

Abstract

This curriculum unit explores the history of American political parties and the two-party system. First, students discuss the origins of political parties in the United States and examine the Founders' concerns that parties would create factions and division among the American electorate. Students will then go on to learn about the origins of the two-party system, Martin Van Buren's architecture of it, and its benefits. Students will continue by analyzing the shortcomings of the two-party system and how it leaves room for special interest groups to influence policy-making decisions heavily. Next, students will discuss contemporary challenges to the two-party system by debating the benefits and drawbacks of third parties, both by examining official third parties (e.g., the Green Party, the Libertarian Party) and social movements that have challenged the status quo (e.g., the Progressive Era, Nixon's Southern Strategy, the Tea Party Movement). Students will reflect on the views presented throughout this unit plan to write a reflection in which they explain which political system is healthiest for American democracy. Lastly, students will be grouped into political parties according to their ideological scores to compete in a mock presidential election. Here, students will demonstrate how political parties nominate candidates, organize voters, and represent the electorate in a democratic government.

Key Words:

Political parties, two-party system, multiparty system, Democrats, Republicans, third parties, interest groups

Political Parties: Vehicles or Disruptors of American Democracy?

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Introduction

When delivering his Farwell Address, President George Washington stated, “[Political parties] serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force.”¹ Although Washington’s disdain for political parties is well-known, it is perhaps still a surprise that the first American president held no formal association with a political party—a position that seems to challenge the format of today’s presidential elections directly. Washington argued that political parties served to divide the public and cater to the interest of self-serving politicians. Washington’s remarks seem to run counter to the views of the current executive leader, President Joseph Biden. In Biden’s Inaugural Address, the President called on all Americans, without disavowing their party allegiances, to unite as one.² Biden’s speech showed his belief in the two-party system and how it lends itself to political cooperation amongst Democrats and Republicans, each making distinct contributions to solutions to common problems rather than allowing political opponents to act as adversaries against one another. This unit plan aims to juxtapose Washington’s and Biden’s views while introducing a multitude of perspectives on how the two-party system in the United States came to be and which political system is best for the United States. In doing so, this curriculum unit challenges students to debate what type of political structure is the healthiest for American democracy.

Rationale

This two-week unit plan is designed for high school twelfth-grade Social Science classes at William W. Bodine High School for International Affairs. Bodine is a magnet high school in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). Bodine is located in Philadelphia’s Northern Liberties neighborhood and serves roughly 600 students. Middle school grades, attendance, disciplinary records, state test scores, and other criteria determine student admission. The SDP operates as a Title I school district; under this policy, all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Over ninety-five percent of students at Bodine live below the poverty line. Students attend daily class periods of fifty-two minutes each. Bodine offers Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses to its upperclassmen. This unit can be used in AP and IB courses as well as for ninth, tenth, and eleventh-grade students.

At Bodine High School, twelfth-grade students must enroll in Social Science, a civics course that focuses on government, politics, and economics. Keeping the classroom’s curriculum as relevant as possible is of the utmost importance. The course’s curriculum is modified to teach topics such as lead and health, the Bill of Rights, the presidential campaigning process, school funding, gerrymandering, foreign affairs, housing, mass incarceration, affirmative action, globalization, the Financial Crisis of 2008, and personal finance in the order listed. Respectively, these topics relate to the role of the media, the foundations of American government, political parties, how budgets become law, legislative representation, the roles of

the president, the federal bureaucracy, trial courts, appellate courts, economic systems and trade, banking and government regulation, and budgeting. Students are genuinely interested in these topics; therefore, the relevance of these lessons better equips them to understand how the three branches and levels of government work in action. Students are quick to register to vote and become civically engaged, which is one of the goals of this course and unit plan.

To prepare students to become engaged in their local, regional, and global communities, they must be aware of the history of their community and nation. These topics can be used within the classroom to promote active civic participation, encouraging students to study the past to understand the present. This practice will result in students' ability to apply concepts and practices throughout history to understand the origin and workings of modern-day societies, cultures, and institutions. Understanding the past is crucial when understanding how the history of philosophy, geography, and culture impacts how our government and politics work in today's economic world, both nationally and globally.

Unit Content

The clash of the celebration and criticism of American exceptionalism is playing out in today's political landscape. When civic dialogue and political unity are so important, political polarization continues to be compared to that during the US Civil War. Today's political divide raises the question about the United States' two-party system: Is it healthy for American democracy to have two main political parties?

Students will learn about the foundations of the American government and the history of its political system throughout this curriculum unit. This unit plan contains four sections:

First, students will study the skepticism about centralized power and parties that many of the Founders of the American government had when designing the federal government. Students will analyze these perspectives to understand how today's governmental system contains several mechanisms that make it difficult for political majorities to implement their policies.

