

Spring 2008

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Recommended Citation

Rich, David L., "Elephants, Donkeys, and American Politics" (2008). *History and Government Faculty Publications*. 29.
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Elephants, Donkeys, and American Politics

By David L. Rich, D.P.A.



The 2008 presidential election looms before us — as impossible to ignore as rising gas prices and the faltering real estate market. Political parties and special interest groups continue to champion the qualities of their candidate over the opposition. Conservatives and liberals alike claim to have the solutions to the problems facing our country, and yet, despite all the talk about “change,” we have this feeling deep down that there is very little *real* change from administration to administration. So, we wonder: Does the two-party system that serves as the foundation of American politics still work? Perhaps a brief examination of its historical development will provide insight into how that system functions today.

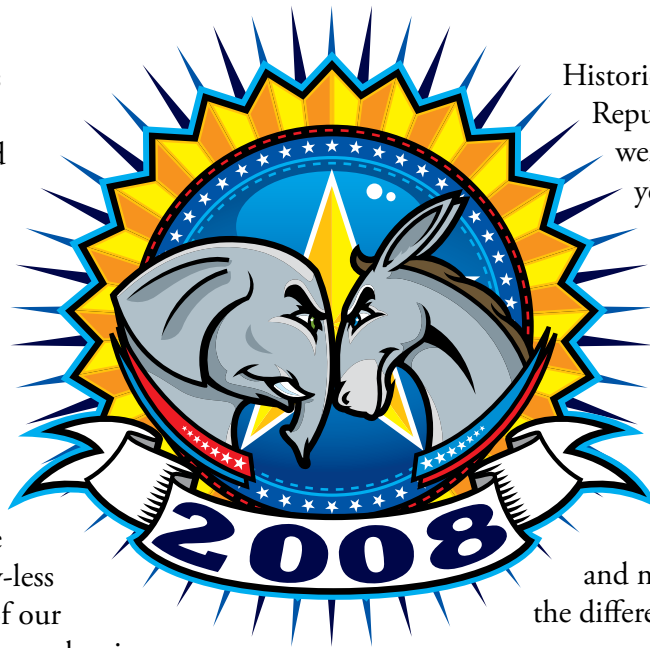


A Look Back

America’s founding fathers were originally opposed to political parties, concerned that they would lead to greater divisions and factional interests. In his farewell address, our first president, George Washington, likened political parties to “a dangerous fire” that requires constant vigilance. But although we saw a short period of party-less politics in the early years of our country, by the late 1700s two dominant political parties had emerged.

For the last 150 years, these two parties have been identified as the Democrats and the Republicans, which emerged following debates concerning the size and role of our national government. The struggle between a strong federal government and state sovereignties was foundational in the development of our current two-party system, a system that has become a part of the fabric of American politics.

While third-party candidates may add flair and color to that fabric, they do not have what it takes to hold together the disparate elements of a fragmented U.S. governmental and political apparatus. And though many democratic nations do have competitive multi-party processes, their political systems do not seem to offer advantages over our two-party form of government.



Historically, the Democratic and Republican party platforms were very distinct. In recent years, however, both parties have adapted their party platforms to changes in American culture in an effort to attract votes. As a result, it would seem our candidates are kowtowing to policies that tend toward the center of the political spectrum, making it more and more difficult for voters to see the differences between them.

What to Do?

So, how should we as believers be involved in the political process that guides our government? Without a doubt, we should engage the culture on political issues. We need to be diligent in the advancement of “salt and light” in the world. If believers withdraw from efforts to provide a godly influence in the civic arena, we give it over to those who do not value what God values.

Voting is the first level of participation in our governing process. We who have the privilege of open and free elections should make wise use of this opportunity. If we do not vote, we give our vote to others and neglect our most basic civic duty.

Being a responsible citizen and voter takes work and preparation, and requires thorough research on the issues as well as the personal views of the candidates. Political aspirants should be evaluated based on



what they value and believe. Those values are expressed in party platforms, individual statements, and a candidate's actions. The nominee you vote for should reflect your position on those issues that are most important to you. At the same time, you must remember that no candidate is going to be perfect or meet all of your expectations.

I use a simple, but systematic, process for evaluating political parties and candidates. The approach involves analysis of the individuals' — and their parties' — views on various issues. It is vital to research their voting records and develop knowledge of their character, along with paying attention to their statements on central issues. Next, determine what matters most to you. Start with a global approach, developing more detail as time permits.

Once you know your key topics, assign them values. For example, I value protecting life over balancing budgets. While both issues are significant, for me, the sanctity of life trumps monetary concerns every time. With this simple concept in mind, you can develop a list specific to your beliefs and rank them in order of their importance not only to you, but to God as well.

In many parts of the world, Christians are denied a voice in politics. We are fortunate in the United States to be able to speak out and lend our support to those who are seeking to make a difference in the political arena. Christians, regardless of political affiliation, need to remember that our source of authority is God's Word. A policy position is neither right nor moral because a political party or candidate says it is, but because it has a biblical foundation. As long as we maintain that perspective, we will discover that we can be engaged in the political process, while still having the peace of mind that comes from trusting in an omniscient God and His infallible Word. **T**

Dr. David Rich serves as interim chair of the Department of History and Government as well as associate professor of public administration and political science at Cedarville University. A Cedarville graduate, Rich earned his M.P.A. from the University of Dayton and his D.P.A. from Western Michigan University. Prior to returning to Cedarville as a faculty member in 2000, he had gained 20 years of experience in local government, working as a city manager for 12 years. His special interests are state and local government, privatization, and the Christian's role in political systems.

