

## US Politics and Government – Parties and Interest Groups

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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**Party system** = the way by which the political system is organised via its political parties.

**The US political party system is broadly organised as a reflection of the federal structure of government:**

- **Parties are largely decentralised** = organised mainly at the state level.
- Like 50 state Democratic and 50 state Republican parties, plus a national committee for each party.
- Since the 1970s, parties demonstrate ideological cohesiveness and play an increasing role in recruitment of congressional candidates.
- Party became more top-down rather than bottom-up.
- Currently, each party has a national committee with offices in Washington DC.
- members of the national committees are representatives from the 50 state parties.

**United government** = when the President, Senate and House are controlled by the same party. In contrast to:

**Divided government** = when one or more of the branches institutions are controlled by a different party.

**Ideology** = a collective set of beliefs.

**Religious right**, also known as Christian Right = a faction of the Republican party with strong conservative views; attempting to influence public policy that is guided by fundamentalist Christian beliefs, such as pro-life policy, prayer at school, etc.

The geographical feature of ideology in the USA = conservative South and liberal West coast.

**Both parties are not ideologically monolith:** not all Democrats consider themselves liberals, especially in the South. Likewise, not all Republicans self-identify as conservative, especially in the North-East and the West.

## The Democratic party

### The Economy

- Support for a federal minimum wage.
- Supports a degree of governmental regulation of the economy.
- Focuses on tax cuts on lower-income workers.

### Welfare

- Supports governmental welfare policies.
- Considers healthcare as a right (Obamacare and other measures).

### Morals and society

- More 'progressive' approach rather than 'conservative' on moral issues and crime.
- Tends to be 'pro-choice' regarding abortion and supports same-sex-marriages.

Like the Republican party, the Democratic party also accommodates socialists and free-market liberals.

### Democrat party factions

**1 – Liberals** = left-wing Democrats are often referred to as liberals, including socialists like Bernie Sanders. They support state welfare and government intervention in the economy to promote social justice and equality, and with liberal views on moral issues.

**2 – Conservatives** = tend to be more conservative regarding fiscal issues, and simultaneously more likely to be socially conservative, for example, the Blue Dog Coalition.

**3 – Moderates** = likely to be somewhat with a conservative leaning on fiscal matters and welfare issues but more liberal on social policy. They tend to be the mainstream faction in the Democrats.

## The Republican party

### The economy

- Usually supportive of minimal governmental intervention and free-market economy.
- Also support for **protectionism** = protecting US companies and jobs, especially under Trump.
- Supports tax cuts including for the wealthy.

### Welfare

- Focuses on individual responsibility and less on governmental welfare.

- Opposed Obamacare and other potential reforms to private insurance models of healthcare.

### **Morals and society**

- Socially conservative views, often with somewhat religious tone.
- Significant opposition to abortion and same-sex marriages.

### **Factions in the Republican party**

**1 – Fiscal Conservatives** = focus on the economy in favour of minimal governmental intervention, low taxes, free trade, strong capitalist competitive economy: the Freedom Caucus.

**2 – Social Conservatives** = often accompanied by a religious leaning (Christian Right), with traditional conservative views on issues such as sexual orientation abortion, immigration, etc.

**3 – Moderates** = tend to be fiscally-conservative regarding the economy combined with a relatively progressive view on social and moral matters, such as abortion and sexual orientation.

### **It is possible to identify a clear split between the parties on key policy issues**

**Increased spending on social welfare measures:** D yes, R no.

**Death penalty:** D no, R yes.

**Gun control:** D yes, R no.

**High defence spending:** D no, R yes.

**Strict environment control:** D yes, R no.

**Strict control measures on immigration:** D no, R yes.

**Universal healthcare:** D yes, R no.

**BLM movement:** D yes, R no.

**Coalition of supporters:** US parties are practically a coalition of interests across various social groups.

## Determinants of voting behaviour and US parties

- **Gender** = relatively a marginal split with a small trend for men to be supportive of Republicans and women with a leaning towards Democrats.
- **Age** = the older the vote the more likely it is to be Republican and vice versa.
- **Religion** = Christians are significantly more likely to vote Republicans (compared with non-Christians), and within, Protestants and especially white evangelicals; Catholics traditionally support Democrats.  
Churchgoers are more likely to vote Republican.
- **Race** = Blacks are more likely to vote Democrats, as Hispanic, Whites are more split with some leaning towards Republicans.
- **Education** = the higher the educational qualifications the more likely the person to vote Democrats.
- **Class** = traditionally blue-collar workers were more likely to vote Democrats whereas individuals with white-collar occupations were more likely to vote Republicans. While some argue that the association is reversed, it is not apparent if only because of the influence of other factors combined, such as race, age and education.

