

The American Political System

When the American Constitution was signed in 1789, the 13 former colonies had just been through a long war with the British Empire, following the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The experience of British »tyranny« put its mark on the men who wrote the Constitution: they created a decentralized government.

The powers of government are separated into three branches:

1. The legislative branch: **Congress**. This is the law-making body. The American Congress consists of two houses:

a. *The House of Representatives*, which has 435 members, elected for two years from single-member districts. The seats are appointed to the fifty states on the basis of population, but all states must be represented.

b. *The Senate* has 100 members, two from every state, they are elected for six years.

2. The executive branch: **President**. The President must protect the Constitution and enforce the laws made by Congress. He is also Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, though only Congress can declare war. The President must be a

native-born American citizen at least 35 years old and at least 14 years a resident of the United States. He can be elected for up to two four-year terms.

3. The judiciary branch: **The Supreme Court**. The number of judges can be changed by Congress, at present there are nine members. They are appointed for life by the President with the consent of the Senate. The function of the Supreme Court is to interpret the law and to guard and interpret the Constitution. The decisions of the Supreme Court are final.

Each of these three branches of government has some authority over the others. For example, the President can veto a Bill of Congress, but Congress can override the President's veto by a two-thirds majority; the President's right to appoint judges, heads of Departments, ambassadors etc. is checked by the right of the Senate to confirm these appointments; the Supreme Court can declare laws passed by Congress and President unconstitutional.

Each of the fifty states has its own political structure, for the most part modeled on the federal one, so that each state has a governor and a state assembly. The Constitution lets

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the states keep all the powers necessary to regulate the daily lives of their citizens – as far as these powers do not conflict with federal law. The effect is that two neighboring states often have widely differing laws in matters such as health, education, welfare, transportation, marriage and divorce, and ordinary police powers.

The result of this political structure, in which one branch is checked and balanced by the others, is a large number of independent centers of power, – sometimes cooperating, sometimes in conflict.

15 The Parties

This decentralization is reflected in the structure of the two major parties, the *Republicans* and the *Democrats*. Each of the fifty states has a Republican and a Democratic party which shapes its policies to local

conditions. This means that neither of the two parties has a strong ideological identity as a national organisation, and in practice there is a great deal of overlap between them. Consequently, Americans tend to vote for individuals rather than for parties, even though there are differences between the two parties.

The Democrats are often seen as the more liberal, and the Republicans as the more conservative. Usually, the Democrats are supported by the trade unions and minority groups such as the Jews and the blacks, while businessmen and the middle-class from the suburbs tend to vote for the Republicans.

Unlike most European countries, there is no strong socialist tradition in the U.S. There is relatively little class-consciousness among workers, and both the Democrats and the Republicans believe in free enterprise and reject Socialism.

