

*an energy efficient economy; and live in ways that respect the integrity of natural systems.*

—Green Party of the United States  
Platform, 2012

Like the Libertarian Party, the Green Party has been most successful in electing candidates at the local level. The party is stronger in Europe, however, and has won national offices in a number of countries.

### The Moderates in the Middle: Centristism

Most Americans don't fit neatly into any ideological camp. They consider themselves moderates, or middle-of-the-road voters. These are people who sit at the center of the political spectrum, between the ideologies of left and right.

In recent years, U.S. politics have become more polarized, meaning that political parties have adopted more extreme policies. The Republican Party has grown more conservative, and the Democratic Party more liberal. This polarization is especially evident in the current Congress, which remains divided on a number of issues.



Liberals are considered left of center, while conservatives are on the right. But there are other positions along the political spectrum, and many Americans are not quite sure where they fit.

These strong divisions often push voters to be drawn to **centristism**. Many surveys show that moderates, along with people who describe themselves as slightly conservative or slightly liberal, make up the largest group of U.S. voters.

In contrast to people with a strong ideological point of view, centrists may hold a mix of liberal, conservative, and perhaps environmental views. Centristism is not an ideology with its own political party. As a result, during election time, centrists often cross party lines, depending on the candidates and issues of the day.

## 7.5 How Americans Engage in Civic Life

For most Americans, voting is the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the words “civic duty.” In a democracy, voting is one of the most basic and important ways to engage in civic life.

There are many other ways to be an active citizen, however. You can read newspapers or watch the news on television to stay informed about current events. You can talk to friends about political issues or put a political bumper sticker on your car to demonstrate your support. You can become a volunteer with a community group or follow a political figure using social media. By doing any of these things, you are engaging in civic life.

### Civil Society: The “Social Capital” of Democracy

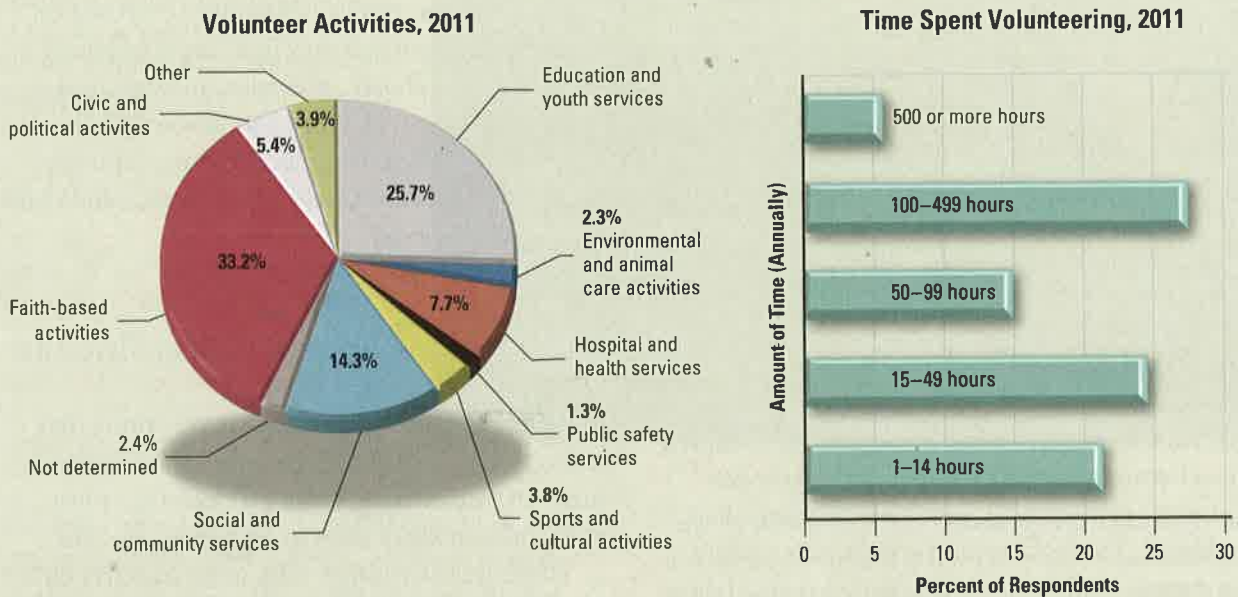
At the start of this chapter, you read about Robert D. Putnam’s work on civic engagement. Putnam concluded that Americans today are less likely to participate in civic associations than they were in the past. He further believes that such participation is crucial to democracy.

