

## Political Parties and Elections

The United States has a two-party, “first past the post” system. It is possible for third parties to run candidates and win elections, but the design of the system makes it difficult for third parties to do well and grow. For this reason, two major parties have long been dominant but these two parties have changed over time. Sometimes the changes taking place within the two major parties are a result of the influence that third parties or grassroots movements have on them. Political scientists and historians typically interpret American political history to consist of a series of “party eras” that have been replaced by “critical elections.”

### Terminology:

**Divided government:** Descriptive statement about the balance of power. Any time one party controls the White House and the other party controls at least one chamber of Congress it is referred to as divided government in that power is divided, or shared, between two parties.

**Unified government:** Any time one party controls both the White House and both chambers of Congress. Does not necessarily imply supermajorities or filibuster-proof majorities (may still have to compromise with minority party).

**Critical election:** A critical election produces a political alignment that causes a new party era. One of the two major parties has historically been dominant during a particular party era until a political realignment (voters switch parties, new electoral coalitions form) results in the other party becoming dominant long-term. Critical elections are NOT simply changes in who controls government but changes in who has long-term dominance within the two-party system.

Party Eras:	Critical/significant elections
1796-1824	1800
1828-1860	1828
1860-1928	1860, 1896
1932-1964	1932
1968-present	1968, 1980, 2008, 2016?

**Instructions:** For each party era, identify the two major parties and which party was dominant long-term. For each critical/significant election, identify which party won and determine what type of political realignment took place. Note: the United States has not had a critical election since 1932. What does this mean for our political process? How would you characterize it?