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The race for the PRESIDENCY

1
The Decision
to Run

2
Declaring
Candidacy

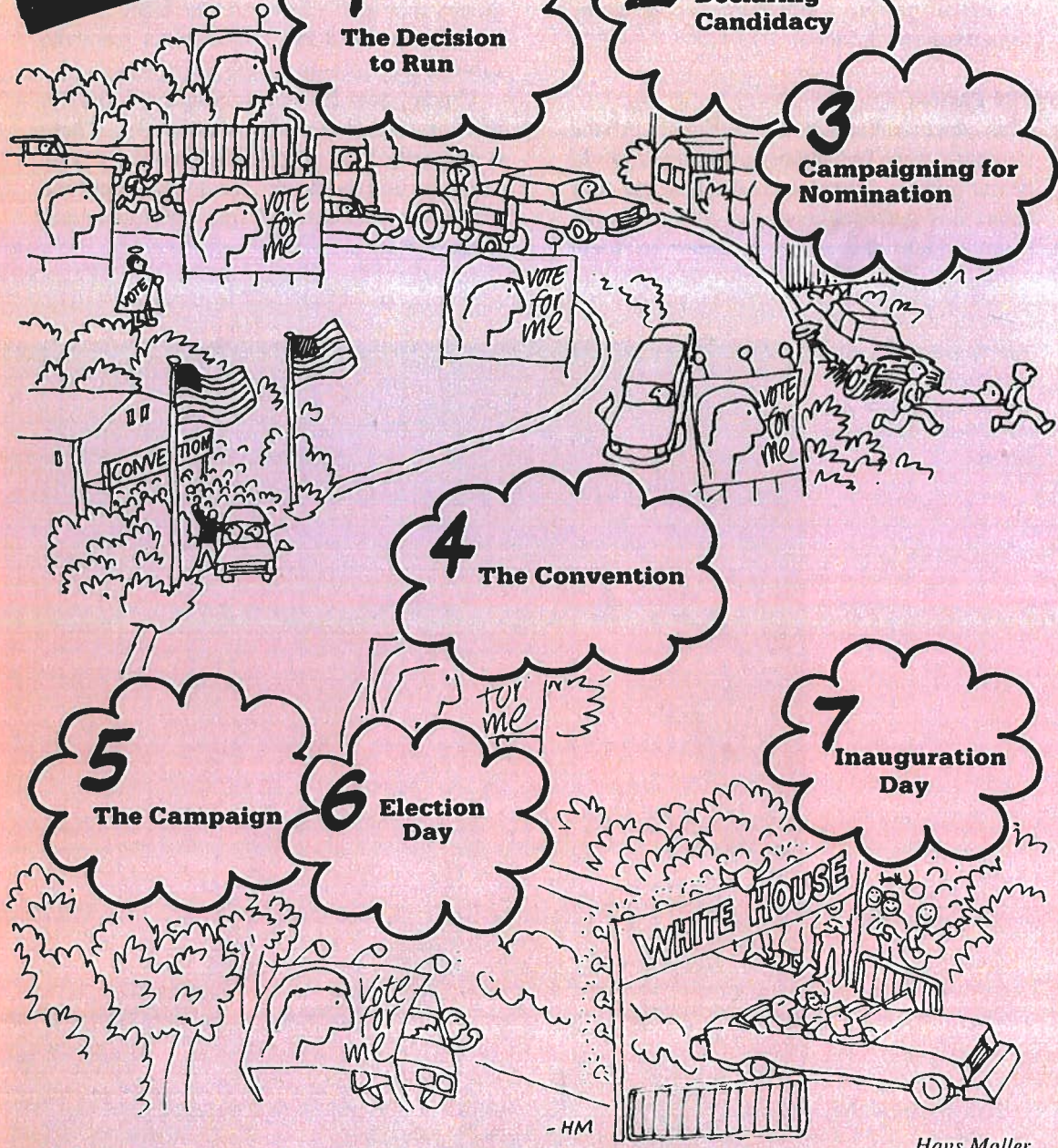
3
Campaigning for
Nomination

4
The Convention

5
The Campaign

6
Election
Day

7
Inauguration
Day



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Hans Moller.

The Race for the Presidency

1. *The Decision to Run*: The first step a candidate takes in the race for President is his private decision to enter the race. He does this by finding out how much support there would be for his candidacy. The opinion polls play an important part at this point.
2. *Declaring Candidacy*: To declare oneself an official candidate is an important decision. Only official candidates can qualify for federal financial assistance, and only they are allowed to raise money to support their campaigns.
3. *Campaigning for Nomination*: The official candidates in each party begin to compete with one another in primary elections (or primaries) to win their party's nomination. The candidates fight to win as large a number of delegates as possible for the national party convention.
4. *The Convention*: At the national conventions of the two parties, which are held the summer before the Presidential election, the delegates nominate the candidates for President and Vice-President. They also write the party program for the election.
5. *The Campaign*: The official election campaign of the two candidates for President lasts from mid-summer until Election Day, early in November. The fight is now between the two parties.
6. *Election Day*: The election is held on the first Tuesday in November. American citizens aged eighteen and over have the right to vote.
7. *Inauguration Day*: The new President is sworn into office on January 20. Many believe that the next Presidential race begins at that moment.