Putnam argues that social clubs and civic organizations are building blocks of what political scientists call **civil society**. This term refers to a middle layer of voluntary associations and institutions that exists between government on the one hand and individuals and families on the other.

Many political scientists argue that a strong civil society is essential in a democracy. The organizations that make up civil society, they point out, are nourished by citizen involvement. This involvement helps to expand a society’s **social capital**. Putnam

## Volunteering in the United States

Americans who volunteer their time do so in various types of activities. Just over a third volunteer mainly through religious organizations. Over 30 percent of volunteers devote 100 hours or more a year to volunteer activities.



defines social capital as “connections among individuals” that are forged through their participation in voluntary associations.

To understand how social capital works, consider this simple example. In many communities, parents of school-age children join the local Parent Teacher Association. Through their PTA, parents work together to improve their children’s schools.

While working on PTA projects, parents form new social networks and exchange information about their community. Through these networks, they may create new groups to work on other local issues. In this way, the connections forged within the PTA help to generate new energy and ideas that benefit the larger community. This is social capital in action.

Of course, the PTA is only one of thousands of volunteer organizations that one might choose to join. As the graphs above show, Americans get involved in many types of volunteer activities and for varying amounts of time. All of these efforts help to strengthen civil society and build social capital.

### Putting Social Capital to Work in Texas

Social capital promotes civic engagement not only in local communities, but also in state and national affairs. Such was the case in Texas in 2006 when various citizen groups rose up to oppose the construction of new coal-fired power plants across the state. Coal is a fossil fuel that produces large amounts of air pollution and greenhouse gases. The power company that planned to build these plants assured the public that they would not pollute the air. But many Texans believed otherwise.

The first protests against the power company’s plan were organized by citizens living in communities where the new plants were to be built. They argued that the coal-burning plants would harm air quality and give rise to health problems.

As opposition grew, local business leaders began to get involved in the issue. They feared that increased pollution from the plants would harm local economies by discouraging tourism and other business activity. Local public officials—including the mayors of Dallas, Houston, and other cities—began to voice their concerns.

## Forms of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement takes many forms, from writing letters to organizing protests. These photographs illustrate just some of the ways citizens can make their voices heard.



### Attend a Public Meeting

Find out what's going on in your community by attending a public meeting. You might be surprised to discover how many decisions affecting your life are made close to home.



### Volunteer in a Political Campaign

Get involved in a political campaign. Share the excitement of election night as volunteers wait for the votes to be counted.



### Circulate a Petition

Take part in a petition drive for a cause you care about. Often you can even sign a petition online.



### Organize a Fundraiser

Raise money for a worthy cause. The challenge is to help people feel good about both asking for donations and giving them.



### Organize a Demonstration

Put your passion to work by organizing a demonstration. Sometimes actions really do speak louder than words.



### Get Involved in a Service Project

Find a way to give back to your community. You will feel good about yourself while making a difference.

In 2006 and 2007, Texas citizens fought to prevent new power plants from being built around the state. They feared that emissions from coal-fired plants, like the one shown here, would harm the environment.



In time, local protest groups banded together to form larger organizations with names like Stop the Coal Rush, the Texas Clean Sky Coalition, and Texas Business for Clean Air. Civic activists sent e-mails and letters to newspapers and public officials. They attended hearings to oppose the power company's

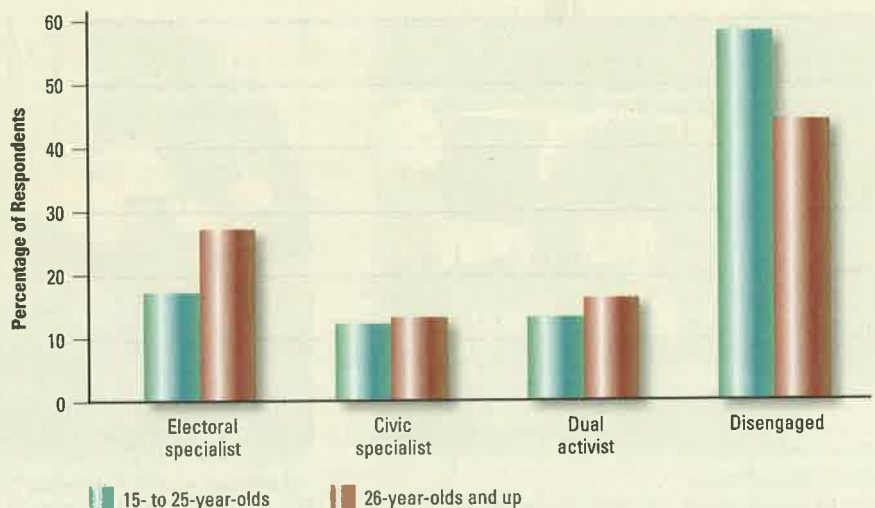
application for building permits. They also created Web sites and held fundraisers to raise money and get their message out.

