

From 1788–1840 ^[1]

This chart shows the evolution of political party systems in the U.S. from 1788 to 1840. Each "party system" is a roughly defined time period in which two major political parties, each with fairly consistent supporters and beliefs, dominated the political scene.

The colored lines represent organized parties that had a significant impact on national politics, electing members of Congress or receiving more than 1% of the vote for President. Where the lines merge and split, parties split or party affiliations changed dramatically in a short period of time. Presidential candidates are also listed for each party.



Timeline

First party system (1792–1820)

The first party system began with divisions in Washington's cabinet between Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Hamilton supporters, who had strongly favored adopting the Federal Constitution, continued to call themselves Federalists. Jefferson's supporters called themselves Democratic-Republicans. At the time, "parties" or "factions" were considered disloyal and suspect, but strong party identities emerged by 1796. State parties operated in the elections of 1794, and the Presidential elections of 1796 and 1800 were strongly competitive.

Many -- though not all -- Democratic-Republicans gradually came to support a stronger government and "internal improvements," such as roads and canals, that would help [commerce](#) ^[4]. As belief in broad-based democracy spread, support for Federalists eroded. After the War of 1812 — which most Americans saw as a victory but which Federalists had opposed — the Federalist Party crumbled.

Partisan newspapers, often funded by party leaders, were the most important campaign tool in this period.

Federalist

- The name "Federalist" originally referred to supporters of the Federal Constitution in the debates over its ratification.
- Wanted strong central government to promote commerce and manufacturing, including a national bank.
- Tended to be suspicious of democracy.
- Supported England in its wars with France.
- Support came especially from urban areas, business, and upper classes.
- Strongest in New England and coastal towns.

Democratic-Republican

- Originally called themselves Republicans; called "Democrats" or "Democratic-Republicans" by opponents who saw democracy as dangerous.
- Believed that America's future was with small farmers and opposed "monied interests."
- Argued for states' rights and small government.
- Supported France in its wars with England.
- Support came from farmers as well as workers and craftsmen in towns.
- Strongest in the South and West.

Second party system (1828–1854)

The second party system emerged from a split within the Democratic-Republican Party. The two main factions were led by Andrew Jackson, hero of the War of 1812 and Indian wars, and Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Jackson's followers formed the Democratic Party, while Clay's formed the Whig Party. Although the parties were fairly evenly divided in Congress, the Whigs elected only two Presidents, both of whom died in office.

Democrats gradually came to support many Whig policies, such as industrialization and railroads, draining Whig support. The issue of slavery and its expansion into the western territories finally split the Whigs in the early 1850s. During this period, for the first time, most voters identified strongly with one party or another. The first party nominating conventions were held, and the parties used parades and other events to rally voters. Some 80 percent of eligible voters turned out at the polls. Several "third parties" were also active in this period, electing representatives to Congress and keeping issues such as slavery and immigration in the public eye.

Democratic

- Organized around Andrew Jackson in the 1820s. During Jackson's Presidency, supported a strong President.

- Believed in small government and states' rights.
- Economically conservative. Opposed banks, especially the National Bank, and paper money. Believed the tariff was a tax on the poor to help the rich.
- Pushed for westward expansion.
- Support came especially from farmers, rural areas, and the frontier. Most urban immigrants, especially Catholics, also voted Democratic.

Whig

- Believed that Congress should be stronger than the President. Saw Jackson's power as dangerous, and took the name "Whig" after Revolutionary Patriots who had fought against monarchical rule.
- To promote industry, supported a tariff (tax) on imported manufactured goods.
- Wanted "modernization" of the economy and society. Supported banks, education, moral reform, and "internal improvements" such as railroads.
- Support came from cities and market towns. Most conservative Protestants were Whigs, as were nearly all wealthy men.

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