

THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

TEXT SUMMARY

Debate over the Constitution's ratification caused two sides—the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists—to form. These became the first political parties.

In the election of 1800, Anti-Federalist Thomas Jefferson beat the **incumbent**, that is, the current officeholder, Federalist President John Adams. The Anti-Federalists then took control of politics. They later became the Democratic-Republicans and then the Democrats.

There have been four eras during which one party dominated national politics. From 1800 to 1860, the Democrats held power. They were a coalition of small farmers, debtors, frontier pioneers, and slaveholders. By the mid-1820s, they had split into **factions**, or dissenting groups.

In 1854 the Republican Party formed. It controlled national politics from 1860 to 1932. The party was supported by busi-

ness and financial interests, farmers, laborers, and newly freed African Americans. By 1896 the Republicans drew from a broad range of the **electorate**—the people eligible to vote. At that time the nation's party politics began to move toward the economic arena and away from the **sectionalism**, or devotion to the interests of one region, that had plagued the nation for years.

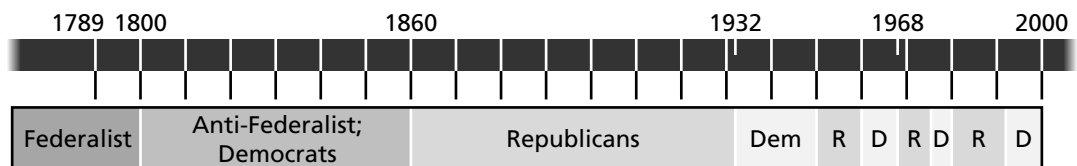
The Great Depression had a huge impact on American life, and one change it saw was the return to dominance of the Democrats. From 1932 to 1968, they operated from a strong base of southerners, small farmers, labor union members, and city people.

A new era began in 1968 with the election of Republican President Richard Nixon. Since then, neither party has entirely dominated politics. For much of that time, while one party has held the White House, the other has controlled Congress.

THE BIG IDEA

The United States' two major political parties have a history of alternating control over government.

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: Political Parties in American History



Control over national politics has gone back and forth between the parties since their beginning.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the first two American political parties called?
2. **Time Line Skills** When did the Republicans first begin to dominate national politics?