These efforts peaked in February 2007 with a large rally at the state capitol in Austin. The next day, activists met with their state representatives and other public

## Categories of Civic Engagement

Political scientists at CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, have classified people into four broad categories of civic engagement. As this graph shows, civic engagement increases with age.

Levels of Civic Engagement, 2006



Source: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org).

officials to argue their case. Before lawmakers could act, however, the company that was planning to build the power plants announced that it was being sold.

The organized efforts of Texans to stop the new power plants from being built were nonetheless effective. The new buyers of the power company immediately announced their intention to scale back the project and explore alternatives to building more coal-fired power plants.

#### **Four Categories of Civic Engagement: Which One Fits You?**

As the Texas story illustrates, civic engagement can have a real impact, especially when people work together toward common goals. But just how engaged are most Americans?

To answer that question, political scientists survey Americans about their civic and political activities. Using those data, scholars at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) have determined that most people fall into one of four broad categories of civic engagement.

*Electoral specialists.* This category includes those whose main engagement is through the election process. People in this group vote, volunteer in political campaigns, and try to persuade others to vote as well.

*Civic specialists.* People in this group focus on improving their communities and helping others. They join local civic groups, support nonprofit organizations, and take part in fundraising activities for worthy causes.

*Dual activists.* This category is made up of people who engage in both electoral and civic activities. They may be found passing out leaflets in a political campaign one day and volunteering in a homeless shelter the next.

*The disengaged.* This group is made up of people who are not significantly engaged in civic life. They don't vote or pay attention to civic affairs.

The graph shows that Americans young and old fall into all four groups. What about you? Which category best matches your level of civic engagement? And are you satisfied with your answer?

## Summary

Civic participation is essential in a democracy. Citizens who get involved in civic and community groups help to strengthen civil society. At the same time, they tend to become more engaged in the political process.

**Rights and responsibilities of Americans** U.S. citizens have many rights. Over time, many of these rights have been extended to lawful permanent residents. Both groups also share many responsibilities, including obeying the law, paying taxes, and, for males, registering for military service.

**Becoming a citizen** There are two types of U.S. citizens: native born and naturalized. Naturalization is a process that takes many months. Naturalized citizens receive most of the benefits enjoyed by native-born citizens.

**Political culture** Most Americans share a common set of beliefs and values about politics and government. This political culture helps to unite Americans, even when they differ over ideology. The two most prominent political ideologies in this country are liberalism and conservatism.

**Civic engagement** Citizens can engage in civic life in many ways. When they do so, they help to build a stronger civil society.

## Chapter 8

# Parties, Interest Groups, and Public Policy

### *Political parties and interest groups: How do they influence our political decisions?*

#### ■ 8.1 Introduction

In October 2012, the United States prepared for the approaching presidential election. As the race for president heated up, political ads appeared on television screens across the country. Many of these ads featured the leading candidates of the two major parties, Republican Mitt Romney and Democrat Barack Obama.

One ad shows a young, middle-class couple. The somber woman holds her child closely while her husband has his arm around her. “My name is Wayne,” the man begins, “and I’m an unemployed coal miner.” As his wife rocks the sleeping child, he explains that Obama’s policies have severely affected the working class. “President Obama just needs to stand with hardworking American families.”

In another ad, a young couple also appears on the screen with their children. Like the above ad, the man identifies himself as a recent lay-off. “I got laid off because Mitt Romney and his friends in Congress want to eliminate tax credits for the wind industry,” he explains. “I think Mitt Romney is not in touch with the little guy.”

Most people watching these advertisements probably assumed that they came from the **political parties** that sponsored the candidates or from the candidates themselves. Only those paying close attention to the credits knew otherwise.

A poster advertising the presidential election of 1860

## Speaking of Politics

### **political party**

An organization that seeks to achieve power by electing its members to public office.