Presidents of the United States

President	Term of Office	Political Party	From State	President	Term of Office	Political Party	From State
1. George Washington	1789-1797	Federalist	Va.	21. Chester A. Arthur	1881-1885	Rep.	N.Y.
2. John Adams	1797-1801	Federalist	Mass.	22. Grover Cleveland	1885-1889	Dem.	N.Y.
3. Thomas Jefferson	1801-1809	Rep.-Dem.	Va.	23. Benjamin Harrison	1889-1893	Rep.	Ind.
4. James Madison	1809-1817	Rep.-Dem.	Va.	24. Grover Cleveland	1893-1897	Dem.	N.Y.
5. James Monroe	1817-1825	Rep.-Dem.	Va.	25. William McKinley	1897-1901	Rep.	Ohio
6. John Quincy Adams	1825-1829	Rep.-Dem.	Mass.	26. Theodore Roosevelt	1901-1909	Rep.	N.Y.
7. Andrew Jackson	1829-1837	Dem.	Tenn.	27. William Howard Taft	1909-1913	Rep.	Ohio
8. Martin Van Buren	1837-1841	Dem.	N.Y.	28. Woodrow Wilson	1913-1921	Dem.	N.J.
9. William Henry Harrison	1841	Whig	Ohio	29. Warren G. Harding	1921-1923	Rep.	Ohio
10. John Tyler	1841-1845	Whig	Va.	30. Calvin Coolidge	1923-1929	Rep.	Mass.
11. James K. Polk	1845-1849	Dem.	Tenn.	31. Herbert Hoover	1929-1933	Rep.	Calif.
12. Zachery Taylor	1849-1850	Whig	La.	32. Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933-1945	Dem.	N.Y.
13. Millard Fillmore	1850-1853	Whig	N.Y.	33. Harry S. Truman	1945-1953	Dem.	Mo.
14. Franklin Pierce	1853-1857	Dem.	N.H.	34. Dwight D. Eisenhower	1953-1961	Rep.	N.Y.
15. James Buchanan	1857-1861	Dem.	Pa.	35. John F. Kennedy	1961-1963	Dem.	Mass.
16. Abraham Lincoln	1861-1865	Rep.	Ill.	36. Lyndon B. Johnson	1963-1969	Dem.	Tex.
17. Andrew Johnson	1865-1869	Rep.	Tenn.	37. Richard M. Nixon	1969-1974	Rep.	Calif.
18. Ulysses S. Grant	1869-1877	Rep.	Ill.	38. Gerald R. Ford	1974-1977	Rep.	Mich.
19. Rutherford B. Hayes	1877-1881	Rep.	Ohio	39. Jimmy Carter	1977-1981	Dem.	Ga.
20. James A. Garfield	1881	Rep.	Ohio	40. Ronald Reagan	1981	Rep.	Calif.

The Moral Majority by Ted Polhemus and Lynn Procter

25 The Moral Majority has had quite an effect in
America since it was involved in President
Reagan's election in 1980. It is one of the new
right-wing political organizations which have
appeared in the last few years. Many Ameri-
cans feel that the American economy and
international leadership are breaking down
because of »moral decay« within and without
America. The Moral Majority is a reaction to
this feeling.

35 The Moral Majority is a collection of rich
and well-organized pressure groups. It can
therefore afford to use up-to-date technology
to get its message across. Before the 1980
election it used computerised direct mailing
systems to send personalised letters to enor-
mous numbers of Americans. The letters
encouraged them to vote for the candidates
who shared the beliefs of the Moral Majority.

Some Moral Majority groups buy televi-
sion time; others give large sums of money to
very conservative election candidates. For
example, over one million dollars was spent to
turn the voters against five liberal senators. As
a result, the Moral Majority played a major
part in the election of Mr. Reagan and many

other right-wing politicians at the expense of
the liberals. 75

Good Guys and Bad Guys

The new right does not choose its »good guys«
and »bad guys« by political party. Instead,
they evaluate the voting records of the
candidates on certain moral issues. The good
guys vote for increases in US defense spend-
ing, restricting the rights of homosexuals,
women, and children, and for bringing back
prayers and Bible reading in schools. They
vote against support to left-wing and commu-
nist governments, abortion for any reason,
child care programs, and most other kinds of
welfare. 80

This Moral Majority definition of morality
is founded on certain basic ideas which the
new right holds in common: 85

1. America is the last stronghold of Chri-
stianity in the world today, and it is God's
chosen instrument, particularly in the
fight against Communism - the weapon
of Satan. 95
2. God looks after his own - America will
prosper if it returns to God's ways. 100

Individuals will be OK if they truly
believe in Christ, so welfare provided by
the state is unnecessary.