Second, students will analyze the emergence of America's two-party system through the vision of President Martin Van Buren, as he sought to use political parties as a way to prevent poor leadership by increasing political competition. Students will assess the two-party system's advantages and efficiencies.

Third, students will examine the shortcomings of the two-party system. Students will learn how the two-party system gives way for interest groups to exercise a large amount of influence over the nomination of candidates and how candidates create public policy. The two-party system's disadvantages will be juxtaposed with its benefits.

Lastly, students will study the utility of third parties and how they challenge the status quo of the political landscape. Students will do this by examining the current divide between Democrats and Republicans and how third parties such as the Green Party and the Libertarian Party and social and political movements like the Tea Party Movement serve as important mechanisms to influence the Democrats and Republicans. Students will also analyze the advantages of third

parties through a historical perspective as they look at the Progressive Era and Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy.

Educating for American Democracy

This unit plan is aligned with the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) initiative.³ The initiative is led by a consortium of educational leaders from all levels to improve civics education in the American classroom. Its seven themes promote civic engagement and student dialogue that encourages active and responsible conversation. Of the seven themes, this curriculum unit focuses on three of these themes:

First, this unit plan encourages students to focus on the EAD theme of Civic Participation. Students are encouraged to analyze their relationship with their local, state, and federal governments. Students will study how political parties assist or inhibit the relationship citizens have with their government. Students will examine how they interact with the government through activism, voter registration, and other measures.

Next, this curriculum unit is designed for students to study the EAD's theme of A New Government & Constitution. Students will explore how the US Constitution provides power to the federal government, state government, and citizens. Students will examine the purposes of the natural laws, powers, and laws established in the US Constitution. Students will analyze how political ideology affects how individuals and political parties interpret the US Constitution differently.

Lastly, students will focus on the theme of Institutional & Social Transformation. Students will examine how conflict and social arrangements between groups shaped American politics from the colonial period to the present day. Students will study how political parties have contributed to or limited these changes.

Content Background

In 2016, Trump's surge to the presidency through populist rhetoric led to the defeat of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. After Trump's electoral win, pundits commented on Trump's unlikely victory while criticizing Clinton's inability to appeal to moderate voters and win key swing states. Many voters indicated they voted for the candidate they disliked the least, while others broke away from their respective parties to nominate a third-party candidate. Some even challenged the two-party system altogether. Often accepted as the political norm, the presence of political parties was hotly contested by the Founders of the American government.

The Founders' Skepticism of Political Parties

Following the United States' victory over Great Britain in the American Revolutionary War, the delegates that formed the First and Second Continental Congress and drafted the Declaration of Independence met to create a government. The delegates in Philadelphia were vocally opposed to King George III's policies regarding increases in taxation, the closure of colonial assemblies, a lack of political representation for American colonists in London, an increase in British military

occupation, restrictions on the taking of Native American lands, and several other policies that he and Parliament enacted. Due to this, the colonists labeled the King of England a tyrant. The attitudes that led the delegates to break away from the British Empire continued to be at the forefront when establishing a new, independent American government. As a result of the Founders' experience under a distant tyrannical centralized government, they looked to structure a democratic state with several mechanisms that would prevent an oppressive government from forming.

Initially, the Founders established a federal government by ratifying the Articles of Confederation in 1777. The structure of the government was in the name, emphasizing power at the level of the states. The Founders wished to design a government that could conduct the basic affairs any nation should properly govern without trampling on the individual liberties of the American people. However, the Founders emphasized the power of state governments so much that the federal government did not have enough influence to perform basic jobs. For example, the federal government could not coin money, raise taxes, regulate trade, or oversee other general affairs of the United States.⁴ A rebellion sparked by Daniel Shays, a western Massachusetts farmer and a veteran of the American Revolutionary War, showed the federal government's fragility as many veterans who had still not been compensated for their participation in the war sought to overthrow the newly formed republic.⁵ While the government suppressed the rebellion, the Founders understood the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation.

The severity of Shays' Rebellion was addressed as the delegates agreed to meet again in Philadelphia during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Here, the delegates addressed the structural problems of the Articles of Confederation by providing the federal government with powers the previous government had not had. Throughout the Constitutional Convention, Federalists and Anti-Federalists had been in gridlock. Federalists, who supported a strong central government, were staunchly opposed by Anti-Federalists, who wanted to preserve power at the state and local levels.⁶ Anti-Federalists accused Federalists of establishing a newly tyrannical government, while Federalists labeled Anti-Federalists as impractical and unwilling to address the issues Shays' Rebellion had shown. A series of compromises pushed the deliberations forward successfully.

