








The Politics of a Democracy

There are some values that most Americans hold. These values are included in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These values influence laws, influence the way the government is operated, and influence the system used to select our leaders. The people who want to be decision makers (the candidates for political offices) try to appeal to the values of the American people.

Some basic American values are listed below.

-  freedom of speech in all its forms
-  equality in all things
-  life, liberty, and happiness
-  civil rights
-  democracy
-  religious freedom
-  separation of church and state

One way Americans show their values is through the election process. They show them by voting for **candidates** who seem to have values like their own. Elections and other parts of the political system of the United States are based on the values of the American people.

Political Parties

A **political party** is a group of people who want to control the government. While the Constitution makes no mention of political parties, our system of government has come to depend on two major parties. The parties that are most important today are the **Democrats** and the **Republicans**.

Each party is made up of people who share some basic beliefs about how our government should be run. The two parties compete with each other to get their own candidates elected to public office. Once in office, elected officials usually make decisions that are in keeping with their party's beliefs. Though the differences between the Democrats and Republicans are not always clear cut, there are some traditional distinctions associated with the two parties.

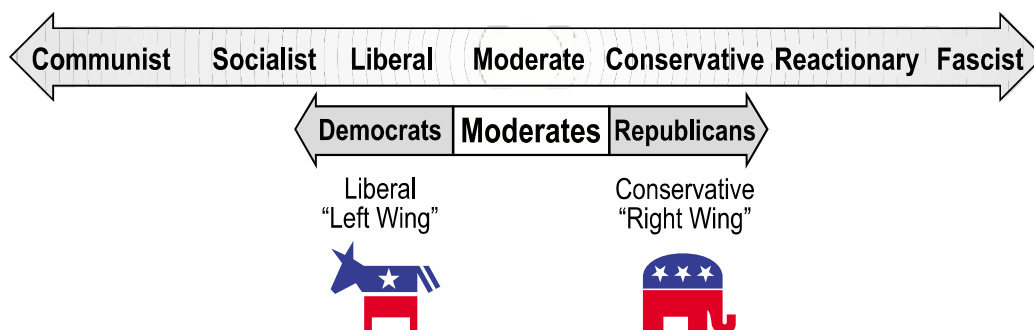
Distinctions between Parties

Members of the Democratic party are traditionally associated with the label “**liberal**,” meaning someone who favors change or reform. Democrats generally support a strong national government which is willing to spend money on **social programs** (programs which help the poor and others in need of assistance). Because of these beliefs, the Democratic party has often appealed to working-class citizens, the poor, and minorities. “**Conservative**” (not wanting change) is the term most often linked with the Republican party. Republicans generally oppose a too powerful central government and high taxes. Republicans often talk of **decentralizing** government by moving power to the state or local level. The Republican party is often supported by the wealthy, by business owners, and by the middle class.

Though the Democrats and the Republicans are the two major political parties today, it is permissible for **third parties** (those other than the two major parties) to enter the political scene. Historically, third parties have not had too great an effect on the political process. Popular ideas of the third party are often absorbed into one or both of the major parties. In some cases, the third party has drawn votes away from one of the major parties, allowing the other major party to win.

Similarities between Parties

While the preceding paragraphs have identified some differences generally associated with the two major parties, some people believe that the differences are becoming less obvious. **Extremists**, persons with very liberal or conservative views, infrequently run for office because they are not likely to get enough support to be elected. **Moderates**, those in the middle, seek to appeal to members of both parties. The continuum shown below gives some idea of the range of political beliefs associated with the two parties.



An **independent** might vote any position on the continuum. Independents are voters who do not regularly identify themselves with a political party or support candidates of a particular party.

Political Party Platforms

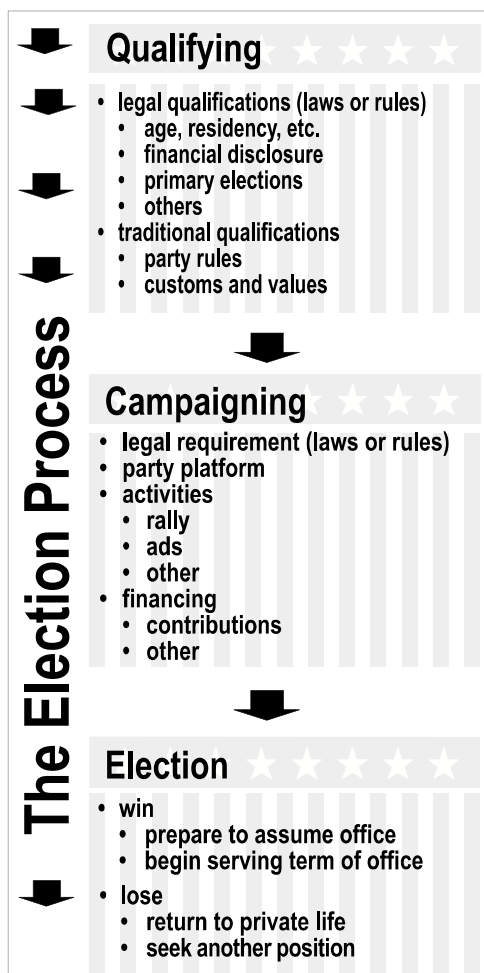
In an election **campaign**, each party tries to explain its stand on issues. To do this, the party develops a political **platform**. A political platform is a list of things a party believes in and is willing to work to bring about.

