



>> This aerial view of the 2012 Republican National Convention shows the festivity and crowd reaction as nominee Mitt Romney accepted the Republican presidential nomination.

Interactive Flipped Video

TEKS

2.A, 2.B, 3.B, 11.A, 11.B, 11.C, 16.A, 20.F

>> **Objectives**

Understand the origins of political parties in the United States and analyze their major functions.

Understand multiparty and one-party systems and how they affect the functioning of a political system, and explain the two-party system of the United States.

Evaluate the role of minor parties that have been active in American politics, and understand why they are important despite the fact that none has ever won the presidency.

Understand why the major parties have a decentralized structure.

>> **Key Terms**

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| political party | single-issue parties |
| political spectrum | economic protest parties |
| partisanship | parties |
| single-member districts | splinter parties |
| plurality | ward |
| bipartisan | precinct |
| consensus | George Washington |
| coalition | Theodore Roosevelt |
| ideological | Thomas Jefferson |

11.1

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” So said legendary football coach Vince Lombardi. Lombardi was talking about teams in the National Football League. He might just as well have had the Republican and Democratic parties in mind. They, too, are in the business of competing and winning.

Political Parties and What They Do

What Is a Political Party?

A **political party** is a group of persons who seek to control government through the winning of elections and the holding of public office. This definition of a political party is broad enough to cover any party including the two major parties in American politics, the Republicans and the Democrats. Another, more specific definition can be used to describe most political parties, both here and abroad: a group of persons, joined together on the basis of certain common principles, who seek to control government in order to secure the adoption of certain public policies and programs.

This latter definition, with its emphasis on principles and policy positions, will not fit the two major parties in the United States, however. The Republican and Democratic parties are not primarily principle- or issue-oriented. They are, instead, *election-oriented*.

You can better understand our two major parties if you recognize that each of them is an organization made up of three separate but closely related elements, three separate groups of party loyalists:

1. *The party organization.* This element of the party includes its leaders, its other activists, and its many “hangers-on”—all those who give their time, money, and skills to the party. In short, these are the

party “professionals,” those who run the party at the national, State, and local levels.

2. *The party in government.* This component includes the party’s candidates and officeholders, those thousands of persons who run for or hold elective or appointive offices in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches at the federal, State, and local levels of government.

3. *The party in the electorate.* These are the millions of people who call themselves Republicans or Democrats, and who support the party and its candidates through thick and thin. Many of them cast their votes on the basis of the party label, without regard to candidates or issues in an election. Observers sometimes criticize this kind of voting behavior as thoughtless. Yet knowing that a candidate is a Republican or Democrat often provides useful clues about where a candidate stands on key issues.

DRAW CONCLUSIONS Why would voters cast their votes based solely on a candidate’s party affiliation?

ELPS **ELPS 1.F.1** Learn new words about political parties from the text by using words you already know. Complete a graphic organizer to help define new words with words you are already familiar with.

The Role of Political Parties

It is clear from our history, and from the histories of other peoples as well, that political parties are absolutely essential to democratic government. They are a vital link between the people and their government, between the governed and those who govern. Indeed, many observers argue that political parties are the principal means by which the will of the people is made known to government and by which government is held accountable to the people.

Parties serve the democratic ideal in another significant way: They work to blunt conflict; they are “power brokers.” Political parties seek to modify the contending views of various interests and groups, encourage compromise, and so help to unify, rather than divide, the American people. They are very often successful in their attempts to soften the impact of extremists at both ends of the **political spectrum**, the range of political views.

Again, parties are indispensable to democratic government and, so, to American government. That fact is underscored by the several significant functions they perform.



>> The two campaign signs in the yard of this home demonstrate that even members of the same family can have different opinions about which political candidate should be elected.



>> The grassroots Tea Party movement, which gained national attention during the 2010 election campaign, advocated lower taxes, less government, and reduction of the national debt.

Nominating Candidates The major function of a political party is to nominate—name—candidates for public office. That is, parties select candidates and present them to the voters. Then the parties work to help those nominees win elections.

In a functioning democracy, there must be some way to find (choose and recruit) candidates for office. There must also be some mechanism to gather support for those candidates. Parties are the best device yet found to do these jobs.

The nominating function is almost exclusively a party function in the United States. It is the one activity that most clearly sets political parties apart from all of the other groups that operate in the political process.

Informing and Activating Supporters Parties inform the people and inspire and activate their interest and their participation in public affairs, including encouraging changes on political issues. Other groups also perform this function—in particular, the news media and interest groups.

Parties try to inform and inspire voters in several ways. Mostly, they do so by campaigning for their candidates, taking stands on current issues, and criticizing opposing candidates and the positions they adopt.



>> The stage for the 2012 Democratic National Convention, with the theme Americans Coming Together, exemplified the goal of such events: to create enthusiasm for the party's candidates.