Among the compromises, the Founders included several mechanisms that would prevent politicians, particularly the President of the United States, from abusing their power while in office. For example, the Founders worried that since the American government drew power from its electorate, then if the leaders of the executive branch mobilized popular support, they could abuse the powers provided to them by the US Constitution. To prevent this, the Founders, in part, created the Electoral College to make the president's office draw its power outside of the legislatures or the voters directly. Additionally, the Founders adopted a system of federalism in which federal and state governments held jurisdiction over separate issues. This was done for the previous-mentioned reasons of avoiding the creation of an overpowering federal government. Presidents could also exercise their veto power during the legislative process, and Congress could override a veto with a two-thirds majority.

Although the Founders were successful in solving the issues made apparent by Shays' Rebellion and avoiding the creation of a tyrannical federal government, the systems they put into place damaged the ability to make coordinated action among politicians effective, particularly without having confidence in political parties, which could mobilize voters and form coalitions among officials at both the state and national levels.

Politicians grew worried about the unduly political aspects of government for the same reasons they had when writing the Articles of Confederation and the US Constitution. They viewed political parties as vehicles that assisted the self-interest of politicians and as promoters of division rather than cohesion. No one became a stauncher opponent of political parties than President George Washington. As the country's first president, Washington had appointed members with differing political attitudes to his cabinet. Washington became a close witness to the fierce debates Alexander Hamilton had against Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. In fact, in Washington's Farewell Address, he warned the country of political factions and argued that political parties would lead to disunion of the newly formed United States.⁷ This was the prevailing view of many of the Founders.

Worried that political parties would increase the likelihood of demagogues, the Founders debated whether members of the House of Representatives, not the population of voters, should elect the president. An independent executive committee that the convention formed successfully argued against this position by stating that presidential elections would be prone to demagoguery within the House.⁸ This might allow individual politicians who had heavy influence within Congress' lower chamber to have an advantage over candidates with more support nationwide. These concerns, in turn, resulted in the creation of the Electoral College, a body made up of politicians who would be more likely to be aware of national issues than most voters or even state legislators. Since the members of the Electoral College would be more aware of national issues, this presidential selection process would incentivize politicians to properly represent their constituents responsibly rather than succumbing to populist practices. However, if candidates could not achieve the minimum required votes in the Electoral College, the House of Representatives would determine the results of the presidential race through an auxiliary election in which each state's delegation to the House would have one vote, regardless of its size.

Founders such as Alexander Hamilton and James Madison worried that fewer candidates would be able to appeal to the national interests of the United States, therefore making it more probable that no presidential candidates would reach the minimum number of electoral votes to win the presidential election outright, making it more likely for the House of Representatives to choose the next President of the United States. And since the results of the presidential election would be determined by the state delegations, not the voters or the Electoral College, some Founders argued that this would create a sense among the American public that the government was an illegitimate republic, ignoring the voices of the people and their electors.

The passage of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804 further heightened these fears as presidential and vice-presidential candidates were now elected on the same ticket. Additionally, having previously had two votes, members of the Electoral College now could just cast one vote despite the minimum electoral vote requirement for presidential candidates remaining unchanged.⁹ So, while delegates at the Constitutional Convention successfully implemented the Electoral College

to avoid the election of demagogues, the changes made to the US Constitution in the years after the Constitutional Convention made it increasingly likely that the House of Representatives would determine the results of the presidential election. It was not until Martin Van Buren orchestrated the two-party system that the nation's political structure provided a solution to the government's inability to cater to coordinated action among politicians while limiting the ability of executive leaders to rise above the will of the people.

The Emergence of the Two-Party System

Martin Van Buren aimed to address the structural issues of presidential elections the Founders had left after the Constitutional Convention. Van Buren believed that the solution to the issue of factionalism was what many Founders saw as the vehicle of factionalism itself: political parties. Van Buren argued that promoting a two-party system would solve the Founders' problems.

First, national political parties limited the field of presidential candidates.¹⁰ In the case of a presidential election with multiple contestants that appealed to national interests and members of the Electoral College, the political parties ensured that fewer presidential candidates competed in the election. This, in turn, increased the chance each runner had to reach the minimum electoral threshold required—something that ratifying the Twelfth Amendment made challenging to attain.

Second, adopting a two-party system allowed for candidates to gain national followings while elevating the reputation of the political party itself in the case of undesirable politicians being on the ballot.¹¹ If too few participants appealed to national interests, voters could rely on the reputation of each political party to elect the president.

Third, Van Buren believed that introducing a two-party system magnified the importance of a candidate's political affiliation rather than their personal ambitions.¹² This meant that political parties prevented candidates from rising above the party they serve. This system created moderation as political leaders were expected to carry out the party's will while in office. Voters elected political figures with the understanding that they would govern within the bounds of their party's platform.

And lastly, Van Buren argued that the wealthy benefited from the current system of nonpartisan politics.¹³ The wealthy elite had more influence over individual players, whereas the masses needed an established political party to organize themselves and protect their interests. Political parties built off reputation offered most Americans a way of defending their interests and adequately representing themselves in the country's political system.

