Party Pros and Cons

DEMOCRATS DOMINATE REPUBLICANS RULE  By Barbara D. Krasner

Talk about a hot debate! For more than 200 years, politicians, scholars, and even citizens have argued about whether political parties are meaningful, helpful, or even healthy. In his farewell address in 1796, our first president, George Washington, cautioned the American people not to be distracted by parties. Washington warned that "...the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it."

Yet America's two-party system has withstood the test of time. From answering challenges from third parties to adjusting to changes in our society and political processes, it has most often proven its naysayers wrong.

At their best, political parties help voters make sense of the country's political scene. They work to mobilize voters to become involved. Because each party has a platform with specific goals it wants to promote, voters can evaluate candidates and choose the one who most closely advocates the platform that is most similar to their own beliefs.

A party's recruiting process also simplifies voters' choices by finding the strongest candidates with the best chances of winning elected offices. Some historians argue that a two-party system offers an organized, stable government, while still giving ordinary citizens a voice in that government.

On the negative side, a two-party system means voters' choices are limited to just two options. Because the Democratic party and the Republican party each has its own distinct platform, their views on issues also limit citizens' choices. Think of the political world as having only two colors: red and blue. What about all the other colors of the spectrum that aren't represented?

At other times, it's difficult to choose between the parties. In some elections, Republican and Democratic candidates vying for office have tried to appeal to people in both parties. By offering similar ideas and blurring the lines that used to make their parties' philosophies distinct, voters do not see a meaningful choice.

One frequent criticism is that the people don't have a strong connection to a single political party. Says Professor John K. White of Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., "In the United States, we believe in three things: the role of the individual, freedom, and equality of opportunity. The Democrats latched onto equality of opportunity. The Republicans latched onto individual freedom. The frustrating thing is that voters want both."

Nowadays, voters evaluate each candidate carefully, regardless of party affiliation. Almost one quarter of U.S. voters today are not identified with either of the two major parties. That's a 50 percent increase over the last 10 years. More and more voters are choosing to register as Independents. With all these negatives, would we be better off without our party system? Absolutely not, says Professor John H. Aldrich of Duke University in North Carolina: "We'd
have a failed democracy. Parties are necessary to making a democracy work, to making the U.S. Constitution work. Democracy requires choice, careful consideration, and logical decisions." Notes Professor Gerald Pomper of Rutgers University in New Jersey, "Parties organize choice, allow majorities to work their will, and promote conversation of citizens. Without parties, individuals have little ability to actually control the government."

In fact, authoritarian nations abolish parties to prevent competition and difference of opinion. At the other extreme, countries like The Netherlands have many parties, usually eight or 10. While voters there are more likely to find something they can agree with, the hard work for that political system comes after the election, explains Aldrich. The winning party may ultimately represent only a small minority of people in the country. Certainly, the United States has witnessed third-party candidates who have met with some success. Says White, "People think they want more choices. But that falls apart when we deal with specific people, because they don't believe in that particular idea or that particular person." Third parties do better, he adds, "when they address something unique."

For example, third parties have supported important causes, such as the abolition of slavery, voting rights for women, and the environment. Members of these parties work hard to make sure their issues are taken seriously and treated as legitimate causes. But historically, only the major parties have the organization and broad support to actually pass legislation to change national policy and laws.

So, more often than not, once their ideas and concerns are picked up by the Democrats or Republicans and become part of that party's platform, third parties tend to fade away. Or, when a third party does become strong enough, it often replaces one of the other major parties. That's what happened in 1856, when the Republican party — itself a third party at the time — replaced the fading Whig party.

In the end, America has the longest surviving two-party system anywhere in the world. As White observes, "Rumors of the demise of the party system are greatly exaggerated."

CON: When the two major parties focus more on unproductive fighting or name-calling instead of talking about the issues, some Americans wonder just how this system helps the political process.

PRO: Political parties offer a stable government while still providing citizens with a choice in that government.

CON: When there is little distinction between the major issues of the two parties, voters feel as though they are voting for a Democrat who is just posing as a Republican to get votes, or vice versa.

PRO: Political parties organize the enormous job of running national campaigns, so that in the end, people feel informed enough to vote.

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