

UNIT

Political Parties and Democracy

◆ **OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Understand the concept of political parties
- 2) Understand the connection between political parties and public policy
- 3) Pursue web-based research of basic terms and concepts

◆ **TOOLS and MATERIALS NEEDED**

- 1) Web access for online projects and research
- 2) Surveys and handouts

◆ **ACTIVITIES**

- 1) Group Activity 1: “Who Supports What?@

SUMMARY of the LESSON

This lesson will introduce the importance of political parties. It reviews what a political party is and what it means to identify with a political party. This unit explains the role of political parties in our system of government and what they do. Finally, this unit introduces an exercise to help students identify the ideological positions of the major political parties.

Political Parties and Democracy

Implementation Outline

1. **Introduction: What is a political party?**
2. **What does it mean to identify with a political party? What are the reasons behind party loyalty?**
3. **What do political parties do?**
4. **Whose opinions does a political party represent?**

TEACHER'S GUIDE to CLASS DISCUSSION

UNIT 7: Political Parties and Democracy

Teacher's Note!

This unit leads students into a basic understanding of our country's two-party system and provides an explanation of party identification and loyalty. Excellent Internet resources are offered for a more in-depth exploration of political parties.

1. Introduction: What is a political party?

- Why do we call political groups “parties” when everybody seems to argue and nobody seems to be having fun? Why does everyone have to join one side or the other? What does right wing, left wing mean? What do liberal, moderate, and conservative mean? Politics, for better or worse, often means taking sides. People make decisions that serve some interests at the expense of others. Many people are alienated from politics because it seems to be a concern of a small number of persons. Fewer and fewer people want to register for a particular party because they do not agree with everything one party supports.
- So, why do we have political parties? Parties allow people to find strength in numbers, to organize, to identify with a general approach to public questions. Parties provide a brand identity so that voters (or consumers) have some idea what they are getting when they support a vote for a candidate. A party represents a general view about the relationship between the government and society. Knowing that a candidate is a member of one party provides an introduction to the kinds of positions he or she will support. In any given election, there may be hundreds of candidates, and it is very difficult (if not impossible) for a voter to judge the individual record and platform of every eligible candidate. Party identification allows a voter to make an informed choice without researching every detail of a campaign.



Defining Political Parties

According to Gitelson, Dudley, and Dubnick (*American Government*, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, p. 154-155), political parties are coalitions of people organized formally to recruit, nominate, and elect candidates for public office. They are also instrumental in running the government, creating and implementing shared political goals through the election of officials to the executive and legislative branches of government, and bringing stability to the political system.

**Internet
Resources**



Directory of U.S. Political Parties

As everyone knows, the two major parties of the American political system are Democrats and Republicans. However, there are at least 36 parties that are considered third parties and at least 13 other parties that exist, although they do not have official candidates.

We encourage you to find out more about the unknown diversity of the American political parties so that you can compare their platforms and ideologies (see also the Internet resources at the end of the unit).

At <http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm>

2. What does it mean to identify with a political party? What are the reasons behind party loyalty?

- Traditionally, people get involved in public life via political parties. They support candidates and parties that reflect their views and interests. Although the attachment between individuals and parties has declined, many people still identify themselves with one party rather than another. People give various reasons. Sometime it follows family history (e.g., my parents voted for a Republican so I will); sometimes it follows ethnic history (e.g., immigrant groups traditionally identify with Democrats for the first couple of generations because of their greater support of social services); sometimes it follows from political, economic, or moral beliefs about public life (e.g., many will support or oppose a candidate because of his or her position on taxes, the environment or abortion). Whatever the reasons given, or level of commitment, or candidate and party supported, the fundamental act of political participation is voting.
- It is important to show to students that identification is a complicated process. As previously stated, some people vote for a party because it is part of an ethnic, cultural, regional heritage. Others are more easily committed for reasons of general philosophy, principles or values. Some take a very narrow view, and commit themselves largely because of one important issue.

3. What do political parties do?

- Political parties unite broad groups of individuals under a common set of beliefs and principles about how government should work. Parties recruit members and candidates for public office so that their ideas are represented in local, state and federal government. Most major parties tend to

embrace general principles and a range of opinions about public affairs. They do not expect every member to agree across the board about all their political goals. For example, Republicans typically want to lower taxes and rely on private and market-driven solutions to social problems, while Democrats usually support higher tax rates and public, government-based solutions to some issues. Smaller groups, such as the Libertarians or Green party, tend to be much more ideologically narrow regarding their concerns and principles.

- Political parties provide a key connection between citizens and government. Party members tend to be much more active in politics at all levels. Parties rely on their members to raise funds, spread the word about candidates and policies, and encourage others to support the party.
- Political parties provide an identity to candidates running for office. Political parties are like brands. It gives people some idea of what they are buying when they go shopping. Imagine how difficult it would be to research every candidate, every policy question. Voters rely on party platforms to enunciate a political philosophy and clarify positions.

4. Whose opinions does a political party represent?

- No political party exists without debate about what policies it should support. Party members argue with their political opponents and among themselves. It is important to realize that citizens can belong to a political party without agreeing with every position it supports.
- Often there are conflicts between party loyalty and personal opinion. Rarely does one party embody every possible position supported by an individual. There can be vast differences between parties at the local, state and national level. For example, many southern Democrats are much more socially conservative than their colleagues from the northeast and midwest. There can be conflicts between the social or moral positions of one party and their economic philosophy. Social conservatives who oppose abortion might worry about welfare reforms, which discourage women from keeping their children.



