

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 begins, just how polarized those parties have been at various times in our history.

Fourth Party Era

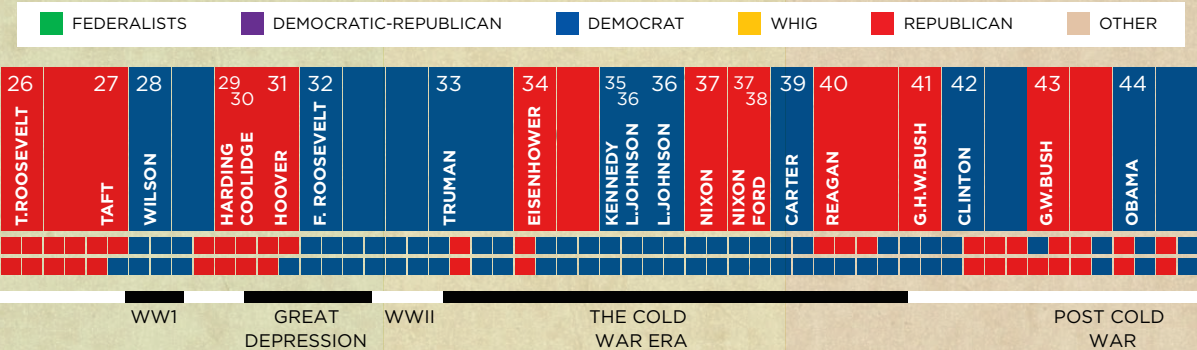
Although William Jennings Bryan, a Nebraska Democrat, attempted to merge the Democratic Party with the People’s Party in the presidential elections of 1896, he failed to amass enough farmers and industrial labor voters to win. The splitting of votes between the People’s Party and the Democrats strengthened the Republican Party. As economic issues subsided in the late 1890s, the regional bases of Republicans and Democrats intensified.

Fifth Party Era

The coalition of voters supporting the New Deal included southern Democrats, Catholic immigrants, blue collar workers, and farmers. Republicans maintained support among business owners and industrialists, and strengthened their regional support in the Northeast and Plains states.

Sixth Party Era

While there is much controversy about whether we have entered a new partisan era at all, and no single critical election has marked the realignment, incremental changes have occurred that are large and so far long-lasting. A realigning process has mobilized African Americans and other minorities into the Democratic Party and southern whites into the Republican Party, creating a greater consistency between partisanship and ideological and issue preferences. The current era is characterized by a narrowly divided nation, intense party competition, and increased gridlock in government.



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