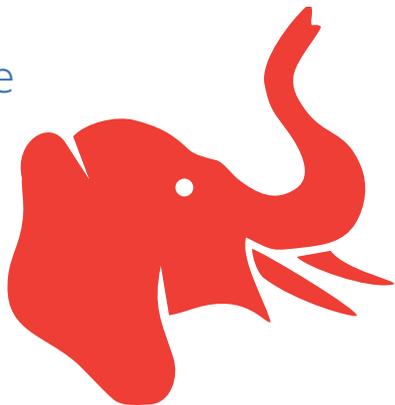




Why does the United States have only two major political parties?



The drafters of the U.S. Constitution did not envision political parties. But, as voting rights broadened and the nation expanded westward, political parties emerged. Two major parties—Democrats and Whigs—became firmly established and powerful by the 1830s.

Today, the Republican and Democratic parties dominate the political process—both of them heirs to predecessor parties from the 18th and 19th centuries.

With rare exceptions, members of the two major parties control the presidency, the Congress, the governorships and the state legislatures. Every president since 1852 has been either a Republican or a Democrat.

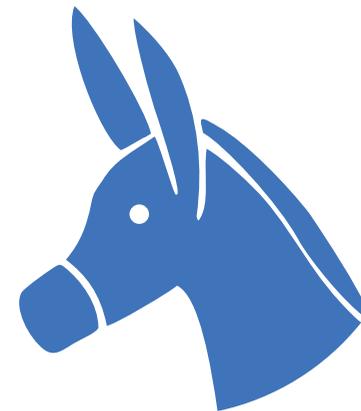
- THE DONKEY AND ELEPHANT HAVE BEEN THE SYMBOLS OF THE DEMOCRATS AND THE REPUBLICANS SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY.

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- EVERY PRESIDENT SINCE 1852 HAS BEEN EITHER A REPUBLICAN OR A DEMOCRAT.

(LEFT) THINKSTOCK (RIGHT) © SHUTTERSTOCK, INC.



Rarely do any of the 50 states elect a governor who is not a Democrat or a Republican. And the number of independent or third-party members of Congress or of state legislatures is extremely low.

Why aren't there more small parties? Many political experts point to America's "first past the post" elections, in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even if they receive less than a majority of the votes cast. In countries that instead award legislative seats based on the proportion of votes a given party receives, there is more incentive for small parties to form and compete. In the U.S. system, a party can win a seat only if its candidate gets the most votes. That makes it difficult for small political parties to win elections.