

How to Move to a Functioning Two Party System

The founding fathers did not believe in political parties. In the first few elections, the winner became President and the runner-up Vice President. In fact, President Washington in his Farewell Address explicitly warned of the dangers of political parties.¹ [The portion of his address regarding political parties has been posted to the message board—it's worth reading.] Despite Washington's admonition, party factions quickly developed. The difficulties surrounding the election of 1800, when Jefferson and Burr tied in the initial vote, led to the 12th amendment. Since then, candidates for President and Vice President have been from the same party.

The current division between Democrats and Republicans dates from 1854, when the Republican Party was formed from a loose coalition of former Whigs, Free Soilers and other anti-slavery activists. The Democratic Party traces its origins to Andrew Jackson in 1828.²

Today's two party system allows the two parties to dominate the election process through their control over state election laws. Current law makes it extremely difficult for third parties to get on the ballot and when they do, they have been unsuccessful in the Electoral College, because current practice is for the entirety of a state's Electoral College votes to go to the winner of the popular vote in that state. Likewise, gerrymandering has allowed state governments to rig the results of congressional elections. Because of the influence of parties at the state level, it has become easier for small, passionate groups to take control of a party. Witness the Tea Party in the Republican Party and, to a lesser extent, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

An excellent description of the current state of party politics in the U.S. can be found in *The Deadlock of Democracy* by James McGregor Burns. The following text is taken from a review of Burns' book by the historian C. Vann Woodward.³

"[The U.S. is] a system of four parties, each of which is made up of coalitions. Both the Democrats and Republicans are divided into a presidential party and a congressional party...In Mr. Burns's view...the congressional parties have a common ideology. [Their ideology]...rests on states' rights, local elections, rural over-representation, restricted franchise, powerful congressional committees, the seniority system, and the filibuster...Presidential parties are typically, though not uniformly, majoritarian, activist, and welfare-minded and internationally oriented...Their own counterpart of the gerrymandered congressional district is the electoral college.

To get any major legislative program off the ground...politicians are compelled to piece together a patchwork of factions, congressional votes, and temporary coalitions. Presidents do this by endless maneuvering, manipulating, compromising, persuading, and bargaining; and on the other side, congressional leaders use the same methods to hamstring them. Any sort of movement comes only through some painfully achieved

¹ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Washington%27s_Farewell_Address#20

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-party_system

³ <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-deadlock-of-democracy-by-james-macgregor-burns/>

consensus, the concurrence of majorities of different sets of voters organized around leaders in “mutually checking and foot-dragging sectors of government.

The result, Mr. Burns believes, is that “we have lost control of our politics.” We occasionally choose bold and courageous leaders, but we withhold from them the power to govern. We have lost our sense of purpose, our power to act in the face of crisis; power itself is so fragmented and splintered that it cannot be marshaled for effective use.”

Recent studies tend to support Burns’ pessimistic view of American politics, especially with respect to Congress. A Pew Research Study found that “over the last thirty years the nation has grown more partisan and Congress has become less effective. Each side is more extreme, and each bases their political agenda on demonizing the other side. Each side engages in political machinations, which include partisan gerrymandering and manipulating the rules of Congress to get their way, stymie their opponents, or deny them office completely.”

“Whether it’s dealing with ISIS, the debt ceiling, or climate change, the media frames every issue as a debate between the Democratic and the Republican positions. This creates the ludicrous idea that every public policy problem has two, and only two, approaches. Certainly some problems have only two resolutions, some have only one, but most have a range of possible solutions. But the “national” debate presents every issue as a simplistic duality, which trivializes everything.”

“A key issue in this current political gridlock between our long-standing two party system centers around gaining and maintaining political power in the legislative process via the congressional rules that are followed. Maintaining loyalty to party platforms and guidelines is critical to establishing legislative power and voting on legislation. This can be seen in the rules that give the majority party the right to appoint committee chairs and to determine which pieces of legislation will come to the floor of the legislative branches for a vote, The expense involved in running for a congressional seat and reliance on party funding in a highly polarized two party system also contributes to strong party allegiance rather than independent thinking or voting.”

“Opinion surveys indicate the American public is sick of this hyper-partisanship within the legislative process of our government. Recent surveys suggest that 80 percent of us disapprove of Congress. Last year 71 percent disapproved of the way Republicans in Congress were doing their job, and 65 percent disapproved of Democrats. In a Gallup poll from last year, 60 percent of respondents said they wanted new political parties. This disgust for the status quo is why some voters in the last Presidential campaign flocked to “outsider” candidates like Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders (Vt.) and Republican businessman Donald Trump.”

“Perhaps the solution to two-party gridlock isn’t new people, or a bipartisan commitment from congressional members.”⁴ Perhaps the answer lies in such things as an end to gerrymandering and reform of the Electoral College.

⁴ <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/267222-the-two-party-system-is-destroying-america>