

Introduction to Political Parties

There is no mention of political parties in the Constitution, but they started to appear during George Washington's term of office. On one side were the Federalists, who wanted a strong federal government. On the other side were the Democratic-Republicans, who believed that the power of the federal government should be limited. Their leader was Thomas Jefferson, who became the third President of our nation.

Washington, however, was opposed to political parties. He feared that they would divide our nation. In his farewell address, he warned "the common and continual mischiefs (sic) of the spirit of party ... agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another."

Nevertheless, political parties have continued to exist. They have proven to be an effective way for people with similar ideas about public issues to work together. It is hard to imagine how an election would work without them. Political parties hold the nominating conventions and select the candidates. Their members raise money and work hard to get votes for their candidates.

Several of the early political parties have long disappeared – like the Federalists and the Whigs. Since 1854, the two major parties have been the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. (The Democratic Party grew out of Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party.) Throughout our history, there have also been a number of small parties, which have usually lasted only a short time. These are known as third parties. Many of them have had colorful names, like the Greenback party, the Free Soil party, the Know-Nothings, and the "Bull Moose" party. A few third party candidates have attracted a number of voters.



Anyone can join a political party. When people register to vote, they tell their party preference. Millions of Americans register as Democrats or Republicans, but many say they are independent. Only a small number of the people who are registered as members of a party take an active role in the party's activities. In most primary elections, party member members must vote for their party's candidates. In general elections, they can vote for candidates of any party. When a member of one party votes for a candidate of another party, it is called a crossover vote.

Each party is organized into committees at the neighborhood level, at the city level, at the county level, at the state level, and at the national level. These committees work to get their candidates elected to office. At election time, rank-and-file members work in their party's headquarters to get out the vote. They call neighbors to promote their candidate. They hand out flyers about their candidate. They even drive people to polling places so they can vote.

Name _____

1. What are the names of the two major political parties in the U.S.?

2. The smaller political parties that seldom win major elections are usually called

_____ parties.

3. People who don't want to register as a member of a political party can

register as an _____.

4. Do voters who are registered as members of a political party always need to

vote for that party's candidate? _____

5. Name three things that active party members do during a campaign to get votes for their candidate.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

6. In your opinion, could someone be elected President without the help of a political party? Explain why or why not.