Van Buren exercised his plan when supporters of Andrew Jackson formed the Democratic Party. Jackson's popularity established a broad coalition through a populist approach. Van Buren's plan worked, and Andrew Jackson's popularity mobilized voters and organized political ideology to avoid a scandalous method of deciding a presidential election. The creation of the Democratic Party in the 1820s forced the ideological opposition to create their party with the Whig Party (a forerunner of the modern Republican Party, which emerged in the 1850s after the Whigs broke apart over slavery).

Van Buren's vision ultimately became solidified over time. Today, the Democratic and Republican parties form the backbone of the American political system, thus creating a political oligopoly on the American political and governmental apparatus. Throughout the country's roughly two hundred fifty-year period, not one presidential candidate has won the presidential election representing a third party. Serious (although ultimately unsuccessful) attempts have been made, perhaps most notably by Theodore Roosevelt's defeat to Woodrow Wilson as the Progressive Party's nominee in 1912. There is still broad support for America's two-party system today, and many supporters echo the views Van Buren highlighted centuries ago.

Under a two-party system, voters are quickly mobilized. In the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties campaign using broad-ranging political platforms that appeal to a diverse group of voters. Moreover, a two-party system allows each political party to have comprehensive platforms that cater to the American electorate rather than focusing on single issues that appeal to a small segment of voters. While ideological diversity can exist within a political party's membership, its wide-ranging political platform allows coalitions to form, leaving voters just two easy choices to select from when casting their ballots.

Because there are just two political parties, the Democrats and Republicans are encouraged to adopt moderate policies during the electoral and governmental stages. During the election cycle, parties are encouraged to compete over the moderate voting population, which ordinarily constitutes most of the electorate and its swing voters. This circumstance, depicted in what is known as the median voter theorem, encourages Democrats and Republicans to adopt policy proposals that appeal to the United States' median voter.¹⁴ Since despite recent widespread polarization, most of the American electorate still consists of ideological centrists; it benefits the Democrats and Republicans alike to adopt more moderate policies. After the election, Democrats and Republicans are encouraged to work with one another to enact legislative changes. With the existence of just two political parties, the Democrats and Republicans must cooperate to avoid the stalling of a bill during the legislative process. That, at least, is what defenders of the two-party system contend.

Since the United States has a two-party system, political parties are not required to form the kinds of coalitions that political parties must often create in multiparty systems. The creation of coalitions in parliamentary systems of government can lead to unusual political partnerships. For example, the 2015 elections in Greece led the center-left SYRIZA party to gain a plurality. SYRIZA could not form an absolute majority on its own, so they were left to build a coalition with another party to create a government. Unable to make a political partnership with the centrist parties to their right and unwilling to ally with the communists, SYRIZA formed a coalition with ANEL, the far-right Greek nationalist party. This government was not sustainable and collapsed just a few months after, forcing the country to hold new elections. Creating a two-party system increases the likelihood of sustainable governments and avoids the tumultuous turmoil in some multiparty systems.¹⁵ Nonetheless, despite the benefits that two-party systems bring, scholars have argued that American political parties push their agendas without providing any real sense of voter control over their political platform.

The Shortcomings of the Two-Party System

The domination of the Democrats and Republicans in American politics since the mid-nineteenth century has allowed voters to nominate candidates that fit the general presentation of a liberal or conservative politician. Although the benefits of a two-party system create large buckets of ideology that voters can easily select from, the electorate is organized into groups that naturally have “varying degrees of trust, adaptation, and confusion.”¹⁶ For example, several media pundits applauded Biden’s ability to create coalitions among his voters. Young people from college towns supported his promise to address the student debt crisis and the rising cost of tuition. Criminal justice reformists supported Biden’s rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the need to reform policing practices. Working- and middle-class earners were concerned with Trump’s handling of the economy and the growing worries that the COVID-19 Pandemic would have on inflation. The United States’ two-party system incentivized Biden to campaign on broad issues related to liberal economic and social reform. This led to groups not sharing policy priorities and backing the same candidate. In other words, while the Democratic and Republican political platforms efficiently organized the American electorate during the 2020 presidential election, the two-party system in the United States also put groups together that did not prioritize or agree on similar policy goals, leaving room for special interest groups to take advantage of how public policy is decided upon and created. Although Van Buren worked to solve the issue that the American electorate would see the political system as too detached from ordinary voters, today’s two-party system incentivizes political parties to prioritize the voices of interest groups over voters, particularly during the nomination process of the campaign.

