

# *Polish Journal of Political Science*

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# *Polish Journal of Political Science*

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Jarosław Szczepański

University of Warsaw

## American Political Spectrum

### Abstract

The text is aimed at tracing the evolution of the American political spectrum. It presents major historical and contemporary political parties of the United States of America. The article has been structured in such a way so as to serve primarily as a teaching aid for classes on the US political system.

**Keywords:** USA, party system, American political system, political spectrum

## Party subsystem

The United States Constitution did not provide for the existence of political parties, and all the more so mass-scale electoral parties known in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup>

## Historical party systems

The historical development of the party system in the United States of America is divided into six periods. They are characterized by different registers of political parties, political culture, in particular as regards the manner of participation in elections, as well as political platforms represented by individual parties. The latter were closely related to the current events in the country and abroad.

The first party system functioned in the years 1792-1824. From 1792 to 1800, that is during the presidency of George Washington, it was at the stage of being formed and partially dormant. It was due to the fact that the President had no party affiliation. As of 1800, the electoral battle was fought by the Federalist Party founded by Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party. Throughout the period of the first party system Federalists were too elitist to compete successfully. Eventually, after the war of 1812, the Federalist Party disintegrated. The end of the first party system was connected with a splinter within the Democratic-Republican Party.

The original system of electing the executive power, i.e. president and vice-president did not entail the functioning of political parties. The dispute between Federalists and

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<sup>1</sup> Massey (2018).

Democratic Republicans exposed the deficiencies of the solution for election of the head of state and his deputy. Already in 1800, i.e. during the first elections with full participation of political parties a situation emerged whereby the two posts were to be filled by representatives with different party affiliations. This, in turn, did not favour their cooperation. For this reason, still in 1803, the Congress adopted the 12<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1804, which introduced the elections as we know them today, that is at the same time President and Vice-President. The first elections organised according to the new system were held in 1804.

The second party system functioned in the years 1828-1854. It was connected with the division of the Democratic-Republican Party into the Democratic Party associated with Andrew Jackson and the National Republican Party, later absorbed by the Whig Party headed by Henry Clay. The Democrats opted for the consolidation of presidential power at the cost of other branches of government. They also contested the functioning of the Bank of the United States and modernization programmes, which were to stimulate industrial development at the cost of the citizens – the taxpayers. On the other hand, the Whig Party favoured the Congress, government economic programmes and economic protectionism. The period of the second party system is the so-called *Bank War* and the formation of the spoils system – replacing politically neutral officials in government administration by party members. The second party system disintegrated after the collapse of the Whig Party, which was connected with the death of Henry Clay and the Compromise of 1850, which divided members of the party as regards the issue of slavery. The second party system was also the period when the Great Triumvirate functioned in the Congress,

which watched over maintaining peace in the country and defusing conflicts concerning slavery and relations between individual regions of the country by way of compromise.

