
 - b. Washington believed that political parties were a necessary evil which every government must endure.
 - c. Washington believed that political parties were the enemies of government and that they distracted government from its intended purpose.
 - d. Washington believed that political parties were mostly a good thing but that they needed to be watched at all times to ensure that they did not become corrupt.

4. _____ Which of the following correctly identifies the two main political parties in the United States today?
 - a. Whigs & Tories
 - b. Democratic-Republicans & Federalists
 - c. Democrats & Republicans
 - d. Whigs & Democrats

5. _____ Which of the following is NOT mentioned as a function of political parties?
 - a. monitor and manage elections
 - b. nominate candidates
 - c. inform the public
 - d. set the agenda

Vocabulary: *Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.*

- a. political party
 - b. politics
 - c. platform
 - d. plank
 - e. grassroots
-
6. _____ the use of strategy and manipulation to gain positions of power and control
 7. _____ a group of people who have joined together because they share common principles, common beliefs, and common values, and seek to control government by winning elections
 8. _____ relating to the common people
 9. _____ one of the stated principles which makes up a party platform
 10. _____ a public statement of a political party's main beliefs and guiding principles

Guided Reading: *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. Members of a party work to convince the _____ to adopt laws, regulations, and programs which reflect their party's beliefs.

2. A two party system is a political structure in which only two political parties have a genuine chance of winning _____.

3. The two party system developed in _____.

4. Initially, the Founding Fathers intended for the American government to avoid _____.

5. The party will adopt or update its platform every four years at the party's _____.

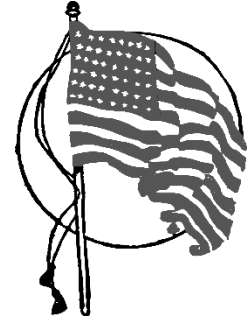
6. One of the most important functions a party serves is to _____ candidates.

7. Whether it's through local, _____ involvement such as letter writing campaigns, or party leaders speaking on television, parties attempt to let the general public know what's going on.

8. The party that is in power can also set the _____.

9. Setting the agenda means that party leaders will establish a course for the nation to _____.

10. Both parties do an effective job of _____ the other party to make sure they are doing the things they are supposed to.



Summarize: Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!



1. Who warned against the existence of political parties?
2. What does it allow the voter to do, when the political parties nominate candidates?
3. When did the Whigs and Tories become the dominant political parties in Great Britain?
4. Where did the two party system develop?
5. Why do political parties engage in letter writing campaigns, go on television, pass out flyers, or stage protest rallies?
6. How does a political party become the party that is setting the agenda?

Student Response: Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of three to five complete sentences.

7. Based on what you know of the current government, and political parties, do you feel that George Washington was correct in warning the nation about their existence? Why or why not? Explain your answer as thoroughly as possible.

Answer Key:

**Political Parties:
Multiple Choice:**

- 1) D
- 2) B
- 3) C
- 4) C
- 5) A

Vocabulary:

- 6) B
- 7) A
- 8) E
- 9) D
- 10) C

Guided Reading:

- 1) Government
- 2) Elections
- 3) Great Britain
- 4) Politics
- 5) National convention
- 6) Nominate
- 7) Grassroots
- 8) Agenda
- 9) Follow
- 10) Watching

Summarize:

1. George Washington warned against the dangers of political parties.
2. When political parties pick nominees, it allows the voter to focus on two or three candidates rather than a whole bunch.
3. The Whigs and Tories became the dominant political parties in the late 1600s and throughout the 1700s.
4. The two party system developed in Great Britain.
5. They do all these things to inform the public.
6. A political party becomes the party setting the agenda, by being the party in power.

Student Response:

7. Student answers will vary.