A political party is a group of voters organized to support certain public policies. The aim of a political party is to elect officials who will try to carry out the party's policies.

A political party offers candidates for public office. It sets out positions on issues that may range from war and taxes to how children should be educated. When people in a democracy disagree about what the government should do, voters express their opinions by voting for the candidates that most closely reflect their views. Political parties provide a way for voters to easily identify a candidate's positions.

Political parties may be large or small, national or local. Large political parties generally have millions of members and supporters. In democratic election campaigns, parties compete freely for votes. Such competition is one of the hallmarks of democracy.

How Parties Began

Political parties as we know them did not begin to develop until the late 1600's. The ancient Greeks, who were pioneers in developing democracy, had no organized political parties in the modern sense. The senate of the ancient Romans had two groups that represented people with different interests — the Patricians and the Plebeians. The Patricians represented noble families. The Plebeians represented the wealthy merchants and the middle class. Although these two groups often mingled, at times they voted as factions, or parties, on particular issues that were important to the groups they represented.

For many centuries after the fall of Rome (AD 476), the people of Europe had little voice in politics. Thus there were no true political parties — only factions that supported one noble family or another. Political parties developed as representative assemblies gained power. In England, this change began after what was called the Popish Plot of 1678.

English Political Parties

In 1678, a rumor spread through England that Roman Catholics were plotting to kill King Charles II and give the
throne to Charles' brother, James, Duke of York (who was a Roman Catholic). There was no real Popish plot, but an alarmed Parliament barred all Roman Catholics from public office and tried to take away the Duke of York's right to inherit the throne. But to King Charles II, Parliament seemed to be challenging royal authority, and he struck back by dissolving Parliament.

All over England people were either for or against the king's act. Those who urged the king to call a new Parliament were called Petitioners. Those who backed the king's deed were called Abhorriors because they abhorred any attempt to control the king's actions. Before long the two factions took on other names. Petitioners were called Whigs. "Whig" was an old term for Scottish Presbyterians who opposed the government. The king's supporters were called Tories. "Tory" was originally a name given to Irish Roman Catholics who had suffered under Protestant rule. These old names took on new meanings.

The basic difference between Whigs and Tories in the 1600's was their view of what government should do and how strong it should be. Tories wanted rule by a strong king. Whigs wanted ordinary people to have more rights and gain more control of their government. In time, as Parliament took greater control, the Whigs and Tories developed into organized parties.

Political Parties in the United States

The leaders of the American Revolution did not like the idea of parties and political battles between parties. Upon his retirement from public life in 1796, George Washington warned Americans against "faction" (parties). James Madison thought parties were probably necessary, although he did not entirely approve of them. Alexander Hamilton thought that faction was a vice to be guarded against at all times. Thomas Jefferson declared in 1789, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." Nevertheless, the men who held these views founded the first two great American political parties.

Early U.S. Parties

Hamilton and other leaders who wanted a strong central government banded together to put over their policies. In 1787 they began calling themselves the Federalists. This was the first United States political party. In 1796, anti-Federalists gathered around Jefferson. Members of Jefferson's group called themselves Democratic-Republicans. Northern businessmen, bankers, and merchants supported the Federalists. They believed in a strong national (or federal) government. Federalists held that capital and industry were the basis of a healthy republic and that the federal government should act to protect the country's infant industries. The Democratic-Republican Party drew its followers from planters, small farmers, and artisans. These people wanted government to leave them alone as much as possible. They wanted to limit the federal government's power and leave the most power in the hands of state and local governments. In foreign affairs the Federalists generally leaned toward England, while the Democratic-Republicans sympathized with Revolutionary France.

Early leaders such as John Adams, who succeeded George Washington as president, had Federalist sympathies. But the Federalists lost control of the government to Jefferson and his party in 1800. The Federalists lingered on as a minority party, especially in New England, for 20 years.

By 1820, American political life was being influenced by sharp differences of opinion between sections of the country. In time, these quarrels led to the Civil War. The slave-holding planters of the South, the frontier farmers of the West, and the manufacturing and banking industries based in the North each wanted the government to follow a different course of action.

In 1828, Andrew Jackson, a Democratic-Republican from Tennessee, was elected president. His party had great support in the South and West. Jackson changed the party's name to Democrats. People who had once been
Federalists joined with anti-Jackson Democrats to form the National Republican, or Whig, Party. Between 1836 and 1852, Whigs gave Democrats strong opposition.

By 1854 the issue of slavery overshadowed all political debate. A related issue was states' rights. If a state government was in conflict with the national government, which government had the final authority? Debate over slavery and states' rights tore the parties apart. Northern Abolitionists--people who wanted to abolish slavery--left the Whig party. The Whigs also lost voters to the "Know-Nothing" Party, a new party that violently opposed Roman Catholics and foreigners. The Whig Party began to go to pieces.

At the same time, the issues of slavery and states' rights divided Democrats into Northern and Southern branches. Southern Democrats strongly favored slavery and states' rights. Extremists among them believed that a state had a right to secede (leave the Union) if the national government tried to interfere with slavery.

