

American Political Parties in History

Federalist Party

The Federalist party, in U.S. history, is a name that was originally applied to the advocates of ratification of the Constitution of the United States of 1787. Later, however, it came to designate supporters of the presidential administrations of George Washington and John Adams and especially supporters of the fiscal policies of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. During Adams's presidency the Federalists attempted to stifle dissent by the Alien and Sedition Act (1798). By the election of 1800, therefore, the Democratic-Republicans gained control of the federal government. The death of Washington in 1799 and of Hamilton in 1804 left the Federalists without a powerful leader, and they proved inept at the highly organized popular politics of the Democratic-Republicans. Although the party continued to have strength in New England, expressing the opposition of commercial interests to the Embargo Act of 1807 and the War of 1812, it never made a comeback on the national level. After the Hartford Convention of 1815, the Federalists were a dying anachronism.

Democratic-Republican Party

An early political party in the United States, originally led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; it was the forerunner of the present-day Democratic party, which name it formally adopted in 1828. The philosophy of the Democratic-Republican party, also known as Jeffersonian Democracy, favored rural, agricultural interests, strong states' rights, and strict construction (that is, interpretation) of the U.S. Constitution. Democratic-Republicans upheld the legitimacy of the French Revolution and opposed close ties with England.

Democratic Party

Democratic Party, one of the two main political parties of the United States. Its origins can be traced to the coalition formed behind Thomas Jefferson in the 1790s to resist the policies of George Washington's administration. This coalition, originally called the Republican, and later the Democratic-Republican party, **split into two factions during the presidential campaign of 1828**. One, the National Republican party, was absorbed into the Whig party in 1834; the other became the Democratic party. In the 1830s, under presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, the Democratic party developed the characteristics it retained until the end of the century. It was willing to use national power in foreign affairs when American interests were threatened, but in economic and social policy it stressed the responsibility of government to act cautiously, if at all. Democrats argued that the national government should do nothing the states could do for themselves, and the states nothing that localities could do. The party's supporters in this period included groups as diverse as southern plantation owners and immigrant workers in northern cities. They all had in common a dislike of government intervention in their lives. The Democrats' opponents, the Whigs, on the other hand, believed in using governmental power to promote, regulate, correct, and reform.

National Republicans

The second two-party system developed gradually as Democratic-Republicans began quarreling over several issues. The followers of Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams, who asserted that the federal government should actively promote economic development, became known as National Republicans.

The Democratic-Republicans split in 1824 and the popular vote for presidential electors gave Andrew Jackson, a hero of the War of 1812, a plurality rather than the necessary majority in the electoral college. Under the Constitution, the final choice fell to the House of Representatives, where Speaker Henry Clay spoke in favor of John Quincy Adams. The outraged and frustrated Jacksonians vowed to correct the betrayal of the popular will at the very next election and began to organize immediately to this end.

Whig Party

The Whig party (1834-56) of the United States was formed to oppose Andrew Jackson and the Democratic party. The Whig coalition's antecedent was the National Republican party organized to support President John Quincy Adams (1825-29). Led by Henry Clay of Kentucky and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, National Republicans advocated an active federal role in the nation's economic development. Known as the **American System**, their program called for federally sponsored roads and canals, a high tariff to protect American manufacturers, a powerful national bank, and a go-slow policy on the sale and settlement of public lands. The leaders and the program proved no match against the popularity of Jackson. He defeated Adams in 1828, rejected federal aid for roads in 1830, vetoed the recharter of a National Bank in 1832, and later that year decisively won reelection against Clay. The repeated defeats led to the formation in 1834 of a new opposition party, initially united on little but hostility to Jackson's bold use of executive power. Joining the economic nationalists in the party were several state-rights southerners, including for a time John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. The opponents of "King Andrew" **took their name from** the American Whigs of 1776 and earlier English Whigs who had opposed the power of the British crown.

The wide diversity of views within the Whig party made it difficult to unify around a common program or leader. In the 1836 presidential contest, therefore, the Whigs backed three regional candidates, Gen. William Henry Harrison, Hugh Lawson White, and Webster, all of whom lost to Jackson's successor, Martin Van Buren. In 1840 the Whigs backed a single candidate, Harrison, who, like Jackson, was a military hero. The Whigs campaigned to victory through slogan and song, parading Harrison as a humble "log cabin" candidate who wore homespun and drank common hard cider.

As president, Harrison was prepared to let Clay seek congressional passage of an energetic Whig program that included a new tariff and national bank. But Harrison died in April 1841, and his successor, former state-rights Democrat John Tyler of Virginia, vetoed the Whig program and was expelled from the party. The Whigs nominated Clay for president in 1844. The Democrats made the "reannexation of Texas" the campaign's major issue, thereby reviving the dangerous controversy over the extension of slavery. The Whigs, more sharply divided than the Democrats over this matter, suffered a narrow defeat.