### **interest group**

Any organized group whose members share a common goal and try to promote their interests by influencing government policymaking and decision making.

### **platform**

A political party’s statement of principles and objectives. The specific objectives or legislative proposals in a platform are known as planks.

### **two-party system**

A political system in which two parties dominate the electoral process and control the government.

### **pluralism**

The idea that political power should be distributed and shared among various groups in a society.

### **political action committee (PAC)**

An organization that raises and distributes funds to candidates running for office. Corporations, labor unions, and interest groups form PACs to channel donations from their employees or members into political campaigns.

### **lobbying**

An organized effort to influence the policy process by persuading officials to favor or oppose action on a specific issue.

### **public policy**

A plan or course of action initiated by government to achieve a stated goal.



In this image, Bill Clinton, a Democrat and former U.S. President, campaigns for Democratic candidate Barack Obama during the 2012 presidential election. Clinton's participation in the campaign is an example of how loyal political party members are to their party.

In fact, a conservative **interest group** called Americans for Prosperity funded the pro-Romney ad. The Obama ad was paid for by the liberal interest group the League of Conservation Voters. Although neither ad specifically asked viewers to vote for a particular candidate, the sponsors of these commercials clearly hoped to influence the 2012 election.

Increasingly, interest groups have joined political parties as key players in the American political process. Both types of organizations are actively engaged in politics, providing information to officials and the public and seeking to affect the outcome of elections. This chapter examines parties and interest groups and considers their influence on our political system today.

## 8.2 Political Parties in the United States

Political parties have played an important role in American politics since the early years of the Republic. Yet many of the nation's founders did not approve of parties. In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington warned against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party." He believed that parties would divide the American people and have a negative influence on government.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson shared Washington's concern. Adams said, "There is nothing which I dread so much as the division of the Republic into two great parties . . . in opposition to each other." Jefferson claimed, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all." Nevertheless, both men eventually became leaders of political parties, and the party system itself became entrenched in American politics.

### What Do Political Parties Do in a Democracy?

The primary goal of parties is to get their candidates elected to office. However, they also have a number of other functions, some of which are listed below.

#### *Parties recruit candidates and support campaigns.*

Each year, political parties seek out and enlist candidates to run for thousands of local, state, and national offices. They look for people with the skills to run a successful electoral campaign and to be effective in office. Political parties also provide some funding for candidates.

#### *Parties help organize elections and inform voters.*

Although state and local governments run elections, political parties help by promoting voter interest and participation. They register voters and monitor the polls on Election Day. They also help inform voters on political issues.

#### *Parties organize the government.*

Congress and most state legislatures are organized along party lines. After congressional elections, members of the majority party in Congress choose one of their members to be speaker of the house or Senate majority leader. Committee chairpersons in Congress also come from the majority party.

*Parties unite diverse interests and make collective action possible.* Parties bring diverse groups together by building coalitions based on shared beliefs and

common goals. Delegates attending national party conventions create **platforms** that outline the party's position on important issues. In that process, they seek to balance the interests and concerns of members from across the country. Their goal is to produce a document that all party members can unite behind to achieve their shared political objectives.

**Parties serve as a loyal opposition to the political party in power.** The goal of a political party is to win control of the government so that it can translate its objectives into laws and policies. The party not in power, or the minority, serves as a "loyal opposition" to the majority party. Minority party members act as critics of the majority party's proposals. They also serve as government watchdogs, always on the lookout for corruption or abuses of power.

### The Structure of Political Parties: Local, State, and National

Both major political parties in the United States are organized at the local, state, and national level. Committees manage the affairs of the party at each level. This diagram shows the basic organization of a major political party.

The national committee is made up of delegates from each state. A national chairperson oversees the day-to-day operations of the committee. The chairperson also makes public appearances to raise support for the party and improve its chances in upcoming elections.

The organization of state and local committees mirrors the structure of the national committee.

