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Organization of Congress, Washington, D.C. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. Government policy is by elected officials who are members of political parties. In the United States most elected officials are members of either the Democratic or Republican party, though occasionally members of smaller parties are also elected. Political parties are organizations that wish to achieve control of the process of government. They differ from interest groups that only want to have an influence on government policy through lobbying or education of the public. A party gains control of government by getting more of its candidates elected to office than its opposition parties do. In Great Britain, for example, more Conservative Party members won representation in Parliament in the elections of April 1992 than did Labour Party candidates. The Conservatives, therefore, were able to have their leader—John Major—continue in office as prime minister. They were also able to decide which programs the government should adopt, and they had the right to choose the cabinet and other important positions in the government.

The oldest and largest political party in the world is the British Conservative Party, founded in 1834. It has been in power since 1979. Other major parties include the American Democratic Party, founded in 1828, and the German Christian Democratic Party, founded in 1945. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, when elected legislatures became a dominant force in government, in the earliest decades in which political parties existed, their memberships were quite small. In the United States and England, for example, most citizens were not allowed to vote. Party membership, therefore, consisted mainly of landowners, members of the nobility, factory owners, merchants, and other wealthy individuals (see suffrage). By the third decade of the 19th century in the United States, and somewhat later in Europe, the right to vote was extended to include most white males. When more people could vote, party memberships increased. By the middle of the 20th century, after women had gained the right to vote in most nations, political parties became more dependent upon mass support. In the early 21st century political parties were found practically everywhere in the world. Large parties have arisen throughout Africa. Many of these have a base of support in ethnic or tribal groups. In the Middle East party affiliation often depends upon membership in religious organizations. This is true in Israel as well as in Islamic countries. Some countries have several parties, all of which may be represented in the government. Other countries function effectively with only two major parties. In some countries, most notably China, Cuba, and several African states, there are one-party systems. The United States, Canada, and Britain have two-party political systems, while most other democracies have multiparty systems. This does not mean that only two parties exist in Canada, the United States, and Britain—there are several in each country. It means that only two parties have consistently been strong enough to contest effectively for control of government. In Germany, Belgium, Italy, and some other countries, there are several parties large enough to contend for office. But the number of parties usually makes it impossible for any one of them to win decisively. It is often necessary to form coalitions of parties to elect governments.

In the United States, where the Constitution requires that members of Congress be elected from single-member districts, the majority of representatives and senators are elected from such districts. Various mathematical formulas are used to achieve the representation, but the results are the same: members of minority parties are able to get one or more candidates seated in a legislature. Proportional representation has been adopted by Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Israel, and a few other nations. Mexico has been an exception to the problems besetting most multiparty states. It had more than a dozen political parties, but since 1938 the government has been solidly controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary party. Most competition for elected office takes place within the party—not between parties. The chief reason for the existence of a large number of parties in a single nation is ideology—the adherence to fixed economic or political doctrines, such as Marxism or socialism. Strongly held beliefs are also the basis for the minor parties in the United States and other two-party nations, but such parties are never able to attract broad enough support to win elections. In addition, the major parties in Canada, the United States, and Britain are really broadly based coalitions that already represent a great diversity of views. By welcoming many different opinions, the major parties prevent themselves from becoming narrowly based ideological factions. In the United States the success of the two-party system has been based on freedom from ideological conflicts. Historically there have been three types of one-party governments: communist, fascist, and that found in developing countries. Communist leaders came to power in Russia in the October Revolution of 1917, with the success of Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik wing of the Social-Democratic Workers' Party. After World War II communist governments came to power in China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Cuba. Fascist governments came to power in Italy, Germany, and Japan. In the United States, Germany, and Japan, the military took over the government. In 1939 the case of Eastern European politics completely changed. Communists lost their political monopoly in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Even Albania overthrew its neo-Stalinist system by 1992. Multiparty elections were held in many Eastern European countries in 1990. In 1991 the Communist Party lost control in the Soviet Union and the country ceased to exist. Five