When challenging for office, candidates must compete over resources and financing that interest groups can help to provide. Because primary elections typically have less media coverage and a smaller voter turnout, the contributions made by interest groups are more influential. If the interest group successfully gets their preferred candidate nominated and elected, they then have a politician in office supporting their policy proposals. By focusing on the nomination stage of the campaigning process, interest groups are more likely to have their policy goals reached. In contrast, if they concentrate on lobbying candidates after they have reached office, interest groups must garner the support of their policies with each bill that moves through Congress.¹⁷ Interest groups can significantly affect the legislative process by supporting candidates across the country during the nomination process.

Since interest groups are not bound by a legislative district or state borders, they can organize nationally. For example, suppose a labor union wishes to back candidates willing to raise the federal minimum wage. In that case, the labor union can support candidates throughout the country, regardless of geographical location, to make the passage of this policy more attainable. To understand the influence interest groups can have, it is essential to remember that interest groups can assist each other in backing specific candidates that embrace both groups’ proposals. Perhaps the labor union requires additional funding or influence to increase the chances that their candidates are elected. If this is the case, the labor union can partner with an environmental group that hopes to ban the practice of fracking. Both interest groups can work together in nominating candidates that will support both policies. Together, these interest groups can grow their influence in determining which candidates will likely be elected to office, perhaps even swaying the political majority within the legislature.

Despite the influence that interest groups hold under the current two-party system, the median voter theorem states that voters are likely to support moderate policy proposals. However, this assumes “voters can judge the policy and ideological positions of candidates.”¹⁸ In reality, a large portion of voters do not know which political party holds the majority in congress, much less are they able to parse the differences between specific policies proposed by separate candidates. This is not to suggest that individual voters are ignorant or stupid; several reasons contribute to the lack of awareness many voters may have. But, if this is the case, why should interest groups aim to propose policies that exclusively cater to centrist voters? Instead, they can control the policy-making agenda to influence the legislative process. The shortcomings of the two-party system have led some voters to cast their ballots in favor of third parties.

The Utility of Third Parties

Criticisms in recent years have resurfaced regarding the two dominant political parties' firm grip on the United States government and American electoral systems. Many contend that election results do not adequately represent American public opinion, especially with recent presidential elections in 2000 and 2016 being decided by the Electoral College when the victor received more electoral votes but fewer popular votes. Critics also argue that primary voters are often ideologically more extreme than the electorate at large and choose extreme candidates who heighten American divisions in ways that foster governmental paralysis on many vital issues.

Despite these critiques, current politicians remain steadfast in their support for the current political system. President Biden, for example, stressed unity and a willingness to reach across the aisle to work with his colleagues in the Republican Party during his Inaugural Address. When it became clear that Donald Trump had secured the presidency in November 2016, Rachel Maddow went so far as to blame those who voted for a third-party candidate for costing Hillary Clinton the election.¹⁹ Even still, voters and media pundits have grown frustrated with the amount of political gridlock in Congress and the division between Democrats and Republicans—a division that worsened in the aftermath of the Great Recession and was exacerbated even more after Trump's successful presidential run in 2016. Some voters feel their voices are not represented well among the current political parties. Critics argue that the two-party system has led to legislative failures. As voters have grown increasingly dissatisfied, more attention has been paid to the utility of third parties, while others have called for adopting a multiparty system. Third parties have, historically, proved to be helpful in several ways. The utility of third parties is examined below using contemporary and historical examples:

Because the two-party system was created to foster ideological moderation, and because they have since become a secure oligopoly, the main two political parties are not challenged to push for new and aggressive policies.²⁰ Since the main parties tend to cater to the centrist voting population, third parties are often the political organizations that can move the needle on specific political issues. For example, the progressive wing of today's Democratic Party has embraced issues that the liberal Green Party has been campaigning on for years. Notable Democrats, including Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have pushed for a Green New Deal, universal healthcare, and an overhaul of the criminal justice system. While these policies have

not been fully implemented, popular support for them has increased, pushing the Democratic Party to include them in their platform.²¹

Perhaps the most straightforward utility among third parties is how they can spoil the election.²² When voters grow tired of either of the existing two parties, they turn to third parties. In a two-party system, a presidential election can be decided by a slim margin, so the majority parties must be careful not to lose votes to third parties on the fringes. Should they lose these votes, it can cost them the election. Therefore, the primary two parties must consider the legislative agendas that third parties are pushing forth while also monitoring the support they are garnering from the American electorate. If Democrats or Republicans fail to do this, they may lose the presidential election. This, for example, took place during the election of 1912 when Theodore Roosevelt broke away from William Howard Taft's Republican Party to run on behalf of the Progressive Party. The split in ideology among Republicans allowed for Woodrow Wilson to secure the presidency as the Democratic nominee.

