

Topic: III. Candidates, Parties, and Ballot Measures

What the students do: Read about the role of political parties and role-play a committee drafting a party’s platform.

[CA History-Social Science Standards:](#) 12.6.1

[CMS Promising Approaches:](#) 1, 2, 6

Thanks to: [Constitutional Rights Foundation](#)

Parties, Planks, and Platforms

Overview

In this lesson, students examine political parties and their role in the U.S. political system. After reading about and discussing political parties, students in small groups role-play members of a committee responsible for making the first draft of a political party’s platform.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify party platforms and planks.
- Explain the nature and development of American political parties.
- Describe the role of third parties.
- Explain how American political parties differ from ideological parties in other countries.
- Create a plank of a party’s platform on a given issue.

Materials/Preparation

Handout: “Political Parties, Platforms, and Planks”—1 per student.

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Hold a brief discussion by asking students:

- What political parties are there in the United States? (The two largest are the Democratic and Republican parties. Other third parties include the American Independent, Green, Peace and Freedom, and Libertarian parties.)
- What do these parties stand for? (Accept various answers.)

B. Explain that students are going to learn more about political parties.

II. Reading and Discussion—Political Parties, Platforms, and Planks

- A. Distribute **Handout: “Political Parties, Platforms, and Planks”** to each student. Ask students to read it and look for:
- How the two-party system developed.
 - The role of third parties.

- B. When student finish reading, hold a class discussion using the questions on the handout:
- 1) How did the two-party system develop in the United States? What important role do third parties play in this system?
 - 2) How are American political parties different from those in many countries? How are they organized? What do they do?
 - 3) What is a party platform? Why are party platforms important? What is a platform plank?

III. Activity—Building a Party Platform

- A. Divide students into 10 groups. Assign each group one of the 10 issue areas below:
1. Preventing terrorism
 2. Jobs and the economy
 3. Diversity and equality
 4. U.S. budget deficit
 5. Healthcare
 6. Education
 7. Environment
 8. Energy
 9. Immigration
 10. Social Security

To make sure they don't forget, ask students to circle their assigned area on their handout.

- B. Review “**Activity: Building a Party Platform**” on the handout. Answer any questions students may have.
- C. When students finish, ask each group to present its findings to the whole class. After each presentation, discuss the plank and vote as a class whether to (1) adopt, (2) modify, or (3) reject each position or plank. Write all the adopted or modified planks on the board.

Political Parties, Platforms, and Planks

Political parties are important in American politics. Yet the Constitution does not mention political parties. In fact, many of the founders, including George Washington, distrusted permanent political parties, fearing that they would become too powerful. The first two political factions to appear were the Federalists, who supported ratification of the Constitution, and the Anti-Federalists, who opposed ratification. These factions disappeared once the Constitution was ratified. Early in Washington's first administration as president, two new factions formed: the Federalists, who supported Alexander Hamilton and a group that gathered around Thomas Jefferson, called the Democratic Republicans. They were the first real parties.

Throughout most of American history, the United States has had two major parties. Today's Democratic Party can trace its origins to Jefferson's old party. Today's Republican Party can trace its origins to the election of 1854. Along the way, dozens of third parties have come and gone. Some of these parties were formed to promote a particular cause, such as the Prohibition Party or the Equal Rights Party, which demanded the vote for women. Other third parties, such as the Populists and the Greenbackers, arose for short periods around economic issues. Some third parties, such as the Progressives and the Dixiecrats, splintered off from the Republican and Democratic parties. Some parties have developed around a certain leader, such as George Wallace's American Independent Party or Ross Perot's Reform Party.

Third parties have never received high percentages of votes in elections, but they still serve important functions in the American political system. They give citizens who vote for them a forum for dissent. They also give those promoting reform a chance to air their ideas. For example, many of the ideas of the Progressives eventually were adopted by the major parties.

American political parties differ from those in many countries, where parties are often organized to promote a particular political or economic ideology such as socialism, communism, fascism, or capitalism. Others may represent a given economic interest such as labor or farmers. Some have been organized to promote a religious group or interest.

In contrast, American political parties are generally not ideological. Instead, they are made up of a loose collaboration of interests that want to win the next election. While the parties might differ on the issues, they seek to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of the electorate.

Platforms and Planks

American political parties are organized on a national, state, and local basis. Every four years, the parties hold a national convention to nominate a presidential and vice presidential candidate. They also meet to develop and approve a party platform of issues and positions upon which the candidates will run. A party platform is a set of principles, goals, and strategies designed to address pressing political issues. Each party's platform is broken down into "planks," or declarations that speak to each specific issue.

Party platforms and their planks are important to the electoral process: They give the candidates a clear political position with which they can campaign. They give voters a sense of what the candidates believe in, the issues they think are important, and how—if elected—they will address them.

For Discussion

1. How did the two-party system develop in the United States? What important role do third parties play in this system?
2. How are American political parties different from those in many countries? How are they organized? What do they do?
3. What is a party platform? Why are party platforms important? What is a platform plank?

ACTIVITY

Building a Party Platform

Imagine that you are members of a committee responsible for creating a first draft of a political party's platform. You have been assigned one of the issue areas from the list below.

1. Preventing terrorism
2. Jobs and the economy
3. Diversity and equality
4. U.S. budget deficit
5. Healthcare
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
9. Immigration
10. Social Security

In your group, do the following:

- a.) Discuss the assigned issue area.
- b.) Discuss why it is an important issue area for a political campaign.
- c.) Develop a position, or "plank," on how the issue area should be addressed.
- d.) Be prepared to present the plank and explain why it should be adopted as part of the platform.