

## **TWO-PARTY SYSTEM: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES**

A two-party system in politics creates a structure where the electorate gives a significant majority of its votes to only two major parties. That means one or the other can win a majority in the legislature. It is the system of governing that is present in the United States, but the actual implementation of forming a government is similar to systems that have multiple parties. There are factions in the Democratic and Republican party struggling for power, showing that there can be a divergence of interests underneath a single-party umbrella. In other words, a two-party system is a system where only two parties or alliances, typically placed either side of the centre, have a realistic chance of forming a majority. Other parties are very minor or solely regional.

The structure of the two-party system compels participants to strive for a majority of votes in specific electoral areas. Members of the national representative assemblies are chosen from single-member districts, with voters often choosing between two fairly evenly matched politicians who compete with each other for the office.

Third-party politicians have the right to run for office in a two-party system, but defeat is usually the outcome unless the people involved receive support or representation from one of the two larger parties. Since the end of the Reconstruction era, there have been 30 Senators, 112 Representatives, and 28 governors who were not affiliated with a major party. In 2016, there were 144 Libertarians holding office at a local level, 139 Green Party members, and 26 Constitution Party officials.

### **PROS OF A TWO PARTY SYSTEM**

**1. It places restrictions on the amount of extremism that enters the government:** When there is a multi-party system in place, then anyone with a view that is exceptionally conservative or liberal can become a representative in the government. That includes people who may hold racist, segregationist views, theocratic principles, and old-fashioned ideas on genderism. The goal of only having two major parties is to select someone who best represents the platform of the entire body – not just one of the segments fighting for power.

Some would argue that the election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton shows that a two-party system can do the opposite as well. Neither received a full majority of the vote in their election, yet Trump represented a full GOP majority for his first two years in office.

**2. It encourages the government to offer majority representation:** Although no candidate since 1900 has even come close to winning a presidential election in the United States, there are a handful of incidents where some people made a strong stand. Teddy Roosevelt ran for a second term in office as a third-party candidate and received over 27% of the vote. Ross Perot received over 18% of the vote in 1992. George Wallace

won electoral votes in the 1968 election. The reason why it is so difficult for candidates to be successful in a third party is because the two-party system of governing encourages a majority every time.

This system works to be inclusive by allowing each major party to create a platform which represents the overall will of the people. Anyone can join either organization in this system and then fight for the policies they wish to see enacted.

**3. It gives every eligible person a chance to run for office:** The primary system in the United States acts like what a multi-party election does for other governments with one key exception: instead of sending representatives into office, it creates a run-off election to choose one person. This process allows each district and state to vote for the one person they wish to represent them on behalf of their favored party.

Then each party receives representation on the ballot if they qualify. What is notable about the 2016 election is that 5.6% of voters chose someone outside of the two major parties, lifting the level of third-party contributions to its highest amount since 1996. Over 1,700 candidates filed a Statement of Candidacy that year, although only six candidates made it on more than 15% of the general election ballots.

**4. It speeds up the governing process for the country:** When an emergency situation arises, the two-party system makes it easy for the government to respond quickly to the situation. Every branch of government in the United States, going all the way down to the local level, is linked through this centralized system of electoral representation. This structure eliminates the need for a coalition because even the third-party candidates must work with Republicans or Democrats to create a majority set of circumstances. That means there is less gridlock in place than there would be in other governing styles.

Although Congress receives low approval ratings often due to their lack of action, the two-party system seats itself each session. When Belgium held elections in 2010, there were 11 parties elected to the Chamber of Representatives and none of them had more than 20% of the seats. It took 541 days of negotiations to form a governing coalition. That doesn't happen in the United States with this governing structure.

**5. It gets more people to start participating in their local government:** Each person who runs for elected office must declare which party they will represent in office, even if they decide to be an Independent. When there are dozens of parties available to join, then understanding the platform of a candidate can become challenging. Some governments allow anyone who wants to start a new party to do so as well.

Thanks to the two-party system, there is a general consensus already known about a candidate due to their affiliation. In the United States, Republicans are generally thought of as being conservative, while Democrats are usually regarded as being more liberal. This identification creates instant recognition for the voter so that they can cast a confident ballot when it is time to vote.