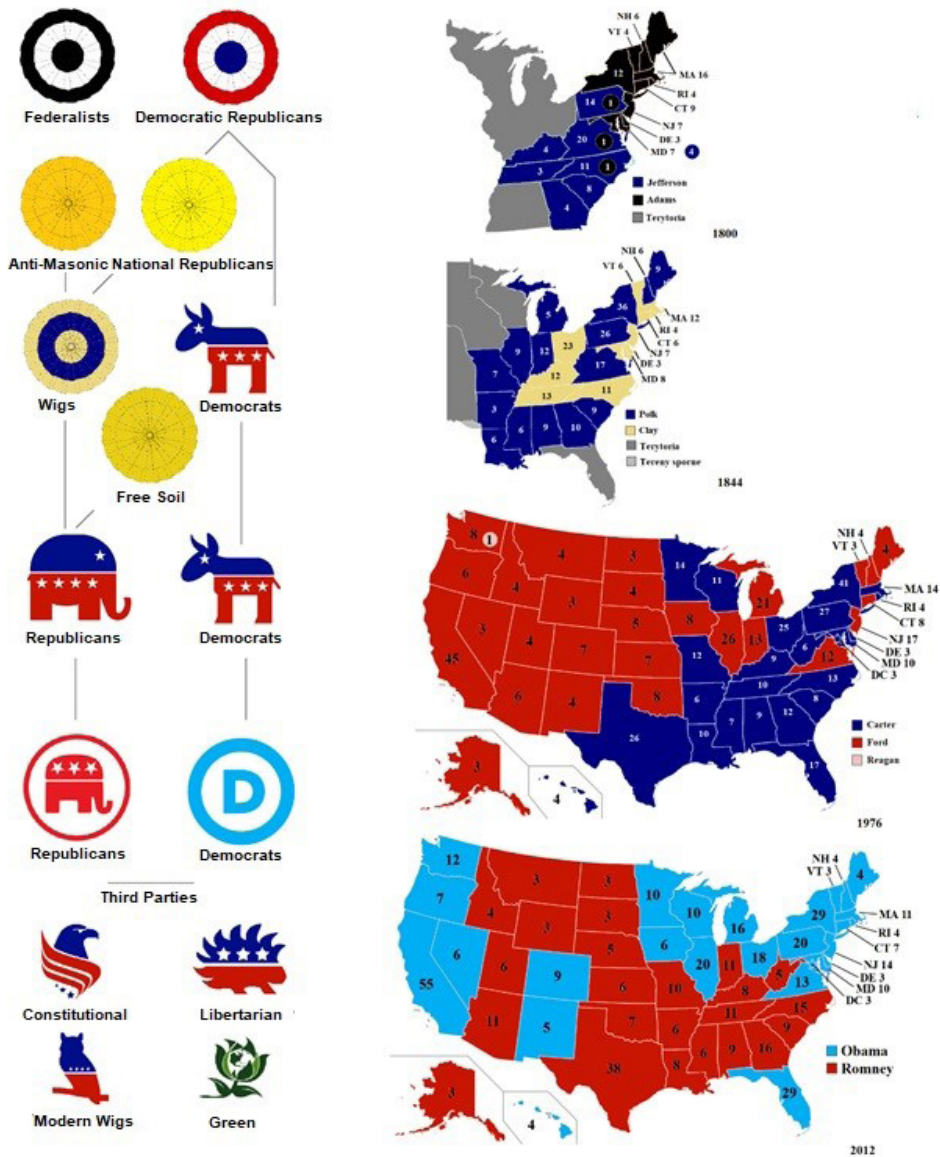
The Great Triumvirate<sup>2</sup> is an informal name given to representatives of three great regions of the USA: the North, the South and the West. It included John C. Calhoun from South Carolina, Daniel Webster from Massachusetts and Henry Clay from Kentucky. Each of those politicians held positions in the House of Representatives, the Senate as well as government administration. Moreover, Calhoun was the first vice-president who resigned from this primarily representative post to resume activity in the Senate. Since 1832, they all had seats in the upper house, where as leaders of their factions they cared for defusing conflicts between regions. Their ultimate success was the Compromise of 1850. Within three years after that accord had been accomplished, all three politicians died leaving the political leadership of individual regions in the hands of a new and radicalized generation of politicians.

The third party system functioned in the years 1854-1890. It was connected with the struggle between the antislavery Republican Party, which inherited the economic postulates of the Whig Party, and the Democratic Party. The system may be internally divided into three periods, i.e. 1854-1860, in which the policy of the Republican Party and departure from the system of compromises supported during the second political system by the Great Triumvirate led to the outbreak of the Civil War; 1860-1865, i.e. the Civil War; 1865-1890, i.e. the Reconstruction and exclusion of the issue of slavery from the political debate after passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

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<sup>2</sup> Peterson (1987).

Diagram: Evolution of parties against the background of electoral geography



Source: Own work

In that period, the currently known symbols of the Democrats and the Republicans were created. The donkey (or

jackass) as the symbol of the Democratic Party was put on the party banners still by Andrew Jackson, who was so named by one of his political opponents. On the other hand, the elephant appeared for no obvious reason during the electoral campaign of Abraham Lincoln. Both symbols were popularized by Thomas Nast, a *Harper's Weekly* cartoonist who was very popular in the 1870s.