Although two-party systems allow parties to form coalitions through broad-based political platforms, third parties can mobilize voters who care deeply about a particular issue. Third parties allow single-issue voters to have their voices heard on issues that are not highly salient to many voters, as has been the case with political parties advocating for animal rights or the legalization of marijuana.²³ Should either existing parties adopt these positions, they can sometimes expand their base and successfully secure the next election. For example, Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy mobilized the Dixiecrats in the south to abandon the Democratic Party in support of his Republican nomination for the White House. Additionally, in reaction to the liberal reforms during the Civil Rights Movement, Nixon ran a campaign focused on "law and order"—a dog whistle to appeal to the racist anger southern segregationists felt towards a supposed rise in black criminality—to secure the presidency. The same pattern is seen in the aftermath of the Financial Crisis of 2008 with the height of the Tea Party Movement.²⁴ From the perspective of supporters of the Tea Party Movement, the federal government spent too much of the taxpayer's money while also advocating for previously marginalized groups by implementing affirmative action policies and other social programs. Primarily white, working-class citizens resented these government-sponsored policies. The Tea Party Movement viewed affirmative action policies as contributing to the advancement of racial minority groups while leaving their community behind when incomes stagnated, and job opportunities diminished. Members of the Republican Party mobilized this portion of the electorate in the midterm and general elections following Obama's inauguration. The Democratic Party lost its political majority in both chambers of Congress in subsequent years. Ultimately, Donald Trump, the leader of the Birther Movement within the Tea Party Movement, won his election as the Republican nominee in 2016.

Third parties in the United States have had difficulty breaking into the American political system. While it is unlikely that third parties will expand to the point of turning the two-party system into a multiparty system, they serve as important vehicles of American democracy by providing voters with an alternative to the status quo, especially in an era of such political division.

Questions for the Immediate Future

With an increase in political gridlock in Congress and political polarization nationwide, the two-party system in the United States is imperfect. Despite having majorities in both the House and the Senate, President Biden and the Democrats have had trouble passing their legislative agenda. The midterm elections are looming, and a presidential election is on the horizon. Yet, today's political climate continues to frustrate voters and bring into question the effectiveness of political parties in adequately representing the American electorate. As students become eligible to vote and enter the political forum, they must be equipped to understand the historical context of how the Democratic and Republican parties came to be and how the dominant two parties behave today. This way, students can participate in American democracy as informed and engaged citizens.

Teaching Strategies

The following teaching strategies are listed and described below to ensure students understand the unit's concepts correctly. This is not an exhaustive list for this curriculum unit.

Verbal and Written Debate

Much of the information will be given to the students using journals, magazines, government documents, and newspaper articles. Students will be reading and watching videos throughout the unit, as this is how many people receive their news today. Students will be exposed to various texts, films, podcasts, and other forms of media. As students read and enhance their literacy skills, students will then complete writing assignments that they will use to debate with and present to each other. These assignments allow students to learn how to articulate their opinion in written and verbal format.

Students will develop critical thinking skills by studying philosophy, politics, geography, and history and learn to construct verbal and written arguments using textual evidence. These skills allow students to improve their reading and writing skills while developing their ability to think logically and form a persuasive and evidence-based discussions. By learning these skills, students can better apply these concepts throughout periods to understand the past and our political and social climates.

Voter Registration

To prepare students to become engaged in their local, regional, and global communities, they must be aware of the history of their community and nation. These topics can be used within the classroom to promote active civic participation, encouraging students to study the past to understand the present. This practice will result in students' ability to apply concepts and practices throughout history to understand the origin and workings of modern-day societies, cultures, and institutions. Understanding the past is crucial when understanding how the history of philosophy, geography, and culture impacts how our government and politics work in today's economic world, both nationally and globally.

Care for the Humanities

After learning about various topics and how they relate to the three branches and levels of government, students will spend time reflecting on each case. During these reflections, students will consider how the issue contributes to the political division the United States faces today. Upon doing this, students will evaluate how the problem can be better explored to understand the political polarization the country faces today. This way, students can explore the multiple perspectives that make up the identity politics of the nation. Students will learn to remain vigilant as citizens and as residents. This will lead to students holding government officials accountable and creating a better understanding of how government works in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and in the United States more broadly.

Classroom Activities

The following lesson plans are listed and described below to ensure that students understand the unit's concepts properly. This is not an exhaustive list for this curriculum unit. (Note: SWBAT = Students will be able to; IOT = in order to).

Political Ideology Survey

Objective:

SWBAT take a political ideology survey IOT debate their opinions on public policy and current events.

Materials:

- Political Ideology Survey Google Form

Procedure:

Students will complete a Google Form that measures their political ideology. Students must select the extent to which they agree on questions about social and fiscal issues that are popular in today's political forum. Students will then compare their political ideology to their classmates. This survey will frequently be referenced when discussing the purposes of political parties and how they mobilize voters.

Comparing Multiparty Systems to Two-Party Systems

Objective:

SWBAT compare the two-party system in the United States to the multiparty systems in Europe IOT weigh the benefits and drawbacks of each system at the electoral and governmental stage.