**6. It allows more ideas to become legislation:** Every political party promotes partisan ideas that support their platform interests. Republicans and Democrats in the United States are no exception to this rule. The difference that you will find in this governing setup is that the minority can still have influence on the majority to ensure needed legislation goes through. You will find more places for common ground because of the emphasis on centrism with this system. Although this advantage can disappear if the elected officials write-off different ideas, a two-party system that embraces an open mind can become quite successful.

**7. It simplifies the process of governing:** Voters can cast a ballot for any political party they want at any time. Even if someone registers as a Republican, they can vote for a Democrat with their ballot – and the opposite can occur as well. Some people vote a straight ticket for one party because that is how they feel like the government can represent their needs. Because of the structure of the two-party system, there is less confusion because it is always a winner-take-all solution. You are either going to get what you want, or you will not because of how everyone else votes around you.

**8. Political information is much easier to understand:** Although a two-party system limits the options of voters, it allows parties to present information in a convenient manner. Each party is able to represent their own broad political philosophy. As such, voters can better understand the views of a party regarding certain issues

## **CONS OF A TWO PARTY SYSTEM**

**1. It creates inconsistent governing patterns for the country:** Coalition governments may have several disadvantages to consider when compared to the two-party system of the United States and others, but there is one distinctive advantage: consistency in governing. When coalitions must form to create a government, then there is more centrism available to the nation compared to the platforms offered by two major parties by themselves.

Since the Republicans and Democrats have distinctively different platforms, a shift in governing power also creates inconsistent policies. What one party starts, the other one cancels in this system unless there are safeguards in place that do not allow it to be overruled – like a Constitutional amendment. It creates a see-saw effect that has a 2-year cycle at times.

**2. It eliminates the idea of having 100% representation of personal ideas:** Because the two-party system puts multiple factions underneath on general umbrella, it creates a “bite your tongue’ set of circumstances for voters. They might not like the candidate that represents their preferred party, but that person is perceived as being better than the person running on the other side of the ticket. If you were in a multi-party system, you could vote for the exact person who represents your values. With this structure, you

might vote for someone based on their stance on 1-2 important issues instead. That means the government may not be an authentic representation of what everyone wants.

**3. It forces the parties into a fixed, but still changing, set of political views:** The foundation of the two-party system starts with the creation of a set list of priorities that everyone will attempt to accomplish during each election cycle. In the United States, that means the Republicans and Democrats create a platform of critical ideas that they wish to pursue for a fixed time – usually four years. Then each person votes for one platform or the other. When the next election cycle comes along, another set of platforms is released, allowing voters to choose again. Although there can be consistency in these views, the two parties typically build a platform based on what they think will get them elected more than what the country might actually require.

**4. It limits the number of new ideas that can be introduced to the electorate:** Although the United States is a two-party system, it can become a multi-party system at times when someone other than the Republicans or Democrats gets at least 5% of the national vote. For two election cycles, the Reform Party was classified as a major party in the American governing system. This threshold seems minimal, but it is rarely met in U.S. politics because of the structures in place. People might support third-party candidates in the polls, but that rarely transfers to the ballot box.

For the 2016 election, there were times when Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson was polling above 15% before the election. When the votes were eventually counted, he received less than 4% of the national vote. Because of this restriction on who can become a majority party, it can limit the number of new ideas that can enter the political spectrum.

**5. It reduces the concept of individuality in governing:** Why did Bernie Sanders run as a Democrat during the 2016 presidential election cycle? He told voters in a town hall in Columbus, Ohio, in March of that year that he had no choice. “In terms of media coverage, you had to run within the Democratic Party,” he said, adding that it would be almost impossible to raise money if he tried to run outside of this process.

Ralph Nader wrote in an op-ed for The Chicago Tribune that he knew what would happen when he ran for president as a third-party candidate. “Historically, many major reform movements have come out of smaller parties that never won national elections, starting with the anti-slavery Liberty Party in 1840,” he wrote. “Several different parties for women’s suffrage followed. Then came parties representing farmers’ struggles against railroads and banks, a movement that peaked in 1892 with the Populist Party.”