The fourth party system functioned in the years 1896-1932. In that period main political parties did not change, only the main points of the debate were different. The beginning of the fourth system is connected with the 1893 crisis which the Republicans blamed on the Democrats. Such issues as the problem of trusts, economic protectionism, role of the trade unions, child labour, corruption of politicians, women's rights, racial segregation or the need to organize a new banking system were added to the debate.

As opposed to European politics, in the United States one of the most serious problems at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was the issue of prohibition. The strong involvement of churches and perhaps primarily women affected how the problem of the freedom to sell alcohol was perceived by politicians. The problem of prohibition also exposed a contrast between rural areas and small towns and large agglomerations, which has persisted in the country until today. As a result of prohibition moods the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed, which banned selling alcohol.

The fifth party system functioned in the years 1932-1964. It was the period of the implementation of the New Deal, i.e. the programme of economic and social reforms introduced by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a response of the Great Depression. The policy of the Democrats was based on liberalism and the coalition of the supporting

groups and associations (also religious and ethnical), white Southerners, trade unions and intellectuals associated with the progressivist ideas. At that time, the Republicans were divided into a conservative and a moderate factions, were systematically losing support until 1964. The end of the fifth system was connected with the disintegration of the coalition set up for implementation of the New Deal.

Between 1930s and 1960s, the Democrats slowly moved towards social-liberalism, while the Republicans were shifted towards conservative liberalism. That change caused that in the following period the Republicans started to gain support in rural regions, small towns and in the South, which had been the original cradle of the Democratic-Republican and then the Democratic Party.

### The contemporary party system

The contemporary political system is a two-party system,<sup>3</sup> in which the main positions are occupied by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. However, unlike European parties they are not ideological but primarily electoral parties, which are actually composed of many internal factions. As a result, in the political practice, ad-hoc coalitions are built in order to force individual issues, which include both Democrats and Republicans.

The contemporary Democratic Party is a social-liberal party, although in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it started from liberal position moderated by support of slavery. Today, it supports the ideas of a welfare state, social aid, public health service (so-called Obama Care), equal opportunities or environment protection.

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<sup>3</sup> Bibby, Maisel (2009).

Therefore, its programme covers the spectrum of European parties connected with the classical social-democracy, the new left, the greens and the neo-Marxist movements (e.g. gender, feminism). The electorate of the Democrats is concentrated mostly in large urban agglomerations situated on both coasts. California (Los Angeles and San Francisco), Illinois (Chicago), New York, New Jersey or Massachusetts (Boston) secure for the Democratic Party 129 electoral votes in presidential elections. The structure of the electorate is based primarily on professional, academic staff, young people, women, LGBT communities, African Americans, Latin Americans as well as other ethnic minorities. In the 2016 elections, 89% African Americans, 64% Asians, 67% Latinos, 57% young voters (up to 35 years of age), 56% women and 56% voted with annual family incomes not exceeding \$49,999 voted for the Democratic Party.<sup>4</sup>

Among Democrats, a conservative wing (Conservative Democrats) may be distinguished, who in the 1940s positioned themselves as an opposition to more radically oriented Republicans. Today, it includes those Democrats who are more conservative than the party as a whole. They play no major role. The liberal wing emerged during the Progressive Era, that is at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the viewpoint of the science of politics and classification of party programmes and political doctrines their agenda is social-liberal. They support the broadening of the rights of consumers, minorities (LGBT), development of social and welfare programmes as well as abolition of death penalty. The libertarian wing (Libertarian Democrats) supports protection of civic rights, containment of public death and

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<sup>4</sup> *Annual totals of Pew Research Center survey data 2016.*

separation of churches (Protestant churches predominated in the United States) from the state, which makes them closer to other Democrats than to the Republicans. At the same time, they oppose the control of possession of firearms, war against drugs, contracting debt by the government or interventionism in foreign policy. The progressivist wing is an immediate ideological heir of the New Left. The closely collaborate with the greens. As opposed to the liberal wing, they are associated first of all with the movement of the neo-Marxist origin and enjoy strong support in the LGBT communities and ethnic minorities (African Americans, Latinos, Jews). The squabble Hilary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primaries was primarily a dispute between the liberal and progressive faction, respectively. The last wing are social-democrats, who have been gradually rising in importance since the 2007-2008 crisis and Bernie Sanders' campaign. They force a programme based on classical socialist solutions with social-liberal elements.

