

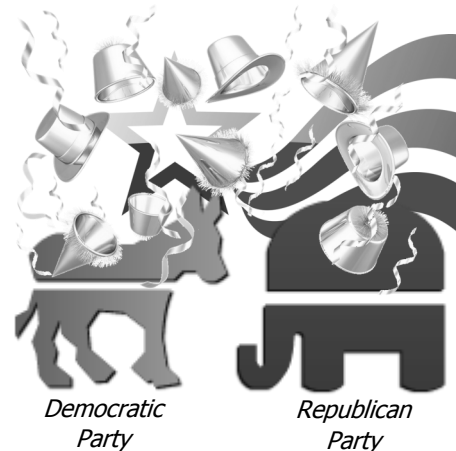
# One Big Party?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## It's a Party...

...but not the kind with ice cream and cake. A **political party** is an organized group of people who share similar political views and work to influence the government in support of those views.

*Political views* are a person's ideas about how the government should run and how the issues facing our country should be solved. Political parties fight to gain political power by having candidates elected to office. They exist at every level of government, from the national level to your very own neighborhood. By organizing into political parties, people have more power to influence government than if they acted alone.



COUNTRY	# PARTIES IN OFFICE
Australia	7
Denmark	11
Germany	5
Guatemala	11
Kuwait	0
Israel	12
Turkey	4
United States	2
Vietnam	1

Source: CIA World Factbook 2011

## How Many Parties Are There?

That depends on the country you live in. Some countries have **no political parties** at all. Most of these countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, are not democracies, and citizens have limited influence on the government.

A few countries, such as China, Vietnam, and North Korea, have a **single-party system** with one major political party. These countries are under very strict rule that gives citizens little or no say in government. They are not democracies, and it is usually illegal to oppose the main political party.

The United States and some other countries have a **two-party system** with two major political parties that hold all the power. Other parties exist, and they sometimes gain enough support to win an election, but this is rare. This is the least common system around the world.

Most countries have **multi-party systems** where three or more political parties share power. Some parties may have more influence than others, but there are always more than two parties with members elected to government office. Most European countries, and many others countries around the world such as Mexico, Australia, and Japan, have multi-party systems.

## The Party Platform

One thing political parties have in common is that they stand for something. If you want to know what a party believes, read its **platform**—the set of statements describing the party's views on all the major issues facing the nation. This set of statements is called a "platform" because it is the set of beliefs the political party stands on.

In the U.S., the two major political parties are Democrats and Republicans. They keep their platforms broad and simple to attract as many supporters as possible. At first, it can be hard to tell the difference on some issues. Both parties might say they want better education or more jobs, but what does that mean? The party's platform explains what that party thinks "better" education looks like and how the jobs should be created. You can find a political party's platform by going to the party's website.



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## Political Parties Support Candidates

In the U.S., you'll be most aware of political parties during an election season. **Candidates** who are running for political office almost always declare themselves a member of a political party. By doing this, a candidate gains support from the political party and makes it easier for voters to figure out what the candidate believes in.

At the same time, political parties fight hard to get candidates from their party elected. Every four years, the national committees for the two major parties must nominate candidates to run for President and Vice-President. At the state level, state committees push to support candidates for the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as for the state's own legislature. Political parties also have local branches that work on behalf of candidates for offices at the county and city levels.

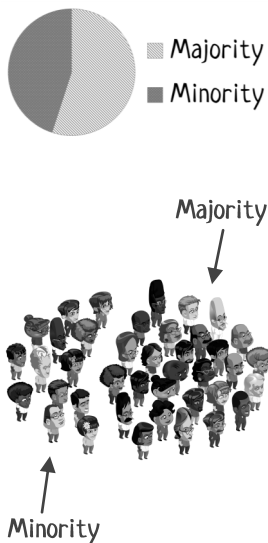


*Political parties donate lots of money to help their candidates.*

## Political Parties Work Inside Government

Candidates who are elected to office work to pass laws and solve problems. What laws get passed and how problems are solved depends on the government's **public policy**—the stand the government takes about how issues should be handled. What stand does the government take? That depends on which political party has the most power. The **majority party**—the one with the most elected members—can most easily influence laws and policy by getting all its members to vote the same way on a bill. This isn't always easy, though, because members of one political party don't necessarily agree on all the issues. But in American politics, it's common for most lawmakers from one party to vote the same way when deciding whether to pass a law.

Meanwhile, the **minority party** works to promote the views of its supporters by forcing compromise with the majority party. If the minority party is successful, this can create laws that are balanced between the two parties' viewpoints.



## Political Parties Influence Voters

During elections, political parties also try to influence voters by distributing information about candidates and issues. Next time you see a campaign ad on television, look closely at the fine print at the bottom and you might see that a political party has funded the ad. But beware: All the information a political party distributes is *biased* toward its own views. That means information from political parties should not be your only source of information about candidates and issues.



## Joining a Political Party

Your first personal experience with political parties might be when you turn 18 and register to vote. Voter registration applications usually let you check a box to join a political party. Joining a political party isn't a requirement, and even if you check a box you can still vote for anyone you want. During a presidential election, in many states joining a political party lets you participate in that state's primary election or caucus to help decide who your party's presidential candidate will be. Some states let you participate even if you don't belong to a party.

