

Political Parties in the United States

Political parties are always torn between competing objectives: accomplishing the policy they care about and getting elected and retaining power. They must please voters to gain election, but also try to persuade them to adopt their goals. Because they want to win, parties will try, when possible, to block weak or radical candidates and instead nominate those who are more broadly appealing.

It is hard to achieve policy in elected governments, especially representative governments, without parties to help guide and coordinate election strategy, campaign for different offices (for example, in different districts or states), and discuss policies and positions. At the same time, though, parties can become so committed to their objectives as to become inflexible and crippling to government, focused on their own good instead of the country.

Washington's Farewell Address (1796)

Almost immediately after the Constitution's government went into effect, two broad groups started to form, with different views of policy and even often how to interpret the Constitution. Even as the two factions started to sort themselves into political parties, George Washington tried to remain detached from and above them. In his 1796 Farewell Address, he warned against a spirit of extreme partisanship he feared would cripple the government.

... The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the constitution which at any time exists till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

...[A]ll combinations and associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the constituted authorities, are destructive of this fundamental principle and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize faction; to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community, and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to snake the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans, digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests.

...Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally.

This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind.

[Why does Washington think parties are natural and inseparable from our nature?]

It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism....

Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), 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.

[Extreme partisanship tends to] distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection.

[How would parties “kindle the animosity of one part against another?]

It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.

There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of the government, and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty. This within certain limits is probably true; and in governments of a monarchical cast patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular character, in governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged.

From their natural tendency it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose [*Salutary means good – what good consequences from parties might he be thinking of?*]; and there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be by force of public opinion to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.

[What does he mean by “a fire not to be quenched” but kept from bursting into a flame? Do you agree with Washington’s advice? Why or why not?]

Washington was clearly no fan of parties (though even Washington conceded parties had some benefits), but many of the other Founders disagreed with him and thought political parties were useful and necessary. James Madison strongly disagreed with Washington, arguing that it was necessary to form a political party, and as a result he and Thomas Jefferson helped build one. Alexander Hamilton similarly helped shape one, too.

Today, some state and local offices require non-partisan elections on ballots, but most offices, most obviously the presidency, tend to be votes cast for partisan candidates.

[Think about the American political system. What are some advantages that having political parties brings to our system? What are some detriments? Would we be better off if voting for president was non-partisan?]