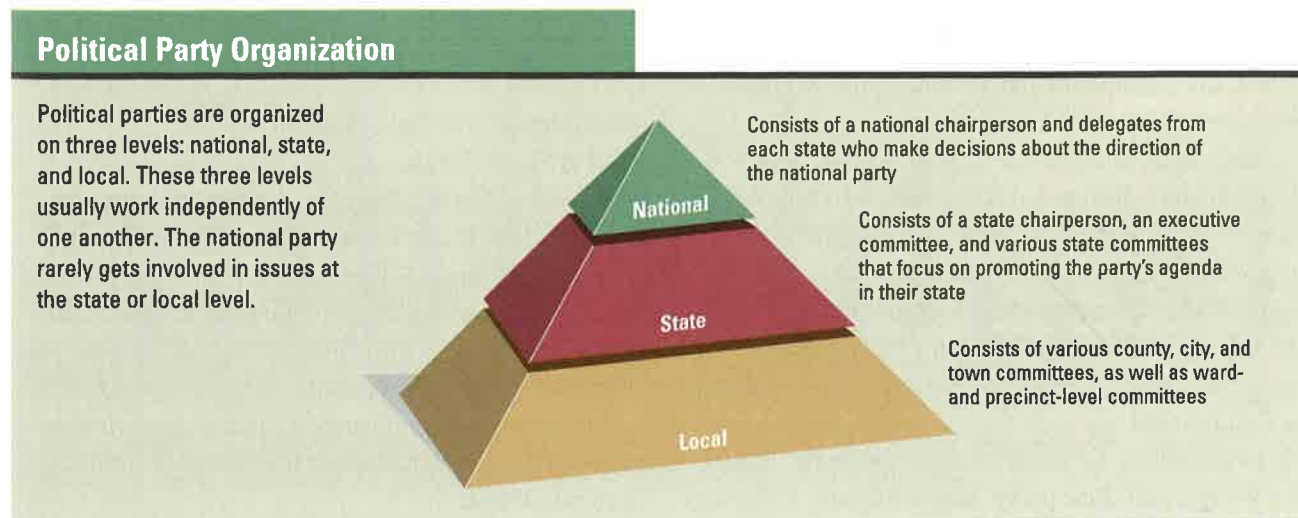
Each state has a central committee with a chairperson. Beneath the state committee are various county committees. Some states also have committees at the city, town, or **precinct** level. A precinct is a local voting district.

Political parties offer various ways for citizens to get involved in politics. The most common way is through voter registration. Most Americans identify with one party or the other, and they register to vote as a member of that party. Citizens can also donate money to a political party or its candidates, show their support using social media, and attend party rallies or meetings. In addition, some citizens volunteer to work on party committees or individual campaigns.

### The Evolution of the Two-Party System

In 1787, when the Constitution was written, no political parties existed in the United States. Perhaps this is why the Constitution makes no mention of parties. Before long, however, the nation's leaders had begun to divide into factions, or groups with differing views. These factions soon gave rise to the nation's first political parties. By the early 1800s, a political system based on two major parties was beginning to emerge. This **two-party system** has endured to the present day.

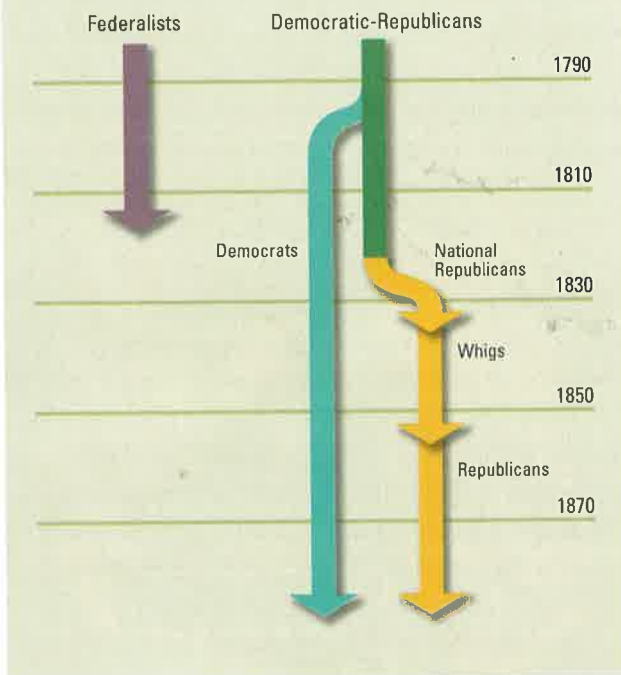
The first parties formed around two powerful figures in President Washington's administration. Alexander Hamilton and his followers became known as Federalists. They favored a strong national government and drew their support largely from commercial and industrial interests in northern





## Evolution of the Two-Party System

The tradition of two major parties in U.S. politics goes back to the 1790s. The two-party system has evolved and changed since then. By the late 1800s, Democrats and Republicans were firmly established as the two main parties.



cities. Thomas Jefferson and his supporters, known as Democratic-Republicans, favored a much weaker national government and strong state governments. They gained the backing of farmers and rural interests in southern states.