How Political Parties Inform People Each party tries to inform the people as it thinks they should be informed—that is, to its own advantage. It conducts its “educational” efforts through pamphlets, signs, buttons, and stickers; advertisements in newspapers and magazines and via radio, television, the Internet, and text messaging; at speeches, rallies, and conventions, and in a variety of other ways.

Remember, both parties want to win elections, and that consideration has much to do with the stands they take on most issues. Both Republicans and Democrats try to shape positions that will attract as many voters as possible—and at the same time, offend as few as possible.

The Bonding Agent Function In the business world, a bond is an agreement that protects a person or a company against loss caused by a third party. In politics, a political party acts as a “bonding agent,” to ensure the good performance of its candidates and elected officeholders.

In choosing its candidates, the party tries to make sure that they are men and women who are both qualified and of good character—or, at the least, that they are not unqualified for the public offices they seek.

The party also prompts its successful candidates to perform well in office. The democratic process imposes this bonding agent function on a party, whether the party really wants to perform it or not. If it fails to assume the responsibility, both the party and its candidates may suffer the consequences of that failure in future elections.

Governing In several respects, government in the United States is government by party. For example, public officeholders—those who govern—are regularly chosen on the basis of party. Congress and the State legislatures are organized on party lines, and they conduct much of their business on the basis of **partisanship**—the strong support of their party and its policy stands. Most appointments to executive offices, at both the federal and State levels, are made with an eye to party.

Political Parties Help the Government Run More Smoothly In yet another sense, parties provide a basis for the conduct of government. In the complicated separation of powers arrangement, the executive and legislative branches must cooperate with one another if government is to accomplish anything. It is political parties that regularly provide the channels through which these two branches are able to work together. Political parties have also played a role in the process of constitutional change.

Consider this important example: The Constitution's cumbersome system for choosing a President works principally because political parties reshaped it in its earliest years, and they have made it work ever since.

The Watchdog Function Parties act as watchdogs over the conduct of the public's business. This is particularly true of the party out of power. It plays this role as it criticizes the policies and behavior of the party in power. In American politics, the party in power is the party that controls the executive branch of government—the presidency at the national level or the governorship at the State level.

In effect, the party out of power attempts to convince the voters that they should “throw the rascals out,” that the “outs” should become the “ins” and the “ins” the “outs.” The scrutiny and criticism by the “out” party tends to make the “rascals” more careful of their public charge and more responsive to the wishes and concerns of the people. In short, the party out of power plays the important role of “the loyal opposition”—opposed to the party in power but loyal to the people and the nation.

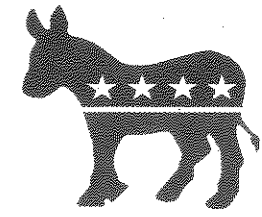
In one such case, when an individual from a party out of power challenged a decision made by a party in power in court, it backfired on the party out of power. The case was *Marbury v. Madison*, and the court was the Supreme Court.

In 1803, when Marbury questioned why his presidential appointment from the previous administration had not been upheld per Section 13 of the Judiciary Act of 1789, the Supreme Court declared Section 13 unconstitutional. However, this case of an individual challenging an issue in court resulted in a huge change for the Supreme Court. It established the power of judicial review for the Supreme Court.

Political Parties Help Make Democracy Work Again, these functions performed by political parties and, particularly, the two major parties, testify to the important role they play in making democracy work in this country. You might well remember that point the next time a comedian on late-night television ridicules some candidate, party, or officeholder.

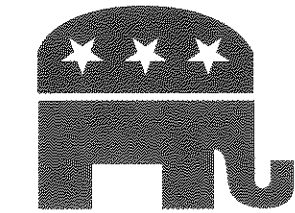
There was a time when the parties played an even larger role in the nation's affairs than they do today. For example, in what has been called “the golden age of parties,” from roughly the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, party organizations operated as major welfare organizations in many places in the United States. They regularly helped newly arrived immigrants and many others among the poor to obtain food, housing, and jobs. Often they did this to win the support of these people at the polls. That once-

Democratic Party



VS

Republican Party



>> A political party logo is a symbol that represents the entire party. The Republicans and Democrats have adopted the elephant and the donkey respectively to represent their parties.

important welfare function has long since been taken over by a number of government programs put in place in the twentieth century.

? IDENTIFY CENTRAL ISSUES How do political parties help to unify the American people?

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The Two-Party System

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 in the United States, only the Republican or the Democratic Party's candidates have a reasonable chance of winning public office.

It is true that in some States, and in many local communities, one of the two major parties may be overwhelmingly dominant, winning election after election. And it may do so for a long time—as, for example, the Democratic Party dominated the politics of the South from the years after the Civil War into