

## Chapter 13 Debate: Resolved: A Multi-Party System Would Be Superior to America's Two Party System

### Introduction

Teachers can use class debates to help students understand conflicting perspectives of a past time and place *or* of a contemporary issue. This often involves dividing the class into two or more parts and assigning each group a role. Students are then encouraged to take on that role and argue their position. They need to argue the position they are assigned, *regardless* of whether or not they agree with that position. Sometimes, teachers may encourage students to know both sides of the argument and have the two sides switch roles midway through the debate.

### Objectives of This Debate

- Students will consider and analyze benefits and drawbacks of America's two party system.
- Students will evaluate why 3<sup>rd</sup> parties rarely succeed.

### Background

Chapter 13 details the presidential election of 1912 – one of the most exciting contests in American political history. What made that election unique was the presence of a strong 3<sup>rd</sup> party candidacy – that of Theodore Roosevelt and his Progressive (Bull Moose) Party. Just twenty years before that election, the Populist Party attracted the interest and support of millions of Americans. And yet, third party efforts have been historically unsuccessful in the United States. Although the Constitution makes no mention of parties, and in fact the founders hoped to avoid such “factions,” from its earliest history, America has maintained a two party tradition. First Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, later Democrats and Whigs, and for nearly 150 years Democrats and Republicans.

Is this tradition a benefit to Americans? Or would our democracy be more robust with the existence of 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, or even 5<sup>th</sup> parties on the political scene?

### Procedures

This debate can be done in one class period. The teacher should divide the class into two parts, each side making arguments either for or against the resolution. Students should be reminded that they should stick to their role and argue *passionately* for their position, despite what they personally may believe. They should also be encouraged to base their points on factual information, rather than opinion and emotion.

Each side of the debate should research both their position AND the position of their opponents. This is important in the event the teacher elects to have the sides change positions. It also makes for a better debate because each side is better able to counter arguments of their opponents.

Students should be able to use *America: The Last Best Hope* to find dual perspectives on these issues, but teachers will also need to provide background through short lectures or explanations. Students can also do research on their own to find arguments to support their point of view. Primary sources from the period can be particularly valuable as a side builds its case.

The following chart represents basic points that should be covered by both sides. Teachers should not immediately give students these points. They might be offered to each side after students have had time to research on their own, or they might be withheld until after the debate and used as a summary or to debrief the debate.

A blank version of the chart is offered at the end of this debate. Students may use this blank chart to take notes as they research their positions in the debate.

When the debate takes place, arrange student desks or chairs with the two debate factions on opposite sides of the classroom *facing each other*. The teacher should serve as a moderator, beginning the proceedings, laying out the resolution, and calling on members of each side in alternating order. If the debate begins to lag, the teacher may call a short break and have each side “caucus” to rethink their positions and prepare responses to arguments made by the other side.

**Resolved: A Multi-Party System Would be Superior to America's Two Party System**

Affirmative	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy should be all about people making choices. Two choices are simply not enough. We need more political diversity.</li> <li>• In the days of the former Soviet Union, we chastised that nation for having elections with only one name on the ballot. We only have two. Is that so much better?</li> <li>• True, we do have parties other than the Democrats and Republicans, but they really don't have a realistic chance because the two major parties control the election process in this country.</li> <li>• European democracies have many healthy parties representing many different approaches to government. Our two parties aren't really that much different. We are often left with choosing the lesser of two evils – not a candidate who really thinks like we do.</li> <li>• It is discouraging that 3<sup>rd</sup> parties never seem to win. In the presidential elections, they have to win an entire state to get even ONE electoral vote. Ross Perot got 19% of the votes in 1992, but <b>not one</b> electoral vote. Unfair.</li> <li>• We need a system where new and different ideas are heard. In this two party system they can't be.</li> <li>• We need to remember that the two party system is not mentioned in the Constitution (many Americans think it is). We should be open to new approaches in our political system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The two party system has served this nation well from the beginning and it would be dangerous to change it.</li> <li>• It is not really true that there are only two names on most ballots. There are often three, four or more names – we do have a multi-party system.</li> <li>• You cannot say third parties have <i>no chance</i> – remember the Republicans began as a third party.</li> <li>• Yes, European nations <i>do</i> have real multi-party elections, but then what happens? Candidates win with far less than a majority of votes. They take office after the majority of voters have voted against them. This is not healthy. In our system, the winner usually has majority support.</li> <li>• Our system may only have two parties with a realistic chance to win, but those parties are “big tents” with many perspectives. It is not true that multiple ways of thinking are not present in our system.</li> <li>• It <i>should</i> be hard for new parties to win states – this prevents electoral chaos and prevents indecisive elections that would have to be settled in the U.S. House.</li> <li>• It is not true that the ideas of 3<sup>rd</sup> parties are not heard. They are. And they are typically picked up and adopted by one of the two major parties – the Populists are a great example of this.</li> </ul>

**Student Debate Sheet**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

As your group researches their position on these issues, use the following table to record your views and prepare for the debate. You should research and prepare for *both* sides of this debate. As the debate progresses, make notes made by the opposing side that your side did not anticipate.

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<b>Affirmative</b>	<b>Negative</b>