Party Systems: Crash Course Government and Politics #41

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
https://youtube.com/watch?v=PkltAl_cO5Y
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/PkltAl_cO5Y

Hello, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics. And today we're gonna talk about, well, mostly history. Wait Stan, this isn't Crash Course History. This must be some kind of exception, like the Mongols. Apparently we're not stepping on anybody's toes by talking about the history of American political parties, as long as we stay away from history in general. Thank goodness, we wouldn't want to start a Crash Course interdisciplinary feud. Just kidding, I'm totally feuding with that Phil guy over at Astronomy.

(Intro)

Political historians like to divide America into eras according to which parties were active at the time. These are called party systems, and there have been 5 or 6 of them depending on who you ask. I want to say there were 6, but that's just me. And some political scientists and historians. But mainly me, because I'm the important one here, and not Phil from Astronomy.

There were no parties during the first elections under the new Constitution in 1788, partly because the framers were afraid of parties, which Madison called factions, and partly because there was universal agreement that the first president of the US should be George Washington. And so he was. It was only after he retired after his second term that voters started to break into political factions and vote based on their ideological leanings. Although, to call these factions parties is a bit of a stretch.

Anyway, the first party system, which probably started in the 1796 election included the Federalists, who supported Washington's Vice-President John Adams, and the Democratic-Republicans who supported Thomas Jefferson. So, the Federalist political party was different than the group that worked to get the Constitution ratified, even though they were also called Federalists. And Alexander Hamilton was prominent in both groups. What the two parties believed isn't so important for this series. We talked about it in Crash Course US History, but overall the Federalists were supported by North-Eastern business elites, especially merchants who wanted closer ties with England, and those who generally wanted a stronger national government.

The Democratic-Republicans were more skeptical of national power, and, when push came to shove, favored the more revolutionary French. Ultimately, the Democratic-Republicans were way more successful. They were dominant in the presidential contests of the time, as Jefferson in 1800 and 1804, Madison in 1808 and 1816, and Monroe in 1820 and 1824 were all Democratic-Republicans. Monroe's elections kind of don't count though, as the Federalists weren't really a factor in national politics after 1815.

In fact, the period between 1815 and 1824 is sometimes called "The Era of Good Feelings". And that's how I like to refer to lunch every day. I just got back from a 45-minute Era of Good Feelings. Mmm, it was a burrito bowl. Yummy.

Sadly, the Era of Good Feelings came to an end with the election of 1824, which saw John Quincy Adams defeat Andrew Jackson in a bitter election that ended up being decided in the House of Representatives. Jackson, ever the gracious loser, decried the election as a "corrupt bargain", and rode this angry sentiment to victory in the 1828 election. Jackson was a divisive figure in a lot of ways, especially if you like the Supreme Court or Native Americans but, from our perspective, he's really useful, because his election helped to launch the second party system.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The new party, called the Whigs, started out as an anti-Jackson party. They claimed Jackson was a tyrant, and they might have had a point. The second Party System brought innovations to the political process, mostly in the party that opposed the Whigs. The Democratic-Republicans re-branded themselves as the "Democrats". These Democrats, especially under the leadership of Jackson's Vice President, and future magnificently bewhiskered President, Martin Van Buren, introduced some of the features of politics that we still see today. They established a central party committee, state party organizations, and party newspapers. Okay so we don't have party newspapers anymore, because we don't really have newspapers anymore. The Democrats also established state and national conventions for nominating candidates. Before this, all candidates had been chosen by caucuses of party leaders, which is less, well, democratic. The Whigs were generally less successful in national elections, but they introduced flair into politics in the campaign of 1840. And we could all use a little more flair.

This was the first time a Whig candidate, William Henry Harrison, won the presidency. And he introduced a great deal of political theater into running for office. The Whigs held parades featuring a rolling model of a log cabin that Harrison supposedly grew up in (he didn't) and copious amounts of hard cider for supporters. It also featured a giant ball covered in campaign slogans that supposedly spawned the phrase "keep the ball rolling", and gave us the first campaign slogan with both rhyming and alliteration, "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too". So catchy it's still used to this day. I put it in my wedding vows, "Do you take this woman? I do... and Tippecanoe and Tyler, too."

This came from Harrison's supposed status as the hero of the battle of Tippecanoe, which introduced another aspect into American politics-- the idea that successful candidates for president should, if at all possible, be war heroes.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Eventually, the issue of slavery pretty much destroyed the Whig party, and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 ushered in the third party system. Lincoln ran and won as a Republican, and after 1860, the US basically settled into a two-party system with all elections basically between Democrats and Republicans. But over the years, the compositions of these parties, who supports each party, and what the party stands for changed enough that we think of those shifts as creating new party systems.

So the Republican party was originally a conglomeration of reformers who coalesced around being against slavery. Republicans have always been pro-business and have tried to associate themselves with liberty. In fact, one of their earliest rallying cries was "Free soil, free labor, free men."

As viewers of the Crash Course US History video on Reconstruction know, it was a pretty pivotal and divisive time in American history. In terms of political parties though, this was when the Southern states all tilted towards the Democratic party, largely because Republicans were (correctly) seen as being responsible for ending slavery.

Democrats during the third party system were a bit of an odd mix. Their strength came from white, largely racist Southerners and working class immigrants in the north, many of whom gravitated to the Democrats because the Republicans tended not to like immigrants or alcohol, and many Republican reforms in this era were designed to keep middle-class Protestant business elites in power.