Materials:

- Shapiro, Ian. "Democracy and Distribution." PowerPoint presented at the Politics and Public Policy in the United States seminar at the Yale National Initiative, May 1, 2020.

Procedure:

First, students will compare the United States Congress to the General Courts of Spain. This way, students will understand how the two-party system in the United States differs from Spain's parliamentary system. Then, using electoral data from Greece, Italy, and Germany, students will look through a series of visual charts that explain how coalitions must form in parliamentary systems to achieve a political majority and govern properly. Students will challenge how efficient these systems are and how well they represent the electorate. Lastly, students will compare these systems by returning to the two-party system used in the US Congress.

Opening Up the Textbook: Political Parties

Objective:

SWBAT read a series of passages on political parties IOT discuss which political system is healthiest for American democracy.

Materials:

- O'Connor, Karen and Sabato, Larry J. *American Government: Continuity and Change*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008.
- Rosenbluth, Frances McCall and Shapiro, Ian. *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Stein, Jill. "Looking for someone to blame? It's not third parties." (2016, November 16). *The Guardian*.
- Washington, George. *Farewell Address* (1796), The New York Public Library.

Procedure:

Students will read an excerpt from the *American Government: Continuity and Change* government textbook. The passage will be accompanied by readings that challenge the textbook's stance on the United States' two-party system. Students will answer a series of guided questions following each document. Lastly, students will complete a written reflection explaining which political system is healthiest for American democracy that the United States should adopt.

Presidential Election Project

Objective:

SWBAT organize themselves into political parties and compete for the presidency IOT identify the benefits and drawbacks of political parties.

Materials:

- Google Sheets
- Presidential Election Project

Procedure:

Using the scores from the Political Ideology Survey Google Form, students will be organized into groups of five students. Each group will serve as a political party. Each political party has five student roles: presidential candidate, presidential campaign manager, political party chairperson, political party advisor, and political party media consultant. (This project can be adapted to include a series of individual roles, including news reporter, pollster, think tank, and interest group). Students in each group will work together to organize a political campaign to win the presidency. Students must create a political platform, run a series of political advertisements, conduct interviews, and perform in a class-wide presidential debate. At the end of all the campaign events, students will participate in a mock election to determine the winner of the presidency.

Resources

This unit plan required several resources, and they are listed below by category: for teachers and classroom use.

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

“The Articles of Confederation,” History, Art & Archives: United States House of Representatives. Office of the Historian. Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1700s/The-Articles-of-Confederation/>. This webpage details the powers the Articles of Confederation provided to the federal government.

Bawn, Kathleen, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics.” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): 571–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23260180>. This article discusses how the two-party system allows special interest groups to dictate policy-making decisions rather than allowing voters to have the most influence on political parties.

Beeman, Richard R. “The Constitutional Convention of 1787: A Revolution in Government.” The Constitution Convention Center. Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/white-papers/the-constitutional-convention-of-1787-a-revolution-in-government>. Beeman talks about how the Founders drafted the US Constitution to address the issues Shays’ Rebellion caused due to the Articles of Confederation.

Biden, Jr., Joseph R. “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.” White House. White House, January 20, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>. Biden shows his

faith in the two-party system as he looks to unify the country's political divide.

Ceaser, James W. "Political Parties and Presidential Ambition." *The Journal of Politics* 40, no. 3 (1978): 708–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2129862>. Here, Ceaser discusses how Martin Van Buren created the two-party system to solve the issues the Founders were worried about with parties leading to factionalism.

Educating for American Democracy. <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>. The Educating for American Democracy initiative prepares students to become active participants in today's political landscape.

Longley, Robert. "The Important Role of US Third Parties." ThoughtCo., July 3, 2021. <https://www.thoughtco.com/importance-of-us-third-political-parties-3320141>. This article discusses the benefits third parties have in today's political system.

Meyer, Robinson. "The 3 Democrats Who Voted Against the Green New Deal." *The Atlantic*, March 26, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/03/climate-change-which-democrats-oppose-green-new-deal/585802/>.

Shapiro, Ian. "Lecture 19: Crisis, Crash, and Response." YaleCourses, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYJLyGoWbzY&list=PLh9mgdi4rNeyViG2ar68jkgEi4y6doNZy&index=19>. In this lecture, Shapiro describes the development of the economic crisis as a culmination of events that create the perfect storm.

Shapiro, Ian. "Lecture 20: Fallout: The Housing Crisis and Its Aftermath." YaleCourses, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v1EtiEuSEY&t=7s>. Here, Shapiro explains how the Financial Crisis of 2008 relates to job security, housing, and the American Dream.

Shapiro, Ian. "Lecture 21: Backlash - 2016 and Beyond." YaleCourses, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5QM1DBSRLw&list=PLh9mgdi4rNeyViG2ar68jkgEi4y6doNZy&index=22&t=3s>. Shapiro reports how the global financial crisis led to the consequences and reactions of today's politics.

