“Political Parties”
(2008)

(The following article is taken from the U.S. Department of State publication, *Outline of U.S. Government.*) Many of America’s Founding Fathers hated the thought of political parties, quarreling "factions" they were sure would be more interested in contending with each other than in working for the common good. They wanted individual citizens to vote for individual candidates, without the interference of organized groups – but this was not to be.

By the 1790s, different views of the new country’s proper course had already developed, and those who held these opposing views tried to win support for their cause by banding together. The followers of Alexander Hamilton called themselves Federalists; they favored a strong central government that would support the interests of commerce and industry. The followers of Thomas Jefferson called themselves Democratic-Republicans; they preferred a decentralized agrarian republic in which the federal government had limited power. By 1828, the Federalists had disappeared as an organization, replaced by the Whigs, brought to life in opposition to the election that year of President Andrew Jackson. The Democratic-Republicans became Democrats, and the two-party system, still in existence today, was born.

In the 1850s, the issue of slavery took center stage, with disagreement in particular over the question of whether or not slavery should be permitted in the country’s new territories in the West. The Whig Party straddled the issue and sank to its death; it was replaced in 1854 by the Republican Party, whose primary policy was that slavery be excluded from all the territories. Just six years later, this new party captured the presidency when Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860. By then, parties were well established as the country’s dominant political organizations, and party allegiance had become an important part of most people’s consciousness. Party loyalty was passed from fathers to sons, and party activities – including spectacular campaign events, complete with uniformed marching groups and torchlight parades – were a part of the social life of many communities.

By the 1920s, however, this boisterous folksiness had diminished. Municipal reforms, civil service reform, corrupt practices acts, and presidential primaries to replace the power of politicians at national conventions had all helped to clean up politics – and make it quite a bit less fun.

Why did this country end up with only two political parties? Most officials in America are elected from single-member districts and win office by beating
out their opponents in a system for determining winners called "first-past-the-post" – the one who gets the most votes wins, and there is no proportional accounting. This encourages the creation of a duopoly: one party in power, the other out. If those who are "out" band together, they have a better chance of beating those who are "in." Occasionally third parties do come along and receive some share of the votes, for a while at least. The most successful third party in recent years has been H. Ross Perot's Reform Party, which had some success in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996. Jesse Ventura became the first Reform Party candidate to win statewide office when he was elected governor of Minnesota in 1998. Third parties have a hard time surviving, though, because one or both of the major parties often adopt their most popular issues, and thus their voters.

"In America the same political labels – Democratic and Republican – cover virtually all public officeholders, and therefore most voters are everywhere mobilized in the name of these two parties," says Nelson W. Polsby, professor of political science, in the book New Federalist Papers: Essays in Defense of the Constitution. "Yet Democrats and Republicans are not everywhere the same. Variations – sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant – in the 50 political cultures of the states yield considerable differences overall in what it means to be, or to vote, Democratic or Republican. These differences suggest that one may be justified in referring to the American two-party system as masking something more like a hundred-party system."