

Political Parties: Two is Company, Three's a Crowd – Lesson Plan

Estimated Time

One to two 50-minute class periods

Essential Question

How have third parties changed the outcomes of U.S. presidential elections?

Objective

To examine the two-party political system in the United States and the effect upon it that third parties have had.

Overview

The Founders did not intend to create a two-party system. As John Adams wrote, *“There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.”*

However, as the country grew in the 1800s and the Electoral College, as outlined in the Constitution, evolved into a “winner-take-all” system in which three or more strong parties would make it impossible to get to the required 270 electoral votes to win a presidential election, a two-party system emerged.

In this lesson, students watch the *We The Voters* film “American Party Animals” to better understand the two-party system, and then break into groups to study three U.S. elections with major third party candidates: the 1912, 1992, and 2000 elections. They conclude by applying their findings to Gary Johnson’s Libertarian Party candidacy in 2016.

Materials

- *We The Voters* film, “American Party Animals” <https://vimeo.com/181829952>
- Copies of Student Handouts
 - Handout #1: Third Party Obstacles
 - PBS NewsHour article “Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process” http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/politics-july-dec04-third_parties/
 - Handout #2: Election Investigation

- American Experience article on 1912 Election <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tr-politics/>
- United States Presidential Election of 1992 <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1992>
- JSTORE: Third-Party Candidates and the 2000 Presidential Election <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42955889?seq=1>
- PBS Education Electoral Decoder Interactive: <http://www.pbseuelectioncentral.com/electoral-decoder>

Procedure

Introduce students to the popular saying, “Two is company, three’s a crowd.” Not only is this a popular saying, but it is also applicable to presidential elections when examining political parties.

Warm Up: Begin by asking students: What third parties can they think of? Why did they not win?

Film Viewing: Play the *We The Voters* film, “American Party Animals.” Ask: Does our Electoral College, as outlined in the Constitution, lend itself to three or more viable parties in its current structure?

Examining Third Party Obstacles: Have students read the PBS NewsHour article [**“Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process”**](#) and complete Handout #1: Third Party Obstacles. Review as a class.

Election Investigation: Next, divide the students into three groups. Have each group investigate one of the above-mentioned elections and complete Handout #2: Election Investigation for their election, drawing on the resources listed above and on the handout. Then, have the groups present their findings and have the other students complete the handout for the other elections.

***Originally sourced from PBS Newshour Extra <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons-plans/political-parties-two-is-company-threes-a-crowd-lesson-plan/>