Ultimately the slavery issue destroyed the Whigs. In 1848 they won the presidency with another military hero, Gen. Zachary Taylor. Whig Senate leaders Clay and Webster, however, fearing disunion over slavery, played key roles in securing the Compromise of 1850, which include a stronger Fugitive Slave Law that offended many northern Whigs. Furious sectional controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act dealt the final blow. The bulk of the party's remaining members dispersed in 1856 to the nativist Know-Nothing party or to the rising Republican party.

Anti-Masonic Party

The first third party in U.S. history, the Anti-Masonic party was formed in 1827 to counter the alleged subversion of public institutions by the Freemasons. Hostility toward the Masons erupted following the disappearance and suspected murder (1826) in upstate New York of William Morgan, the author of a purported expose of the Masons. The party rapidly gained followers, **and in 1831 it held a national nominating convention in Baltimore--the first time that practice was followed.** However, its presidential candidate, William Wirt, carried only one state (Vermont) in 1832, while Andrew Jackson, a Mason, won overwhelmingly. The party merged with the Whigs after 1838.

Free-Soil Party

The Free-Soil party was organized in 1848 to oppose the extension of slavery into the territories newly acquired by the United States from Mexico. Among its leaders was Salmon P. Chase. The Free-Soil forces, chose former president Martin Van Buren as their presidential candidate in 1848. Although they failed to carry a single state, the substantial Free-Soil vote in New York helped the Whigs defeat the Democrats in that state and thereby win the presidency for Zachary Taylor. They did, however, elect a number of congressmen. The party weakened in the 1852 election; most of its members later joined the new Republican party.

Know-Nothings

Know-Nothings, in American history, popular name of a secret political party that existed from 1849 to about 1860. The party organized in clandestine societies that discriminated against immigrants and members of the Roman Catholic church. Such societies included the Order of the Sons of America in Pennsylvania and the Order of the Star Spangled Banner in New York. The chief aims of the party were to prevent foreign-born citizens from holding political office and to check foreign influences and ideas. Between 1825 and 1855 more than 5 million foreigners, mostly Roman Catholics, entered the United States. The Know-Nothings became powerful because of popular fear that these immigrants were growing in strength. The Know-Nothing party's name was derived from its practice of secrecy; a member questioned about the party always answered "I don't know." In 1854 the group officially adopted the name American party, and that same year its candidates won the governorships in Massachusetts and Delaware. In the presidential election of 1856, however, the party attempted to straddle the slavery issue and in so doing lost a great majority of its partisans in the North and West to the aggressive Republican party.

Republican Party

The Republican party is one of the two major Political Parties in the United States, the other being the Democratic party. It is popularly known as the GOP, from its earlier nickname Grand Old Party. From the time it ran its first Presidential candidate, John C. Fremont, in 1856, until the inauguration of Republican George BUSH in 1989, Republican presidents occupied the White House for 80 years. Traditionally, Republican strength came primarily from New England and the Midwest. After World War II, however, it greatly increased in the Sunbelt states and the West. Generally speaking, after World War I the Republican party became the more conservative of the two major parties, with its support coming from the upper middle class and from the corporate, financial, and farming interests. It has taken political stances generally in favor of laissez-faire, free enterprise, and fiscal responsibility (at least until 1981) and against the welfare state. Scholars agree that **the origins of the party grew out of the sectional conflicts regarding the expansion of slavery into the new Western territories**. The stimulus for political realignment was provided by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. That law repealed earlier compromises that had excluded slavery from the territories. The passage of this act served as the unifying agent for abolitionists and split the Democrats and the WHIG party. "Anti-Nebraska" protest meetings spread rapidly through the country.

Greenback Party

Greenback Party, in U.S. history, a political party formed in 1875, chiefly by midwestern and southern farmers. The primary aims of the party were the adoption of a new national monetary policy based on bimetallism and federal issuance of paper currency, called greenback, not backed by gold.

The party was organized after the depression of the early 1870s, when the indebtedness of farmers to merchants and banks was rising and prices were declining. The farmers believed that adopting the measures they advocated would result in general prosperity for the nation and would also allow them to pay off their debts and to raise the prices of their products. In 1878 the Greenback party was dissolved, and its farmer-members united with workers to form the Greenback-Labor party.

Greenback-Labor Party

Greenback-Labor Party, in U.S. history, popular name for the National party, a political party organized in 1878 by workers and farmers as a means of relieving their economic difficulties resulting from the depression of the 1870s. The party was formed by Greenbackers, members of the defunct Greenback party, and by the members of a number of labor organizations. The Greenbackers sought labor support for their program, which called for the issuance of the greenback, or paper currency not backed by gold, and for a monetary policy based on bimetallism; the labor groups desired Greenbacker support for their demands, which included a reduction in working hours, the establishment of a labor bureau in the federal government, and the curtailment of Chinese immigration, which was viewed as a cause of lowered wages. At its first national convention, held in Toledo, Ohio, in February 1878, each group pledged to support the demands of the other. The congressional elections of 1878 marked the height of power of

the Greenback-Labor party, which polled about 1 million votes and elected 14 representatives to Congress. In the following year, economic conditions in the nation improved, and interest in politics among the workers and farmers decreased.

