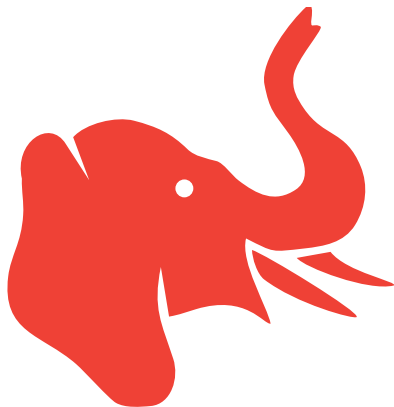




Why does the United States have only two major political parties?



The drafters of the U.S. Constitution did not envision political parties. But, as voting rights broadened and the nation expanded westward, political parties emerged. Two major parties—Democrats and Whigs—became firmly established and powerful by the 1830s.

Today, the Republican and Democratic parties dominate the political process—both of them heirs to predecessor parties from the 18th and 19th centuries.

With rare exceptions, members of the two major parties control the presidency, the Congress, the governorships and the state legislatures. Every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or a Democrat.

- THE DONKEY AND ELEPHANT HAVE BEEN THE SYMBOLS OF THE DEMOCRATS AND THE REPUBLICANS SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY.



- EVERY PRESIDENT SINCE 1852 HAS BEEN EITHER A REPUBLICAN OR A DEMOCRAT.

Rarely do any of the 50 states elect a governor who is not a Democrat or a Republican. And the number of independent or third-party members of Congress or of state legislatures is extremely low.

Why aren't there more small parties? Many political experts point to America's "first past the post" elections, in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even if they receive less than a majority of the votes cast. In countries that instead award legislative seats based on the proportion of votes a given party receives, there is more incentive for small parties to form and compete. In the U.S. system, a party can win a seat only if its candidate gets the most votes. That makes it difficult for small political parties to win elections.



What about Americans who don't belong to the Democratic or Republican Party?



- SOMETIMES AMERICANS FEEL THAT NEITHER MAJOR PARTY ADVANCES THEIR PREFERRED POLICIES AND BELIEFS.



In recent decades, increasing numbers of American voters call themselves politically “independent,” or affiliated with no party.

Yet opinion polls suggest that most independents lean toward either the Republican or Democratic Party. Some do belong to smaller political parties. Regardless of party affiliation—or lack thereof—all Americans age 18 and older are allowed to vote in local, state and presidential elections.

How does the two-party system represent the beliefs of Americans who affiliate with neither party? Sometimes Americans feel that neither major party advances their preferred policies and beliefs. One strategy they may pursue is to form a new party for the purpose of demonstrating the popularity of their ideas. One famous example occurred in 1892, when dissatisfied Americans formed the Populist Party. Its platform called for a graduated income tax, direct election of senators, and an eight-hour workday. The Populists never captured the presidency, but the big parties noticed their new competitor’s growing popularity. The Democrats and Republicans began to adopt many of the Populists’ ideas, and in time the ideas became the law of the land.