The platform lists the issues of the campaign, explains the party position on that issue, and tells the voters what to expect the party's candidate to do if he or she is elected. Below is a sample of a political platform.

Political Platform	
Issues	Position
Taxes	Taxes need to be raised to pay for a stronger defense.
Nuclear weapons in space	Nuclear weapons should not be placed in space unless another nation does so first.
Farm prices	The government should make sure that farmers get a "fair" price for their goods.

The Election Process

In order to hold a political office, candidates must first win elections. Those interested in being elected must first meet the legal requirements for the office they are seeking, such as age or residency requirements. Candidates must then campaign for the political office they desire.



Campaigning may involve a variety of activities, including public appearances such as rallies or debates, advertisements on radio and TV, and door-to-door visits. Campaigning requires money, and candidates often seek donations from individuals and interest groups to finance their campaign. Candidates must publicly disclose all donations received and money spent.

The last two steps of the election process—campaigning and election—can take place as many as three times before a final decision is made. Candidates may take part in primary, runoff, and general elections.

Primary Election

Each party has several candidates in the **primary election**. These candidates are either nominated by their political party (as in presidential elections) or self-

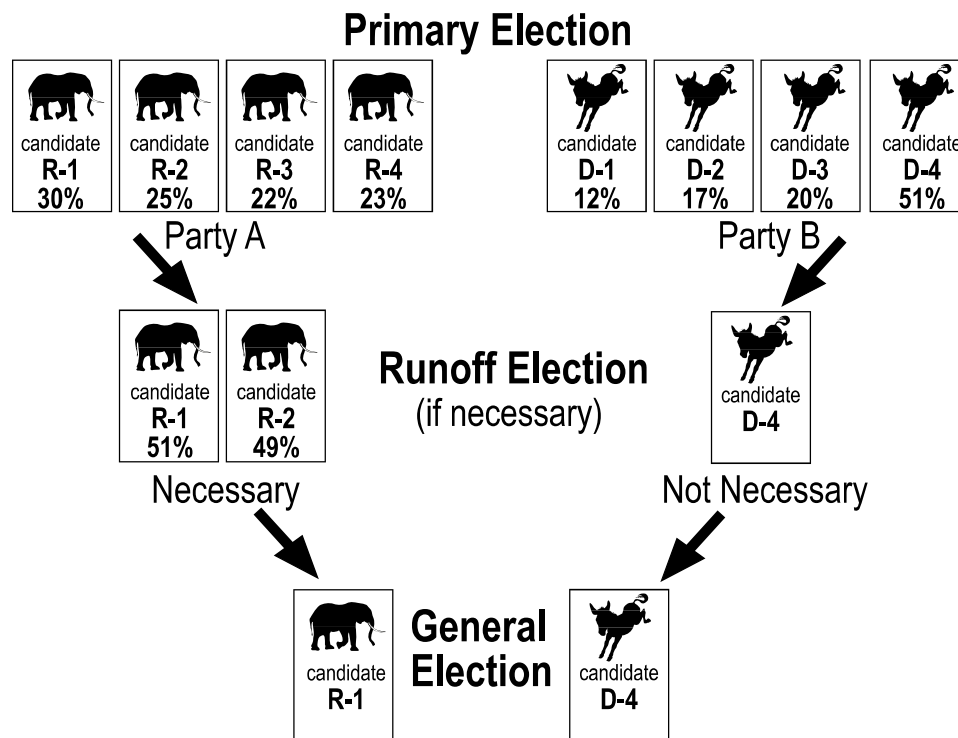
announced. In **closed primaries**, only voters who are registered for that party can vote on the party's candidates. Usually an independent can not vote in a closed primary election. (This is not true in some states. Some states have **open primaries** and let voters vote for either party in the primary election.) If one candidate wins a majority (more than half) of the votes, he or she becomes the party's candidate in the **general election**.

Runoff Election

If no candidate wins a majority of the votes, a **runoff** election is held for the top two vote-getters in the primary. Only that party's voters can vote in a runoff. The winner of the runoff becomes the party's candidate in the general election.

General Election

General elections are regularly scheduled statewide elections in which voters make the final selection for public officeholders. Each party has one candidate in the general election. Voters from either party can vote for either candidate. The following diagram illustrates the steps in the election process.



The Electoral College

While the winners of most elections are determined simply by counting the number of **ballots** (votes) cast for each candidate, presidential elections are decided by the **Electoral College**. The founders of the Constitution feared that citizens could not make a wise choice in choosing a President because they knew little about potential leaders. They also feared that the most popular candidate might not be the best President. Article II, Section I, established the Electoral College, which is made up of electors equal to the number of members in the House and Senate plus three for the District of Columbia.

Each state gets one electoral vote for each of its senators and representatives in Congress. The candidate who gets the most votes in a state receives *all* of the electoral votes of that state. Shortly after the general election, **electors** (**delegates** from each state) cast their ballots to determine the winner of the presidential election. In order to win, one candidate must receive a majority of the electoral votes.

The Electoral College is a winner-take-all system. The party whose candidate receives the majority of votes in the state, even if it is only one vote more than the other party's candidate, wins all the electoral votes for that state. Most states do not legally require electors to vote for the candidate who receives the most **popular votes**, and a few electors have ignored this tradition; however, none have changed any final election results.