

THE BIG PICTURE: HOW THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE EVOLVED

James Madison may have been suspicious of political parties, lumping them in with the dreaded “factions” that he thought were so destructive to liberty, but the fact is that they have always been with us, even in Madison’s time. What has varied over time is not the tendency of Americans to form umbrella groups with their ideological fellows to try to affect political change from inside the system, but the particular configurations of those parties. This Big Picture shows how American parties have evolved over time and, since 1879, when data on the current parties begin, just how polarized those parties have been at various times in our history.

First Party Era

In the U.S. party system’s elite-driven formative stage, the issue of federal versus states’ rights provided the central political cleavage. The Federalists, supporters of a stronger national government, were led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, while the Democratic-Republicans (also called Jeffersonian Republicans) supported states’ rights and were led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

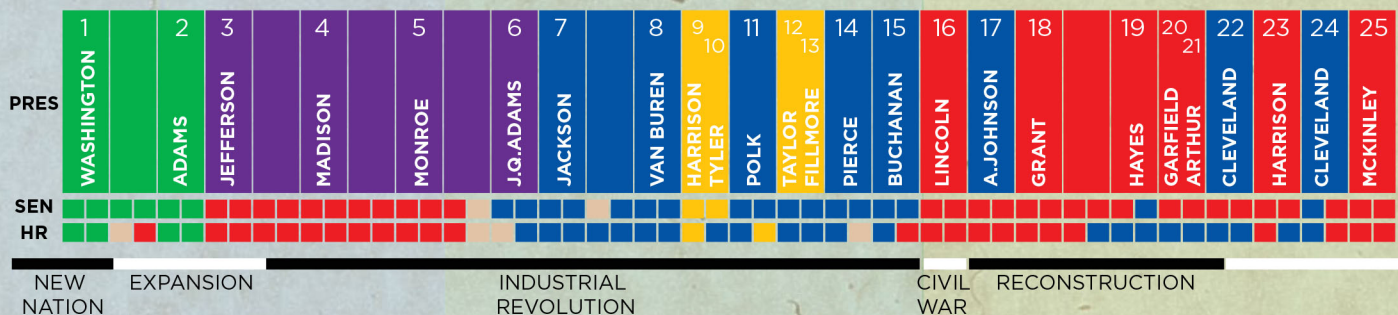
Second Party Era

Buoyed by an explosion in the number of voters—which swelled from 350,000 in 1824 to well over a million in 1828—Jackson prevailed in the bitter election of 1828, solidifying the coalition of states’ rights supporters (lower classes and southern states) over those advocating more power for the national government (business interests and northern states). From the ashes of Adams’s failed candidacy came a new party—the Whigs, led by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, who competed with the Democrats until the mid-1850s.

Third Party Era

Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1858, and by 1860 the party’s presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, had won the presidency as well. After the Civil War, an era of regionalism pitted Republicans (northern and western states) against Democrats (southern and pro-slavery states). Presidential elections were closely contested, but the Republicans tended to hold the edge.

Political Parties in Power



1789

1879

Ideological Difference Between Parties in Congress

