

Political Parties, Platforms, and Planks

Political parties are important in American politics. Yet the Constitution does not mention political parties. In fact, many of the founders, including George Washington, distrusted permanent political parties, fearing that they would become too powerful. The first two political factions to appear were the Federalists, who supported ratification of the Constitution, and the Anti-Federalists, who opposed ratification. These factions disappeared once the Constitution was ratified. Early in Washington's first administration as president, two new factions formed: the Federalists, who supported Alexander Hamilton and a group that gathered around Thomas Jefferson, called the Democratic Republicans. They were the first real parties.

Throughout most of American history, the United States has had two major parties. Today's Democratic Party can trace its origins to Jefferson's old party. Today's Republican Party can trace its origins to the election of 1854. Along the way, dozens of third parties have come and gone. Some of these parties were formed to promote a particular cause, such as the Prohibition Party or the Equal Rights Party, which demanded the vote for women. Other third parties, such as the Populists and the Greenbackers, arose for short periods around economic issues. Some third parties, such as the Progressives and the Dixiecrats, splintered off from the Republican and Democratic parties. Some parties have developed around a certain leader, such as George Wallace's American Independent Party or Ross Perot's Reform Party.

Third parties have never received high percentages of votes in elections, but they still serve important functions in the American political system. They give citizens who vote for them a forum for dissent. They also give those promoting reform a chance to air their ideas. For example, many of the ideas of the Progressives eventually were adopted by the major parties.

American political parties differ from those in many countries, where parties are often organized to promote a particular political or economic ideology such as socialism, communism, fascism, or capitalism. Others may represent a given economic interest such as labor or farmers. Some have been organized to promote a religious group or interest.

In contrast, American political parties are generally not ideological. Instead, they are made up of a loose collaboration of interests that want to win the next election. While the parties might differ on the issues, they seek to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of the electorate.

Platforms and Planks

American political parties are organized on a national, state, and local basis. Every four years, the parties hold a national convention to nominate a presidential and vice presidential candidate. They also meet to develop and approve a party platform of issues and positions upon which the candidates will run. A party platform is a set of principles, goals, and strategies designed to address pressing political issues. Each party's platform is broken down into "planks," or declarations that speak to each specific issue.

Party platforms and their planks are important to the electoral process: They give the candidates a clear political position with which they can campaign. They give voters a sense of what the

candidates believe in, the issues they think are important, and how—if elected—they will address them.

1. How did the two-party system develop in the United States?
2. What important role do third parties play in this system?
3. How are American political parties different from those in many countries?
4. How are they organized?
5. What do they do?
6. What is a party platform?
7. Why are party platforms important?
8. What is a platform plank?