The Republican Party is at present a conservative-liberal party, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was affiliated with the free soil movement and abolitionists. It is also called the Grand Old Party (GOP), which refers to its descent from Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. Today it supports the ideas of consolidation of the executive branch, the right to possess firearms, deregulations or containment of public spending. The electorate of the Republicans is now concentrated mainly in southern state (among others Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina), the so-called Bible Belt linked with the strong movement of Evangelical Protestantism. The other is the so-called Jell-O Belt connected with Mormon settlements (Idaho, Utah, Arizona). The states from those regions

secure altogether 120 electoral votes. The electorate structure is based primarily on white voters, men, high school graduates and religious people. 54% white voters, 51% men, 46% with incomplete higher education, 76% white Evangelicals, 47% Catholics, 69% Mormons support the Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

Among the Republicans, a conservative wing may be distinguished, which is in opposition to trade unions, contest high taxes and a broad scope of state regulations. They disapprove of affirmative actions, control of access to firearms or illegal immigration. They support nursing of tradition and religiousness. From the viewpoint of the science of politics and classification of party programmes and political doctrines they are conservative liberals. The moderate wing, the so-called Rockefeller Republicans or Republican Businessmen are perceived by the conservative wing as Republicans In Name Only (RINO). With respect to economic solutions there are in favour of a balanced budget, low taxes, free trade and deregulation. On the other hand, in the area of social life they support some of the affirmative actions, partnerships, reimbursing abortions or legal control of firearms possession. The libertarian wing is relatively small (particularly as compared with the conservative wing). It focuses on the free market, minimization of social programmes, containment of budgetary spending, deregulation and low taxes. At the same time, they support gay rights, though as regards marriages they do not contest homosexual marriages but rather strive at deregulation of the institution of marriage in general. From the viewpoint of the science of politics and classification of party programmes and political doctrines they are liberals. Apart from wings, the Republicans include also the so-called Tea Party,

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<sup>5</sup> *Annual totals of Pew Research Center survey data 2016.*

whose name refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> century event called the Boston Tea Party. It is a movement proclaiming low taxes, reduction of public debt, lowering of budgetary deficit and restriction of public spending. It emerges in response to the 2008-2009 crisis. In the 2016 election campaign, it played a key role in the victory of Donald Trump in the primaries.

Apart from the two main current parties, there are several so-called third parties on the political scene in the United States. Worth mentioning among them is first of all the Libertarian Party and the Green Part, which have over 100,000 registered voters each. The former is associated with the libertarian doctrine, free market, civic liberties and opposes foreign policy based on interventionism. The latter is linked with the doctrine of the New Left within the socialist movement, anti-capitalism, progressivism (in the US related to the promotion of minority rights or gender) and like the Libertarian Party with civic liberties and opposition against foreign policy based on interventionism.

Among smaller parties, worth mentioning is the Constitution Party which promotes low taxes, balanced budget and reduction of spending in the economic sector. In the social sphere, on the other hand, it postulates reduction of welfare programmes, opposes euthanasia or abortion (even in case of rape). It is also against illegal immigration. Another party are Modern Whigs, who try to present themselves as a middle-of-the-road party, which would be an alternative for voters who do not strictly accept Republican or Democratic positions.

The last category includes state parties. The best known and largest of this type is the Alaskan Independence Party. Its electoral programme is close to those presented by the Republicans, the Constitution Party and the Libertarian Party.

Therefore, it is a conservative-liberal party. The basic objective of the party is to provide an opportunity for the inhabitants of Alaska to speak up whether they wish to remain a state or change the status.

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