



The Seattle Times Newspapers In Education presents

# Electing the President: *A Guide to the Election Process*

Learn how our president is elected and why voting counts. Articles appear every Wednesday through June 4 and again in the fall. In partnership with the League of Women Voters at [www.lwvwa.org](http://www.lwvwa.org).

## Unit Four The Parties

### And Other Behind-the-Scenes Powers

The challenge of running a competitive campaign for the United States presidency is made easier by the existence of the political parties and other organizations that support individual candidates and their agendas. The various political parties sponsor political advertising, organize volunteers and help get-out-the vote on Election Day to help elect their candidate.

### Early History: How the Political Parties Came to Be

The U.S. Constitution has nothing to say about political parties. In fact, the Constitution's framers were resolutely opposed to the formation of political parties in this country.

Based on their knowledge of the way things worked in Britain, the framers believed that parties created unnecessary and counterproductive divisions within a nation. They thought that candidates should be judged on their personal merits and their stands on the issues, not their party affiliations.

Before long, however, early opposition gave way to the political and practical convenience of a party system. Parties enhanced cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of government and made it easier to coordinate policymaking among the different levels of government — from the federal level down to the states, counties and towns. More importantly, parties allowed diverse groups of like-minded Americans

from throughout the country to come together and have an influence on national policymaking and the election of the president.

### The Life of the Parties: The Democrats and Republicans Take Center Stage

From the beginning, American politics have been dominated by two major parties. However, the constituencies and the names of these parties changed during the early years of the republic.

Many observers note that in recent years the Republican Party has become increasingly conservative. Although there is a range of opinion within the party, Republicans generally advocate a limited role for the federal government in solving society's ills.

Republicans also tend to support lower taxes, cuts in a range of domestic programs from social welfare to environmental protection and increases in spending for defense. They also tend to oppose reproductive choice and gun control.

The Democrats have been identified since the 1930s as the more progressive party, due in large part to Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs, designed to alleviate problems caused by the Great Depression. The Democrats generally support a more active government role in protecting the environment, in public education and public health and in ensuring equal opportunity for all citizens. The party also tends to support reproductive choice and some forms of gun control.

### The National Committees

Each of the major political parties is led by a national committee headquartered in Washington, D.C. While the national parties

used to come to life only every four years to run the presidential nominating conventions, in the last three decades they have shifted dramatically to full-time professional organizations supporting state and local parties and recruiting and training candidates.

In recent election cycles, a key function of the Democratic and Republican National Committees (DNC and RNC) has been to raise money to support the respective parties and candidates.

In 2004, the DNC took in \$394 million and the RNC, \$392 million. The amounts raised by the parties almost invariably increase from one election cycle to the next.

### The State and Local Parties

The parties also have committees at the state and local levels throughout the country that play an important role in a presidential campaign. They keep up enthusiasm within the grassroots, distribute campaign literature and provide staff for candidates' headquarters.

Support at these levels from party leaders and volunteers is considered crucial to the success of a presidential campaign.

### Independents' Day: Beyond the Parties

The Democratic and Republican Parties have been the dominant political parties in the U.S. for more than a century, but for many years, a considerable number of Americans have called themselves independents. According to the respected Stanford University of Michigan American National Election Studies poll in 2004, 10 percent of Americans said they were independent and didn't prefer either major party. Another 17 percent said they were independent but leaning toward the Democrats, while 12 percent said they

were independent but felt closer to the Republicans.

### Enter the Special Interests: Groups Step Up Their Campaign Activity

The political parties aren't the only organizations working to influence the outcome of American elections. Recent presidential and congressional races have seen groups such as the Christian Coalition, the AFL-CIO, the American Medical Association and many others playing an increasingly important role in promoting candidates, their ideas and getting Americans to the polls.

In recent elections, individuals and organizations with millions of dollars to spend have formed special committees to influence the outcome of the presidential and congressional races. In some cases, these groups are established under the law so that they can accept unlimited funds and may not have to reveal who their donors are.

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, placed new restrictions on what interest groups can do to help favored candidates, especially in the period just before Election Day.

## Discussion

- ◆ As a class, discuss and reach a definition of conservative and liberal. Also discuss what positions each side takes on major issues. Based on information from the newspaper and online sources, determine the political stance of the candidates: conservative, liberal or perhaps middle of the road. Which position do you agree with and why? Which candidate does this lead you to support?



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