In 1796, John Adams, a Federalist, succeeded Washington in office. Four years later, however, Adams lost the election to Jefferson. After that defeat, the Federalist Party declined and, within a few years, disappeared altogether.

For a brief time, one party—the Democratic-Republicans—dominated U.S. politics. In the 1820s, however, disgruntled members broke away and formed a new political faction. First called National Republicans, the new faction later became known as the Whig Party. Around the same time, the remaining Democratic-Republicans became known simply as Democrats.

In the 1850s, the issue of slavery deeply divided the Whigs, and their party soon fell apart. A number

of former Whigs joined with antislavery activists to form the Republican Party in 1854. During the Civil War and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, the Republicans established themselves as the nation's second major party. The Democratic and Republican parties have dominated American politics ever since.

### The Two-Party System Today

Over the years, the two parties have evolved and changed, and so have their bases of support. For example, the Democrats were once the strongest party in the South. Today the Republicans generally enjoy more support among southern voters.

In 2000, political analysts began to speak of a regional divide in American politics. The 2012 presidential election results also showed clearly defined “red states” and “blue states.” The red states—mainly in the southern and central parts of the country—were those in which the majority of people voted Republican. The blue states—mainly in the Northeast and far West—were those in which the majority voted Democratic. The distribution of red and blue states led many political observers to conclude that the United States had become deeply divided along political lines. This map shows the results of the 2012 presidential election.

This red-state, blue-state political divide is probably not as sharp or as deep as the map suggests. In many states, the number of Republicans and Democrats is roughly equal. Moreover, people who call themselves Republicans or Democrats do not all agree on what their party stands for. Nevertheless, the two parties and their supporters do differ in some important ways.

### Republicans and Democrats in the Twenty-first Century

While all kinds of Americans support either party, a Republican is more likely to be white, male, and relatively affluent. A Democrat is more likely to be a member of a minority group, female, and less affluent. This graph shows other differences between the Republicans and Democrats.

In general, Republicans hold more conservative views, and Democrats more liberal views, on the issues that follow.

*Size of the national government.* In general, Democrats support a strong federal government and look to it to solve a wide variety of problems. Most Republicans favor limiting the size of the national government and giving more power to the states to solve problems at a local level.

*Taxes.* Republicans favor broad-based tax cuts to encourage economic growth and to allow people to keep what they earn. Although Democrats favor tax cuts for the poor, they are more willing to raise taxes on affluent Americans in order to support programs that they see as beneficial to society.

*Regulation of business.* Democrats generally support government regulation of business as a way to protect consumers, workers, or the environment.

Most Republicans oppose what they see as excessive business regulation by the government believing that too much regulation prevents economic growth.

*Social issues.* Republicans tend to oppose legalizing same-sex marriage, abortion, and gun control laws. Democrats are more likely to support same-sex marriage rights, abortion, and gun control laws.

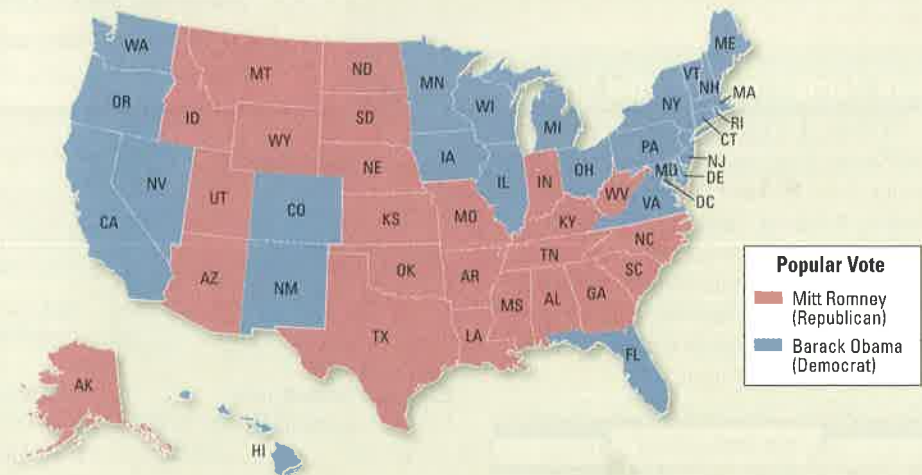
*Environment.* Most Democrats favor strict environmental regulations. Republicans tend to oppose such regulations because they believe it hurts businesses and the economy.