years after the Russian Revolution the Fascist party, led by Benito Mussolini, came to power in Italy. Whereas communists contended that they spoke for the workers, fascists believed in the right of the elite to govern the masses. As a result, in Italy—as well as in Spain and Portugal later—the Fascist Party never played as dominant a role as did the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Industrialists, bankers, and other powerful figures tended to dominate policy. The party's function was focused on policing the state, eliminating political opposition, and controlling the military. In Germany the National Socialist (Nazi) Party of Adolf Hitler, though fascist in outlook, exerted much greater control of the country than did the fascist parties in Italy or Spain. Germany under the Nazis differed from other fascist countries in that Hitler personally, not the party, was the government. There was no pretense at a rule of law. In the developing world the communist governments of North Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia were similar to those that existed in the Soviet Union. In other developing countries, however, single-party governments tend to call themselves either socialist or reformist, but they rarely have any strong leaning toward communism. Often, a one-party system is proclaimed to keep one individual in power for life. Single-party governments in developing countries have generally proved to be inefficient and corrupt. They have rarely been able to oversee economic development successfully, since the chief aim is monopoly of political power. Great Britain and the United States both have, in general, two-party systems of government. The Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party, the Green Party, and Reform UK are the main opposition parties to the Conservative Party in the House of Commons. The Liberal Democrats are the second largest party in the House of Commons. The Green Party is the third largest party in the House of Commons. The Scottish National Party is the fourth largest party in the House of Commons. 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From this group members are selected to form an executive committee. The national committee is headed by the national chairperson, who is chosen by the party's nominee for president but must be approved by the national committee. Elected officials from the local to the national level exert considerable influence on the operations of local, state, and national party machinery. The base unit of local organization is the precinct, or election district. The chief official is the committeeman, or precinct captain. This official's job is to win friends for the party and to get out the vote on election day. The official also schedules social events, recommends party members for political (or patronage) jobs, and provides transportation to the polls on election day. The next higher level of leadership in cities is the ward committeeman and, in rural areas, the county chairman. Above these are organizations for the city, congressional district, state, and national levels. The most visible aspect of a political party to most citizens is its national nominating convention, which is held every four years. At the national convention, delegates from the state parties meet to select the party's nominees for president and vice president. Delegates are elected by the state parties at their own conventions. Since then party conventions have always been held in the same year as a presidential election—in years that are evenly divisible by the number 4. In the spring of a convention year, delegates are selected to attend their party's national convention. They are chosen by state party conventions or are elected in presidential primaries. The national committee determines the number of delegates for each state. Each party uses a formula based on the state's population, party support, and votes cast to allot the number of delegates. Both the Democratic and Republican parties hold their convention in a large city in midsummer. The first convention is usually held by the party that does not control the White House. Each convention lasts four or five days. Despite the political dominance of Democrats and Republicans, there have been several other party movements. None has succeeded in winning the presidency or the control of Congress, but the positions they advocate are often later adopted by the major parties. This was especially true of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party in 1912. Most of its platform has since become public policy. The first distinctive third party was the Anti-Mason—in opposition to the Masonic lodge and other secret societies. The Nullification and Anti-Jackson parties were South Carolina protests against federal authority. The American or Know Nothing Party of 1856 opposed immigration and Roman Catholicism. The Liberty and Free-Soil parties were pre-Civil War antislavery groups. In 1860 the Constitutional Union Party tried to avoid the slavery issue. The Greenbacks of 1876 and the Populists of 1890 advocated easy credit. In 1920 the Farmer-Labor Party entered the White House. Its name was dropped after its defeat. Several countries have adopted proportional representation. This is a device by which seats in the legislature are awarded to members of political parties according to the proportion of the total vote that they receive. In 1918 the Irish Home Rule Party won 73 of 103 seats in the House of Commons. In 1926 the Irish Fianna Fáil Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1927 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1928 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1929 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1930 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1931 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1932 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1933 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. In 1934 the Irish Sinn Féin Party won 68 of 103 seats. 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