3. The family is very important to God's
ways. Homosexuality and abortion are
anti-family and therefore anti-God and
should be made illegal. Women's rights
and child care services will allow women
to get out of the home where they belong
and are therefore also anti-God. The
father is the head of the family, women

and children should do what he tells
them.

From a European perspective, the Moral
Majority might appear a strange new pheno-
menon, but in America it all fits in. America
never forgets that it was founded by the
Puritans. Although in some ways it is quite
liberal, America is still the country where
religious and temperance movements are
extremely strong. The new right has taken
some old ideas and combined them with
imaginative use of new technology. 55
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Suggestions for Work

The American Political System

1. Outline the structure of the federal government.
2. How is the relationship between the federal government and the states?
3. What are the powers of the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court?
4. What do the major parties stand for?

The Race for the Presidency

1. What is the role of primaries?
2. What functions do the party conventions have?

The Moral Majority

1. What does the Moral Majority stand for?

2. How do pressure groups like the Moral Majority try to affect public opinion?

Summing up the Theme

1. How does the American political system differ from the Danish system?
2. Try to compare the two major American parties to Danish parties. - Why is this difficult to do?
3. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of a two-party system?
4. Do you see it as an advantage or a disadvantage that personalities play an important role in American politics?
5. What has been the role of Jesse Jackson in American politics in the 80s?

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The American Political System

consti'tution forfatning
former tidligere
'empire imperium
Decla'ration of Inde'pendence
uafhængighedserklæringen
branch (her) magt, myndighed
'legislative branch lovgivende magt
law-making body lovgivende forsamling, parlament
House of Repre'sentatives
Repræsentanternes Hus
a'ppoint to tildele
the 'Senate Senatet
ex'ecutive branch udøvende magt
en'force håndhæve
Co'mmander-in-Chief øverstbefalende
ju'diciary branch dømmende magt
the Su'preme Court Højesteret
a'ppoint udnævne
in'terpret udlægge, fortolke
over'ride underkende, tilsidesætte
ma'jority flertal
heads of De'partments ministre
'unconsti'tutional forfatningsstridig
state assembly statsparlament

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widely differing vidt forskellig
check and balance kontrollere
shape forme, tilpasse
con'dition forhold, betingelse
'consequently følgelig
tend to være tilbøjelig til
trade union fagforening
lass-consciousness klassebevidsthed
free 'enterprise det frie/private initiativ
re'ject afvise

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The Race for the Presidency
'Presidency præsidentembedet

'candidacy kandidatur
o'pinion poll meningsmåling
qualify for have ret til
'federal (her) fra forbundsregeringen
com'pete konkurrere
'primary election primærvalg
nomi'nation nominering
con'vention konvent, møde
Inaugu'ration indsættelse i præsidentembedet
swear into office aflægge embedsed

The Moral Majority

ma'jority flertal
right-wing højreorienteret

de'cay forfald
message budskab
get across vinde gehør for, få til at slå an
computerised direct mailing
adresselister på edb
'personalised med modtagerens navn på
at the ex'pense of på bekostning af
e'valuate vurdere
voting record stemmeafgivning
'issue spørgsmål
'increase forhøjelse
de'fense spending
forsvarsudgifter
re'strict begrænse, indskrænke
child care børneforsorg
welfare socialforsorg
mo'rality moral
hold in common være fælles om, dele
'stronghold fæstning, højborg
prosper blomstre, have fremgang

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fit in passe
the Puritans religiøs retning som lægger vægt på nøjsom livsførelse
'temperance afholds-
i'maginative opfindsom, fantasi-
rig