



The Constitution does not mention political parties nor did the delegates to the Constitutional convention have much regard for them. As do some reformers today, they saw parties as corrupt and self-interested. Nevertheless, soon after the Constitution's ratification parties began to form, and they have existed ever since. Indeed, as one political scientist once put it, "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."¹ The **two-party system** in the United States, dominated by Democrats and Republicans, is reinforced by electoral rules that make it difficult for third parties to succeed.

Parties are multifaceted entities that have at least three components: in the electorate, in government, and as organizations.² In the U.S. electorate, voters have a **party identification**, an affinity for one party or the other, rather than a formal party membership as in some other countries. Surveys ask voters to self-identify as "strong" or "weak" members of one party or another (or as independents). These identifications may be based on people's assessment of how their own issue positions correspond with those of the parties, or they may be grounded more in social group identifications.³ Either way, information on party ID serves as an excellent guide to voters' behavior: in recent years, roughly 90 percent of self-identified Democrats have voted for the Democratic Party presidential candidate, while about 90 percent of self-identified Republicans have voted for the Republican Party candidate.

House and Senate party leadership teams organize legislative agendas and coordinate congressional voting. In the mid-20th century,

congressional party coalitions were less cohesive than they are today, but since the 1970s, the House and Senate Democratic and Republican parties have become more internally unified and more distinct from one another.⁴ This pattern of **polarization** is less obvious in the electorate than it is in Congress, and scholars debate whether polarization extends beyond elected officials and activists to the public at large.

Reflecting their historical legacy as organizations that were stitched together in the 1800s from a patchwork of local groups, political parties have fragmented structures.⁵ The Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) (which organize presidential nominating conventions) are best known, but party efforts in congressional races are coordinated by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, National Republican Congressional Committee, Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and National Republican Senatorial Committee. Each of these organizations maintains a distinct structure and leadership. Still more party organizations exist in each state and in many localities.

At national conventions held in presidential election years, party representatives draft and approve **party platforms**, documents that outline official party issue positions. Although battles over the contents of these platforms may be heated, parties make little effort – and have little power – to ensure that their members adhere to these positions. The platforms therefore serve only as rough guides to party stances.

¹ E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004 [1942]), p. 1.

² This categorization comes from V.O. Key, *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1958).

³ Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

⁴ See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal's definitive DW-NOMINATE data at <https://voteview.com/>.

⁵ For a definitive account of parties, see John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).