While these generalities hold for the two political parties, individual Democrats or Republicans may not share the same views on every issue. Republicans who call themselves Log Cabin Republicans, for

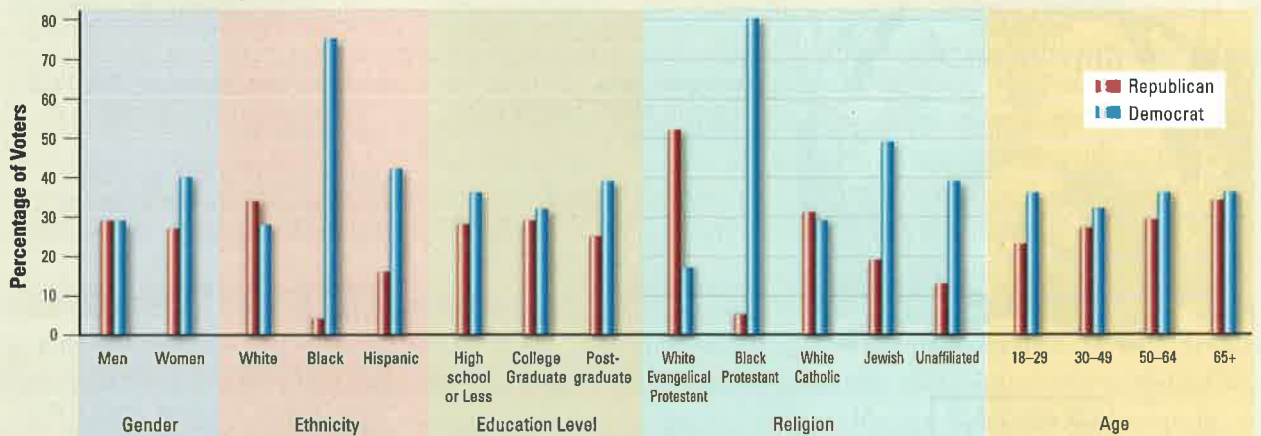
## Red and Blue America

This 2012 election map shows a country geographically divided between "red states" and "blue states." The graph shows other differences between Republicans and Democrats. For example, White evangelical Protestants are more likely to vote Republican. Jewish voters, on the other hand, are more likely to vote Democratic.

### 2012 Presidential Election Results



### How Americans Vote, 2012



Source: AP Results, as reported by *The Washington Post*. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

example, strongly support equal rights for gay and lesbian Americans. At the same time, many traditional Republicans are just as strongly opposed to granting certain rights, such as the right to marry, to gay and lesbian couples.

Nevertheless, for most Americans, identifying with one party or the other provides a useful way to make sense of the candidates at election time. In effect, party labels tell voters what the candidates stand for and help them make choices when they vote.

### Third Parties: Single-Issue, Economic Protest, Ideological, and Splinter Groups

Not all Americans identify with the two major parties. Throughout our country's history, people frustrated with the status quo have formed third parties to express their opinions in constructive ways.

There are four main types of third parties in the United States. Single-issue parties tend to focus on

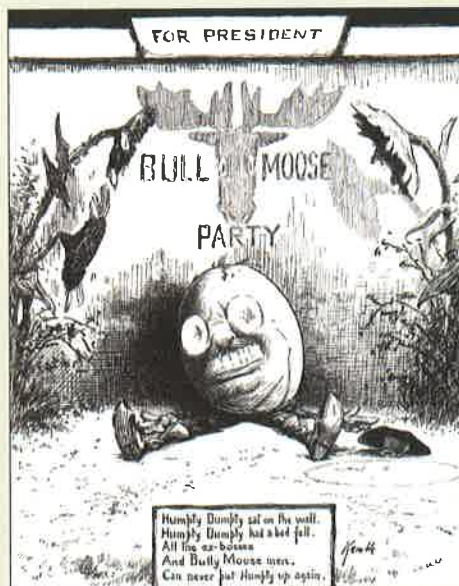
one issue, such as taxes or immigration. Economic protest parties unite opponents of particular economic policies or conditions. Ideological parties view politics and society through the lens of a distinct ideology, such as socialism. And splinter parties develop as offshoots of the major parties. The table below lists an example of each type of third party.

