Political parties are one of the major ways citizens participate in the political process and influence the direction of government.

Growth of American Parties

SS.7.C.2.8, LA.7.1.6.1, LA.7.1.7.3

GUIDING QUESTION Why did political parties develop in the United States?

Do you and your friends share opinions about the things you like and dislike? Do you discuss your feelings about school, sports, or music? Have you ever joined a group that shares your interests? In a similar way, some Americans join a political party to share ideas with others who feel as they do. A political party is a group of people with broad, shared interests. They join together to help the candidates they support win elections. They also work to shape government policy.

Two major parties have competed for power during most of the nation's history. For this reason, the United States is said to have a two-party system. The names and makeup of the two main parties have changed over time.

The First Parties

The U.S. Constitution does not mention political parties. In fact, many of the leaders who wrote the Constitution did not like the idea of political parties. They feared that parties, or “factions” as they called them, would lead to divisions that would weaken the new nation. Despite this, by the late 1790s two groups had formed to compete for political power. Parties arose because people had different ideas about what the government should do.

Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson were the leaders of the first parties. Hamilton thought that if the federal government was too weak, individuals’ rights would be in danger. So he favored a strong national government. He also believed that a strong central government was needed to have a healthy economy. Jefferson, on the other hand, wanted to protect people’s rights by limiting the power of the national government. He supported more power for the states, which were closer to the people.

Hamilton and his followers formed the Federalist Party. Jefferson and his supporters formed the Democratic-Republican Party. Starting in 1800, Jefferson’s party grew stronger, while the Federalists lost support. The Federalist Party soon faded away.

Today’s Major Parties Form

By 1824, the Democratic-Republican Party was so dominant that four presidential candidates ran under the party’s banner. After a close-fought election, John Quincy Adams defeated Andrew Jackson. Tensions between the two candidates and their supporters remained. Sectional differences among North, South, and West increased the tension. By 1828, the Democratic-Republican Party had split. Those who supported candidate Andrew Jackson called themselves the Democratic Party. They wanted to stress their ties to common people. Those who opposed Jackson called themselves National Republicans.

The National Republicans faded quickly, though. The Whig Party took their place as the main opponent of the Democrats until the 1850s. The Whigs tried to win broad support by proposing ambitious internal improvements such as roads and canals. They also tried to avoid the controversial issue of slavery.

In 1854 people who opposed slavery joined together to form a new party. They called themselves the Republican Party. Some Republicans thought slavery should be abolished in the Southern states. Others did not go that far, but they did agree that it should not spread to the territories controlled by the United States government. Democrats wanted to allow the people in each territory to decide for themselves whether to permit slavery. As the slavery issue grew more important, the Whig Party dissolved. Since the late 1850s, the Republicans and the Democrats have remained the major parties in our nation.

Describing How did Federalists view the power of the national government?
Third Parties
SS.7.C.2.8, SS.7.C.2.10, SS.7.C.3.1

GUIDING QUESTION What is the importance of third parties in American politics?

Throughout American history, smaller political parties have competed for power with the two main parties. These smaller parties are known as third parties.

Third parties have not had widespread support from voters. Yet they have influenced American politics in important ways. For example, third parties have often promoted ideas that were unpopular at first. Over time some of these ideas gained popularity and became law. The Populist Party of the 1890s called for senators to be elected directly by voters. It also wanted the workday to last only eight hours. The Progressive Party of the early 1900s pushed for changes, too. It worked to give voters a more direct role in government and more power to make laws.

Types of Third Parties

Some third parties form to promote a particular cause. These are known as single-issue political parties. For example, the Prohibition Party was formed in 1872. Its main purpose was to ban the sale of alcohol. Single-issue parties usually fade away when the issue loses importance or is adopted by a major party.

Other third parties are formed by people with a certain ideology, or set of beliefs, about government. One example is the Communist Party USA. Members believe that the government or workers should own all resources and businesses. Third parties united by an ideology can last for a long time.

Still other third parties unite around an independent leader with a strong personality. Such parties often do not last beyond the defeat of that candidate. Ross Perot was one such leader. He ran for president as an independent in 1992. Then, he founded the Reform Party when he ran again in 1996. He lost both elections and the Reform Party has grown weaker in recent years.

Third parties have a hard time competing against the two larger, more powerful parties. The names of Republican and Democratic candidates are always placed on the ballot in many states. On the other hand, third-party candidates must gather signatures from a large number of voters in order to appear on the ballot. These candidates have more hurdles to overcome. As a result, third parties often cannot raise enough money to compete effectively.

Other Party Systems

Political parties exist in most countries, but two-party systems are rare. The role that political parties play differs with each nation’s political system.

Many democracies have multiparty systems; that is, they have three or more parties. For example, Canada has three major parties, France has more than eight, and Israel has more than twenty. In these countries, one party rarely wins enough support to control the government. As a result, several parties must work together.

Some nations have a one-party system. In the People’s Republic of China, for instance, only one party—the Communist Party—exists. As a result, only Communist Party members fill government positions. No rival candidates are allowed to run for office. Thus, elections are mainly for show. One-party systems are not democratic.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Name three types of third parties and explain why they form.

Florida CONNECTION

Florida’s Republican Party

Florida’s Republican Party was organized after the Civil War and dominated state politics until 1876, when the Democrats won control of the statehouse. From 1889 to 1937 a poll tax kept most of the state’s African Americans, who were then mostly Republican, from voting. The Democrats won every gubernatorial election but one from 1876 through 1962. SS.7.C.2.8
21st Century SKILLS
Communication: Organizing Ideas

Develop and complete a graphic organizer to identify and describe the various types of party systems.

SS.7.C.3.1

Party Differences
SS.7.C.2.8

GUIDING QUESTION How do America's major modern political parties differ?

Today's two major U.S. parties differ in their ideas about how much the government should be involved in the economy and in citizens' lives. Democrats tend to think that the federal government should be more directly involved in regulating the economy.

They believe that the government should also help provide housing, income, education, and jobs for the poor. Republicans favor less government regulation of the economy as the best way to promote prosperity. Both parties believe that economic growth will give unemployed people a better chance to find jobs on their own.

Both parties are national parties. That means they usually field candidates in elections throughout the country. Nonetheless, each party tends to do better in some sections of the country than in others. The Democrats are particularly strong in the Northeast and on the West Coast. Republican support is very strong in the South.

Sometimes the ways in which the two major parties differ in their views on a specific topic may seem small. One reason is that both adopt some moderate views. They hope this will help them appeal to as many voters as possible. The parties may also seem similar because most Americans generally agree on many issues.

How can citizens identify the differences between the parties? They can read the platform that each party writes when it nominates a presidential candidate every four years. The platform is a series of statements expressing the party's core beliefs and its positions on various issues.

READING PROGRESS CHECK
Explaining Why do the two major parties often seem similar?

Why It MATTERS
Party Platforms

Party platforms try to appeal to as many people as possible, while at the same time drawing clear differences from other parties. What might be some important platform issues?

LESSON 1 REVIEW
Review Vocabulary

1. Why do third parties usually not last very long in the American two-party system?

2. Why do political parties create platforms? How are platforms useful to voters?

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. Explaining How did the first two major American political parties differ?
SS.7.C.2.8

4. **Analyzing** How have third parties been important in American history?

SS.7.C.2.8

5. **Contrasting** How do the two major political parties of today differ?

SS.7.C.2.8

6. **EXPOSITORY WRITING** Why do ideological third parties last longer than the other two kinds of third parties?

LA.7.1.7.3