We might get new ideas to enter the two-party system from outside of it, but the overall structure limits individuality. You’re either with the party or against them.

**6. It creates a system of exclusiveness:** Some states in the U.S. almost always vote for one party exclusively in the presidential election cycle. If your state votes for Democrats

almost all of the time, then begin a Republican puts you on the outside of the election. You know that your vote counts, but it won't contribute to the electoral tally for the presidential election since a majority vote doesn't matter. People can feel excluded in the two-party system because neither option works for them, but it doesn't allow for representation of an independent either.

There is also an aura of exclusiveness and superiority in this system. Unless you're in the party that wins, it can feel like those from the outside are targeting you with their conduct.

**7. It is a system which limits the choices of the voter:** Even though there were over 1,700 people who filed a Statement of Candidacy for the 2016 presidential election, the primary system produced two candidates for the majority parties that struggled to win a majority of the votes from within their own party. Donald Trump may have won 37 states and earned 14 million votes (which was a record), but he only earned 44.9% of Republican votes during that time. In comparison, John Kasich only won his home state, but earned 13.8% of the total votes. Because delegates (not votes) count in the primary system like electoral votes count in the presidential system, the choices for the voters are sometimes drastically limited.

**8. It creates patterns of voting that are based on name recognition:** One of the reasons why term limits are a popular concept for Congress in the United States is because the same people keep getting voted in by their districts. Their career presence in Washington is seen as a disadvantage because their work looks to be a reflection of staying elected. When there is a two-party system in place, it actually encourages this type of voter behavior.

If you don't like elements of the Democratic platform, then a straight-ticket Republican vote is not an unusual outcome. Some states even offer a choice on their ballot that allows you to check one box to vote for every candidate from the same party. This process makes it easier to participate in this civic duty, but it also encourages votes without thought. Instead of looking at the experience and qualifications of the candidate, they're looking for the (D) or (R) by the name.

**9. It will eventually lead to societal polarization:** P.J. O'Rourke describes this disadvantage with these words. "The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove the crabgrass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then they get elected and prove it."

James Morcan puts it this way. "Democrats and Republicans were essentially the same party with different faces and that was why, no matter how many promises each leader made, significant change rarely transpired."

Or there is this comment from Michael Parenti. “Democrats – lily-livered, weasel-assed collaborators.”

People identify with their political party as closely as they do to their family, friends, and brands that they prefer. Criticizing the party platform becomes a personal insult, so another is offered in return. That is why the structure of a two-party system often leads to societal polarization.

**10. It promotes corruption:** Politics is always linked with corruption no matter where you are in the world. Practices like patronage may be frowned upon but it’s a common sight in the political sphere. Even the awarding of government contracts to party insiders is a practice rampant in two-party systems.

Parties have also faced criticism particularly when it comes to funding. For instance, big contributors would want something in return for having gave a large portion of their fortune to a campaign. Let’s say that candidate won the election; that particular candidate might find it difficult to say no to a contributor requesting for something seeing as they partly owe their election to them.

**11. It ignores alternative voices:** Two-party systems that want to stay united usually ignore alternative options, especially radical ones. In a multi-party system, debate and diverse views are encouraged because coalitions are formed by stronger and weaker parties in order to achieve dominance. Third parties, on the other hand, are often ignored in two-party systems because of the winner-take-all voting mechanism where a losing candidate loses relevance even if they had a significant following.

## **Conclusion**

The two-party system has some tremendous advantages to consider. It provides a clear majority in almost every election, encourages centrism, and limits the number of radical ideas that enter into the national discussion.

It also has some tremendous disadvantages, leading with a lack of genuine representation. Many voters describe the experience of casting a ballot as a vote for the “lesser of two evils.”

If you are voting for a “lesser evil,” then you are still not voting your conscience. That is the ultimate problem that we can find in the pros and cons of the two-party system. You are almost always forced to compromise on what you believe on some level, despite the potential benefits that might come your way.