## The apparent polarisation of US politics

### 1 – Red America =

- Predominantly white.
- Protestant, and evangelical.
- Rural, small town or suburbs.
- Fiscally and socially conservative.
- Pro-guns.
- Pro-life.
- Pro-traditional marriage.
- Limited role of federal government.
- Opposing Obamacare.
- Viewers of Fox News.

### 2 – Blue America =

- A racial mix of White, Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx.
- Urban.
- Socially liberal.
- Support for gun control measures.
- Pro-choice.
- Pro-LGBTQ and rights.
- Expansive role for federal government.
- Support for Obamacare.
- Viewers of CNN and Saturday Night Live.

## Does the US have a two-party system?

A two-party system is a term describing a system wherein two major parties regularly win the vast majority of votes, thus occupy nearly all the seats in the legislature or alternatively control the executive.

### Evidence supporting a two-party system

- **Popular vote** = in all the last seven presidential elections, the two major parties won more than 80% of the popular vote; on 4 of which they won 95%.
- **Congressional seats** = after 2020, the two key parties occupy 533 out of 535 seats.
- **Executive branch control** = every president since 1853 has been either a Democrat or a Republican.
- **State government** = by 2017, 49 of the 50 state governors were either Democrats or Republicans.

### The reasons for the two-party system

**1 – Electoral system** = first-past-the-post makes it extremely difficult for national third party to thrive.

**2 – Broad party ideologies** = each party offers a comprehensive ideological package on all matters.

**3 – Primary elections** = make the two parties more tuned to the electorate and it maintains the party affiliation.

## Interest groups

Operate at all governmental levels = federal, national and local.

Seek to influence all three branches of the government, at these three levels.

There are different typologies, but a key distinction is between sectional and causal groups:

**1 – Sectional** = seek to represent their own section or group within society.

- Business or trade group; American Business Conference.
- Labour unions; United Auto Workers.
- Agricultural groups; National Farmers Union.
- Societal groups; National Organisation for Women.
- Professional groups representing the interests of a particular profession; American Medical Association.
- Intergovernmental groups; National Governors' Conference.

**2 – Causal groups** = campaign for a particular cause or issue.

- Single-interest groups; BLM.
- Ideological groups; American Conservative Union.
- Policy groups; Friends of the Earth.
- Think-tanks; Institute for Policy Studies.

### **Functions**

- **Representation**
  - An important link between the public and politicians.
  - An effective channel of representation.
  - More effective than directly addressing the elected officials.
- **Citizen participation** = allows citizens to participate in decision-making processes in-between elections.
- **Public education**
  - Educate and inform public opinion.
  - Warn of potential dangers.
- **Agenda setting**
  - Seeking to influence the agenda's priorities.
  - May seek to bring together different groups to promote a common interest.
- **Programme monitoring**
  - Scrutinised and hold the government to account regarding implementation of policies.

### **Significance**

- **Party decline:** increased apathy, cynicism, distrust, lack of efficacy.
- **Access points at different government levels** and for different branches and agencies.
- **The constitution:** protects the rights of groups to exist, organise, raise funds, protest, etc.

### **Methods**

**Lobbying** = a key practice that is protected by the First Amendment.

**Legal methods** = resorting to courts to advance their cause, with much success, see the role of the judicial.

**Publicity** = raising public awareness and recruiting support.

### **Power and effectiveness**

The groups had significant impact in several policy areas:

**1 – Environmental protection** = such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society; achieved stricter laws.

**2 – Women’s rights** = League of Women Voters and the National Organisation of Women increased momentum and are now campaigning on issue such as equal pay and sexual harassment in the workplace.

**3 – Abortion rights** = both lobbies have been significantly active, and they also try to be influential on the judiciary.

**4 – Gun control** = the National Rifle Association is one of the most powerful groups and seeks to protect the Second Amendment rights and oppose gun control legislation.

**5 – Racial equality** = BLM movement following the killing of George Floyd under police custody in 2020.

### **Impact of interest groups on government**

**On the Congress:** by lobbying members, members of committees, organising constituents and publicising members’ voting records.

**On the executive:** strong ties with executive departments and agencies, influencing the formulating and enacting of policy to advance their cause.

**On the judiciary:** engage in nomination and confirmation of judges at all levels of government but especially the Supreme Court, because of the powers granted for the latter, especially when activist. Also trying to influence court hearings through *amicus curiae*, friend of the court briefings, by presenting their arguments in writing before the hearing of oral arguments.

One of the most influential groups is the **American Civil Liberties Union** that assisted in bringing forward high-profile cases pertaining Affirmative Action and transgender rights.