Shapiro, Ian. "Lecture 22: Political Sources of Populism – Misdiagnosing Democracy's Ills." YaleCourses, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TromTeBgwXY>. Shapiro talks about the rise and effects of populism in the United States.

Tilva, Rahul. "Shays' Rebellion." George Washington's Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon. Accessed June 20, 2022. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/shays-rebellion/>. This webpage analyzes the effects Shays' Rebellion had on the foundations of the American government.

Van Amburg, Jessie. "Rachel Maddow Calls Out Third-Party Voters." *Time*, November 9, 2016. <https://time.com/4564294/rachel-maddow-third-party-candidates-election-2016/>. This

online news article discusses the comments Rachel Maddow regarding third parties' impact on the 2016 presidential election.

List Materials for Classroom Use

O'Connor, Karen and Sabato, Larry J. *American Government: Continuity and Change*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2008. Students will read a passage from this American government textbook about the popularity of the two-party system in the United States.

Rosenbluth, Frances McCall and Shapiro, Ian. *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Students will examine Rosenbluth and Shapiro's thoughts on how a two-party system is the healthiest form of government in a democracy.

Shapiro, Ian. "Democracy and Distribution." PowerPoint presented at the Politics and Public Policy in the United States seminar at the Yale National Initiative, May 1, 2020. Shapiro's presentation shows the drawbacks multiparty systems have on the governmental stage.

Stein, Jill. "Looking for someone to blame? It's not third parties." (2016, November 16). *The Guardian*. Stein responds to Maddow's comments regarding the utility of third parties.

Washington, George. *Farewell Address* (1796), The New York Public Library. Washington warns the country of the dangers political parties bring to a democracy.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Below is a list of standards from the social studies section of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of Education. These standards will be used as guidelines for students to think critically about political parties.

Civics and Government

Standard - 5.1.12.B: Employ historical examples and political philosophy to evaluate the major arguments advanced for the necessity of government. Students will examine different political ideologies and determine their own ideological beliefs.

Standard - 5.2.12.B: Examine the causes of societal conflicts and evaluate techniques to address those conflicts. Students will examine how political parties work with and against each other to enact their agendas.

Standard - 5.2.12.C: Evaluate political leadership and public service in a republican form of government. Students will study how political parties serve to represent the American electorate.

Standard - 5.3.12.D: Evaluate the roles of political parties, interest groups, and mass media in politics and public policy. Students will analyze how special interest groups and the media affects the political system.

Notes

¹ George Washington, *Farewell Address* (1796), The New York Public Library.

² Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.,” White House, White House, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

³ Educating for American Democracy, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/>.

⁴ “The Articles of Confederation,” History, Art & Archives: United States House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1700s/The-Articles-of-Confederation/>.

⁵ Rahul Tilva, “Shays’ Rebellion,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/shays-rebellion/>.

⁶ Richard R. Beeman, “The Constitutional Convention of 1787: A Revolution in Government,” The Constitution Convention Center, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/white-papers/the-constitutional-convention-of-1787-a-revolution-in-government>.

⁷ Washington, *Farewell Address*.

⁸ James W. Caeser, “Political Parties and Presidential Ambition,” *The Journal of Politics* 40, no. 3 (1978): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2129862>.

⁹ Caeser, 18.

¹⁰ Caeser, 19.

¹¹ Caeser, 18.

¹² Caeser, 20.

¹³ Caeser, 19.

¹⁴ Ian Shapiro, “Democracy and Distribution,” PowerPoint presented at the Politics and Public Policy in the United States seminar at the Yale National Initiative, May 1, 2020.

¹⁵ Ian Shapiro, “Lecture 22: Political Sources of Populism – Misdiagnosing Democracy’s Ills,” YaleCourses, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TromTeBgwXY>.

¹⁶ Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): 575, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23260180>.

¹⁷ Bawn, et. al., 575.

¹⁸ Bawn, et. al., 576.

¹⁹ Jessie Van Amburg, “Rachel Maddow Calls Out Third-Party Voters,” *Time*, November 9, 2016, <https://time.com/4564294/rachel-maddow-third-party-candidates-election-2016/>.

²⁰ Robert Longley, “The Important Role of US Third Parties,” ThoughtCo., July 3, 2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/importance-of-us-third-political-parties-3320141>.

²¹ Robinson Meyer, “The 3 Democrats Who Voted Against the Green New Deal,” *The Atlantic*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/03/climate-change-which-democrats-oppose-green-new-deal/585802/>.

²² Longley, “The Important Role of US Third Parties.”

²³ Longley.

²⁴ Ian Shapiro, “Lecture 20: Fallout: The Housing Crisis and Its Aftermath,” YaleCourses, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v1EtiEuSEY&t=7s>.