Populist Party

People's Party or Populist Party, political party active in the United States between 1891 and 1908, supported mainly by farmers in the South and West. A product of the Populist movement, the People's party was the successor of the Greenback-Labor party of the 1880s. One of its chief organizers, the journalist and reformer Ignatius Donnelly was a leader of the Populist-oriented Farmers' Alliance.

Founded in 1891 at a convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, the party adopted a platform calling for free coinage of silver and the issuance of large amounts of paper currency—inflationary measures that it hoped would ease the financial burdens of the nation's debt-ridden farmers. Its other demands included abolishing the national banking system, nationalizing the railroads, instituting a graduated income tax, electing U.S. senators by direct popular vote, and allowing people to participate directly in government by means of referendum. In 1892 the party nominated James Baird Weaver for the presidency. Weaver lost, but he received more than a million popular votes and 22 electoral ones, and several Populist candidates were elected to Congress. In 1896 the Populists won control of the Democratic convention in St. Louis and secured the nomination of William Jennings Bryan, who favored the Populist program, as candidate for the presidency. After Bryan was defeated, the People's party split over the issue of its continued alliance with the Democrats. Some of its ideas were later incorporated in the U.S. system of government.

Socialist Party

Socialist Party, political party of the United States, founded in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1901. The first political party in the U.S. dedicated to the promotion of socialism was the Socialist Labor party, founded in 1877. The American Congregationalist minister George Davis Herron became a socialist in 1899, hoping to give the movement a Christian orientation. In 1901 the Socialist Labor party joined Debs, Berger, and other Social Democrats and the Christian Socialists to form the Socialist Party of America. By 1912 party membership had increased to approximately 118,000. Debs, presidential candidate of the party in 1904 and 1908, received 900,672 votes (6 percent of the popular vote), in the 1912 presidential election. In that year the party had more than 1000 members in public office. The reformist policies, or “immediate demands,” of the party, dedicated to achieving socialism through peaceful democratic methods, were disseminated by influential publications. The party also played an important role in the growth of trade unions in the U.S.

The Socialist party denounced World War I and the belligerent role of the United States in what it regarded as an imperialist conflict, although some of the party's leaders resigned to support the war. This antiwar stance was one factor in the party's undoing. Debs was arrested in Canton, Ohio, for criticizing the war effort and sentenced to ten years in prison under the Espionage Act of 1917. Dozens of like-minded Socialists were jailed under the Sedition Act of 1918. In 1920, while in prison, Debs was again the party

candidate for the presidency. He received 919,799 votes, the largest vote ever cast for a presidential candidate of the Socialist party. Meanwhile, the Russian Revolution of 1917 led to a split in the party. The left wing, which later came to constitute the Communist party, advocated similar revolutionary methods and recommended the establishment of a workers' dictatorship in the U.S. Following the party split, in 1919, the Socialist party declined in membership to approximately one-fourth its former size.

Progressive Party

The Progressive party was the name for three separate political organizations in U.S. history. Although the 1912, 1924, and 1948 organizations were all concerned with social reform and were generally opposed to excessive corporate power, they differed substantially in their emphases. The Progressive party of 1912 grew out of former President Theodore Roosevelt's drive for the Republican presidential nomination. Foiled by the incumbent, William Howard Taft, who controlled the convention machinery, Roosevelt led his supporters into his Bull Moose Party (another name for the Progressives). The party's 1912 platform called for numerous social and political reforms, including the conservation of natural and human resources, Women Suffrage, popular election of U.S. senators, and the initiative, referendum, and recall. Roosevelt campaigned zealously but could not defeat the progressive Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson; still, Roosevelt and his vice-presidential candidate, Hiram Warren Johnson, polled 4.1 million votes--about 600,000 more than Taft received. In 1916, with World War I under way in Europe, Roosevelt and most of his followers crusaded for war preparedness, delivering the Progressive nomination to the Republican candidate, Charles E. Hughes, and shattering their own weakened party.

In 1924 the Committee of 48, custodians of the Progressive party label, united with the Socialist Party, the railroad unions, and the American Federation of Labor behind the independent candidacy of Robert M. La Follette. As the American economy improved, however, the Republicans minimized the scandals of Warren Harding's administration, and La Follette was short of funds and smeared as an unpatriotic, red demagogue. As a result, the Republican candidate, Calvin Coolidge, won a landslide victory;

Dixiecrats

The Dixiecrats were a group of Southern Democrats who broke away from the Democratic National party in 1948 after its national convention adopted a plank favoring civil rights legislation. They chose Gov. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as their presidential candidate, hoping to prevent either the Democratic candidate, President Harry S. Truman, or his Republican opponent, Thomas E. Dewey, from receiving a majority of the Electoral votes. They failed in their strategy, winning only 39 electoral votes and 22.5 percent of the popular vote in the South.