In 1854 antislavery forces and Free Soil forces (a group founded in Buffalo, New York) formed the Republican Party. The Republicans ran their first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont, in 1856. By 1860 the voters had a choice of four major parties — Northern Democrat, Southern Democrat, Republican, and the Constitutional-Union Party, which drew some ex-Whigs. Strong antislavery feeling helped Republicans capture the presidency for Abraham Lincoln. In 1861 the Southern states seceded and the Civil War began.

**Democrats and Republicans**

The defeat of the Southern Confederacy weakened the Democrats, who were associated in voters' minds with the Southern cause. For many years the Republicans were the major party. They favored business interests and high tariffs (taxes on imports). The Democrats supported free trade. They attracted farmers and the immigrants who poured into the country between the Civil War and the turn of the century.

The two major parties were not so deeply divided again until the 1930's. At that time the Great Depression struck the country. The presidential election of 1932 brought in Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal programs. Roosevelt Democrats thought that the federal government must actively help people who had been hurt by the Depression. Under the New Deal the government passed economic relief measures, social security, laws helping unions, and other bills. Republicans thought the government was taking too much power and moving the country toward a welfare state. They fought against governmental interference with business.

Today both parties agree in general on social security, unemployment insurance, basic foreign policy, and civil rights. The issues on which they disagree often are not goals so much as means: how best to keep the economy growing, protect the environment, and maintain a strong national defense. In general, Republicans tend to oppose government programs as solutions to national problems. Democrats tend to believe that government can and should act for good. However, the parties' views on government's role often depend on the specific issue or program in question.
U.S. Third Parties

The United States has a two-party system. However, nothing in the Constitution requires two parties. The Democrats and Republicans have alternated in power since before the Civil War mainly because they have put forward candidates and policies that appeal to most Americans. But minor parties, or third parties, have often played a role in politics. Third parties focus attention on issues and ideas. Sometimes they draw enough support to affect the outcome of elections. Sometimes a third party gains part of its goals by supporting a major party that promises to act on the third party's views.

After the Civil War, Americans debated issues such as women's voting rights and labor reform. New political parties helped focus attention on these issues. In 1872, for example, Victoria Woodhull became the first woman to run for president. She shared the Equal Rights Party ticket with African American leader Frederick Douglass. In the 1890's the People's Party of the U.S.A., or Populists, drew support from laborers and farmers.

In 1912 a disagreement among Republicans produced a splinter group called the Progressive, or "Bull Moose," Party. Theodore Roosevelt, the party's presidential candidate, outpolled the Republican candidate, William H. Taft. But the Republican split only helped the Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson, win the election. The Progressive Party's name was revived in the 1920's. The Progressives opposed big business monopolies and favored the interests of farmers and workers. The Socialist Party favored wider social welfare measures. It reached its greatest strength in the 1930's, during the Great Depression.

After World War II, Southern Democrats formed the States' Rights, or "Dixiecrat," Party to protest a growing movement to secure the civil rights of African Americans. The American Independent Party, led by Alabama governor George Wallace, also opposed racial integration. It was a factor in the presidential election of 1968. The Libertarian Party, formed in the 1970's, stressed individual rights. The 1990's saw the growth of the Reform Party, formed by Texas businessman H. Ross Perot. And the Green Party has formed as an outgrowth of the environmental movement. Like earlier third parties, these groups have helped focus attention on important social and political issues.

How U.S. Parties Work

The major U.S. political parties are highly organized. The precinct is the smallest local division. The parties are run by county and state committees. Committee members may be elected at primaries, chosen at state conventions, or appointed by party officers. The two major parties also have national committees, made up of one man and one woman from each of the 50 states and U.S. territories. Every four years, parties hold national conventions. Delegates are chosen in primaries, by state conventions, or at gatherings called precinct caucuses. These delegates gather at the conventions to nominate a presidential and a vice-presidential candidate. Each party at its convention also drafts a platform. The platform is a statement of what the party stands for. If the party wins, the platform is supposed to guide the actions of the elected officials.

Parties today use computers to draw up lists of possible supporters and take public opinion polls to explore the views of voters on certain issues. They use advertising to mold public opinion and compete for favorable media coverage for their candidates. U.S. election campaigns are enormously costly, and fund-raising is a major part of the parties' work. Special-interest groups able to raise money and turn out voters for candidates they favor have grown in influence. State and federal laws control the ways political parties can raise and handle money.

Political Parties in Other Countries
Political parties are often a standard by which a country's political freedom can be measured. Some countries have only one political party. In China, for example, there is only one party, the Communist Party. Under such a system, people who do not agree with the party in power cannot express their objections by voting for another group. Often the ruling party holds power with the support of the army. Democracies usually operate under either a two-party or a multiparty system. Like the United States, Britain has a two-party system. The major parties are the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, though there are active third parties. Canada also has two major parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals.

Multiparty systems are common in Europe and other parts of the world. In this system, three or more parties each enjoy substantial support from voters. France, Germany, Israel, and South Africa are just a few examples. In these countries there may be many parties representing a wide range of political views. Because of the number of competing parties, it is sometimes difficult for any one party to get a clear majority of the votes. In such cases, leading parties that can agree on general policies form a coalition (a combination of parties) to run the country.

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