Third parties have had some electoral successes. The Socialist Party gained a substantial following in the early 1900s. More recently, Independent Party candidate Lincoln Chafee won election as governor of Rhode Island in 2010. That same year, the Tea Party movement was also successful when members obtained seats in both the Senate and House. Although the Tea Party is not officially recognized as a political party, it is considered a third party by some. The Green Party has also enjoyed some success in elections, particularly at the local level.

Third parties have also advocated reforms that have eventually been adopted by the major parties.

## Third Parties in the United States

Third parties have been formed for many reasons. In 1912, former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt formed the Progressive, or Bull Moose, Party. This cartoon portrays Roosevelt as Humpty Dumpty to parody the fact that his party split the Republican vote in the 1912 election, which helped ensure victory for Democrat Woodrow Wilson.



### Types of Third Parties

Type	Examples from U.S. History
<b>Single-issue party</b> Formed to oppose or promote one issue	<b>National Woman's Party (1913–1920)</b> Promoted voting rights for women  <b>Right to Life Party (1970–present)</b> Opposes legalized abortion
<b>Economic protest party</b> Formed to promote “better times”	<b>Greenback Party (1874–1884)</b> Promoted use of paper money, silver coinage, and the eight-hour workday  <b>Populist Party (1892–1908)</b> Protested economic conditions and government policies that hurt farmers
<b>Ideological party</b> Formed by people committed to a set of beliefs	<b>Socialist Party of America (1901–1973)</b> Promoted government ownership of basic industries  <b>Libertarian Party (1971–present)</b> Favors reducing the role of government in citizens' lives
<b>Splinter party</b> Formed by people unhappy with a major party	<b>Progressive “Bull Moose” Party (1912–1952)</b> Separated from the Republican Party to promote progressive reforms  <b>States' Rights “Dixiecrat” Party (1948)</b> Separated from the Democratic Party to oppose desegregation

In the 1990s, for example, the Green Party helped raise awareness of environmental issues. Today “green” positions on the environment can be found in the platforms of the two main parties.

In general, however, third parties face an uphill battle given the strength of the two-party system. Smaller parties find it hard to raise money and get the media coverage they need to challenge the two major parties.

### The Moderate Middle: Centrist and Independent Voters

In recent years, a growing number of Americans have identified themselves as political independents. As such, they are not aligned with any political party. According to some political analysts, the rise of independent voters represents a turn away from the more liberal or conservative views of the two major parties toward a centrist, or middle-of-the-road, position.

Nevertheless, political scientists note that many people who embrace the “independent” label still tend to lean toward one or the other major party at election time. In other words, although these voters call themselves independent, they still vote like either Democrats or Republicans. The proportion of voters who are truly independent of either party has hovered around 10 percent since the 1950s.


## 8.3 Interest Groups in America

Americans join all kinds of groups that reflect their interests, from garden clubs and hiking groups to civic organizations. When such groups seek to influence government, at any level, they are called special-interest groups or **special interests**. The term *special interest* refers to a particular goal or set of goals that unites the members of a group. In the case of the National Rifle Association (NRA), for example, that goal is protecting the rights of gun owners. For the Wilderness Society, it is preserving wild lands.

### Are Interest Groups Good or Bad for Democracy?

Many Americans distrust special interests. They believe that these groups seek to achieve their goals at the expense of society as a whole. According to this view, interest groups represent a selfish, corrupt-

True leaders have the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. They do not set out to be leaders, but they become leaders by the quality of their actions and the integrity of their intent.

 [www.sadd.org](http://www.sadd.org)  
877-SADD-INC toll-free

SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) was founded to counsel teenagers against drunk driving. It has since expanded its mission to caution against other destructive behaviors among young people.

ing force in U.S. politics. Is this a valid criticism or an unjust accusation?

More than two centuries ago, James Madison addressed this question in *The Federalist Papers*. In *The Federalist* #10, he wrote that “factions”—his term for interest groups—posed a threat to democratic government if their power went unchecked. At the same time, he believed that the growth of interest groups was inevitable, and even a good thing, in a society that prized freedom. The key issue was how to contain the threat while preserving liberty.

Madison believed that **pluralism** held the answer. Pluralism is the idea that political power should be distributed and shared among various groups in society. In theory, competition between these groups,