Another reason for Democrats' success in recruiting immigrant votes was that this was the era of political machines, which traded political appointments for support to win elections and maintain power.

The most famous of these machines tended to be in big cities with large immigrant populations like Boston and New York, and they were mostly Democratic, although there were Republican political machines too, mostly in the Midwest. The supposed Democratic abuses of machines brought about electoral reforms like voter registration, secret ballots, requiring that voters be alive, and other good government reforms that had the effect of reducing the number of voters and making elections a lot less fun.

The third party system lasted from roughly 1860 to 1896, when another pivotal election brought about a change in the composition of one of the parties, in this case, the Democrats. Some time in the 1880s, and certainly by 1892, a new party The People's Party, or Populists, began to form in the south and the western parts of the US. They had a number of concerns, mainly about regulation of farm prices and railroad shipping rates, but also things like supporting a national income tax and a general mistrust of bankers and plutocrats. (Those are the Democrats that live on Pluto, but according to Phil, no one lives on Pluto. WHATEVER PHIL.)

They won a few congressional elections, but eventually merged with the Democrats when they nominated the Democrat William Jennings Bryan to be their presidential candidate in 1896. Adding certain elements of populism shored up Democratic support in the South and the Midwest, but for many Americans their ideas were too radical and the Democrats were unable to elect any presidential candidates between 1896 and 1932, with one exception: Woodrow Wilson.

Good ol' Woodrow only made it in because the Republican vote in 1912 was spilt between the establishment candidate Taft and former president Theodore Roosevelt, who started his own progressive party.

The rise and fall of the Populists show us something important about third parties in American politics. The first thing is that they never win, largely because the way American elections are structured, but this doesn't mean that they don't matter. Third parties can shift the terms of political debate. Without a Socialist party (and there was one, believe it or not) issues of workers' rights wouldn't have been nearly as prevalent in the early part of the 20th century. (Eagle was in the shot, I didn't want it to be. Didn't want to influence political debate.)

Often, third party ideas get incorporated into the platforms of one of the other parties. This happened with the Populists, as their plans for graduated national income tax and direct election of senators were eventually incorporated into the constitution in the 16th and 17th amendments.

After the election of 1932 when Franklin Roosevelt became president and the Great Depression had kind of discredited Republican economic policies, the Democrats were dominant in both Houses of Congress as well. Thanks to these advantages, the Democratic party saw another shift in its composition and priorities. One so big that we say that the new fifth party system was the result.

The Democrats' New Deal policy brought more groups into the party's fold. Support for organized labor, especially the Wagner Act, attracted union workers. The idea that government could work to alleviate poverty through research and planning attracted some Socialists and many upper middle class intellectuals, including a large percentage of the American Jewish community. Southern farmers, always a backbone of the Democrats, were attracted by New Deal farm policies. New Deal support for jobs and FDR's repeal of prohibition helped bring urban immigrants, especially Catholics, into the Democrats camp. The Democrats acknowledgment that African Americans were suffering especially hard from the depression helped shift African American support away from the party of Lincoln.

This was a major re-alignment, as black people, when they could vote in America, had until the New Deal voted overwhelmingly for Republicans.

And even though New Deal programs did very little for black people (the programs were often quite discriminatory), the impression that the Democrats and FDR were champions of the poor helped convince many African Americans to vote Democrat, and they remain one of the most consistent groups in terms of their party affiliation.

The coalition of groups that make up the Democratic party, sometimes called the New Deal coalition (also my band name in high school), had been pretty stable for quite some time, as has the coalition that makes up the Republican party. This is why some people suggest that there've only been five party systems, with the fifth beginning roughly in 1932 and continuing to the present. I disagree! As do other historians and political scientists. My people, my posse. I bet they all have beards too.

Us six-system-ers argue for a further realignment of support after 1968 and consider the current political climate to be a sixth party system. The main shift here, and in terms of Congress it has been *really* huge, is that the South, which used to be solidly Democratic, is now pretty unshakably Republican.

Most historians will tell you that this has largely to do with race, and the Democrats' support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, and we don't have time to go into just how true that is. What we can say is that for whatever reason, the Republican party now draws a lot of support from White, middle, and lower-middle class voters, especially in the South and Midwest, and that these were groups that used to vote for Democrats.

A major part of this realignment is white working class men who generally used to be reliable union democrats, but are now just as likely to vote republican. The democrats have maintained their support among liberal intellectuals, members of minority groups, and to a lesser degree women, but their coalition is much less powerful than it used to be.

We could say a lot more about political parties in America and how they might be changing as we speak, but as I promised this episode has been about history and how we got to where we are. If you're going to take away anything, it should be that political parties change over time both in terms of their policies and the groups that support them. And that it's often historical contingencies that cause these shifts. And although we pretty much always had a two party system, third parties are still valuable even though they never win because they help frame issues and move the terms of political debate and even of policy. It's like me. I've never won an internet award, but I made up the word "Doobly-doo," so...

Thanks for watching, see you next time. Crash Course Government and Politics is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Support for Crash Course U.S. Government comes from Voqal. Voqal supports non-profits that use technology and media to advance social equity. Learn more about their mission and initiatives at voqal.org. Crash Course is made with the help of all these nice people, who aren't Phil. Thanks for watching!