Group Activity 1: Who Supports What? Ask your students to identify which political party supports (or opposes) specific policy issues such as tax increasing and affordable health care. Encourage them to reflect what their political affiliation may be based on the issues that they personally endorse or oppose (see Handout 1).

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- ❏ **Political parties are a central feature of American political life.**
- ❏ **Political parties attempt to represent a broad coalition of like-minded citizens.**
- ❏ **The goal of political parties is to recruit members and elect representatives to public office.**
- ❏ **Major American political parties tend to represent a general philosophy about governing rather than narrow positions.**
- ❏ **One can remain a member of a political party without agreeing with every party position.**

KEY TERMS or CONCEPTS*

*Unless otherwise noted, all definitions are taken from Webster Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com>

- ❏ **Political Ideology:** A pattern of complex political ideas presented in an understandable structure that inspires people to act to achieve certain goals (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2001, p.130).
- ❏ **Opinion:** A view, judgment, or appraisal formed in the mind about a particular matter; belief stronger than impression and less strong than positive knowledge; a formal expression of judgment or advice by an expert; the formal expression (as by a judge, court, or referee) of the legal reasons and principles upon which a legal decision is based.
- ❏ **Political Platform:** Statements of party goals and specific political agendas that are taken seriously by the party's candidates but are not binding (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2001, p.159).
- ❏ **Electoral Coalition:** Groups of loyal supporters who agree with the party's stand on most issues and vote for its candidate for office.
- ❏ **Political Parties:** Coalitions of people organized formally to recruit, nominate, and elect candidates for public office. They are also instrumental in running the government, creating and implementing shared political goals through the election of officials to the executive and legislative branches of government, and bringing stability to the political system (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2001, pp. 154-155, *American Government*, Houghton Mifflin)



ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS INDEX

The Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science were developed using the 1985 Illinois State Goals for Social Science, the National Standards for World History, the National Standards for United States History, the National Geography Standards, and National Standards for Civics and Government, other various state and national work, and local standards contributed by team members.

Online Resource:

Information regarding the Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards can be found online at: <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/default0.html>

Illinois Learning Standards Alignment

State Goal	14	Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.
Learning Standards	A, B, C, D, F	
Major Emphasis	14.A.4, 14.C.4, 14.D.5, 16.B.4, 16B.5a-b	
State Goal	16	Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, The United States and other nations



NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

The Curriculum Standards for Social Studies were developed by a Task Force of the National Council for the Social Studies and approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in April 1994. Its *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* focuses on ten thematic strands in social studies considered essential for educators and students. More information can be found at their website: <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/>

This unit addresses the following thematic standards:

- ☒ Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- ☒ Power, Authority, and Governance
- ☒ Individual Development and Identity
- ☒ Civic, Ideals, and Practices

DICTIONARY and INFORMATION LINKS

There are many helpful resources online for you and your students. Those below will just get you started.

LibrarySpot.com

This is one of the best places to begin any kind of information search. It provides direct links to encyclopedias, dictionaries, curriculum ideas and library resources.

<http://www.libraryspot.com/>

Dictionary.com

Free online English dictionary, thesaurus and reference guide, crossword puzzles and other word games, online translator and Word of the Day.

<http://www.Dictionary.com>

Webster Dictionary at www.m-w.com

Online version of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary. Simply enter keywords for a comprehensive definition, with thesaurus option.

<http://www.m-w.com>

AllWords.com - Dictionary, Guide, Community and More

allwords.com provides English definitions plus a multi-lingual search. Search in German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish and English. It provides a helpful pronunciation guide and gives students a chance to see how words often share cultural roots with geographic, and cultural neighbors.

<http://www.allwords.com/>

AskJeeves.com

One of the best search engines on the web. Web users simply put questions to AJeeves@the butler, who then searches the web for relevant information and web sites.

<http://www.askjeeves.com/>

INTERNET RESOURCES on POLITICAL PARTIES



Visit the following web sites for more information on how to connect your students to public life. Some of these sites provide information while others outline opportunities for getting students connected to their communities. Unless otherwise noticed, all quoted material is taken directly from the listed web sites.

⊕ ***Young Democrats of America***

Website Young Democrats of America

<http://www.yda.org/>

⊕ ***Teen Age Republicans***

Website Teen Age Republicans

<http://www.teenagerepublicans.org/>

⊕ ***Democratic National Committee***

Provides access to and information about the Democratic party and officials online.

<http://www.democrats.org/>

⊕ ***Republican National Committee***

Provides access to and information about the Republican party and officials online

<http://www.rnc.org/>

⊕ ***DemocracyNet***

You can find out information about local and national campaigns at this site.

<http://www.dnet.org/>

⊕ ***ISSUES 2001: Every Political Leader on Every Issue***

This web site provides a comprehensive list of policy issues and the opinions of candidates, and elected officials on each topic. This is one of the best sites on the web for this kind of information.

http://www.issues2000.org/faq_frm.htm

⊕ ***Association of State Green Parties***

Provides links to the Green party state by state.

<http://www.greenparties.org/>

⊕ ***Libertarian Party***

Home of the Libertarian Party

<http://www.lp.org>

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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- ✦ Brian C. Shea, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, coordinator and principal author;
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- ✦ Nelson Portillo, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Psychology, evaluation, editing, and web design;
- ✦ Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, evaluation supervision;
- ✦ Linda Von Dreele, Associate Director of CURL, oversight and editing.

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