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(STUDY MATERIALS FOR LONG QUESTIONS AND SHORT NOTES)

AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM

The United States has two major national political parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Although the parties contest presidential elections every four years and have national party organizations, between elections they are often little more than loose alliances of state and local party organizations. Other parties have occasionally challenged the Democrats and Republicans. Since the Republican Party's rise to major party status in the 1850s, however, minor parties have had only limited electoral success, generally restricted either to influencing the platforms of the major parties or to siphoning off enough votes from a major party to deprive that party of victory in a presidential election. In the 1912 election, for example, former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt challenged Republican President William Howard Taft, splitting the votes of Republicans and allowing Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win the presidency with only 42 percent of the vote, and the 2.7 percent of the vote won by Green Party nominee Ralph Nader in 2000 may have tipped the presidency toward Republican George W. Bush by attracting votes that otherwise would have been cast for Democrat Al Gore.

There are several reasons for the failure of minor parties and the resilience of America's two-party system. In order to win a national election, a party must appeal to a broad base of voters and a wide spectrum of interests. The two major parties have tended to adopt centrist political programs, and sometimes there are only minor differences between them on major issues, especially those related to foreign affairs. Each party has both conservative and liberal wings, and on some issues (e.g., affirmative action) conservative Democrats have more in common with conservative Republicans than with liberal Democrats. The country's "winner-take-all" plurality system, in contrast to the proportional representation used in many other countries (whereby a party, for example, that won 5 percent of the vote would be entitled to roughly 5 percent of the seats in the

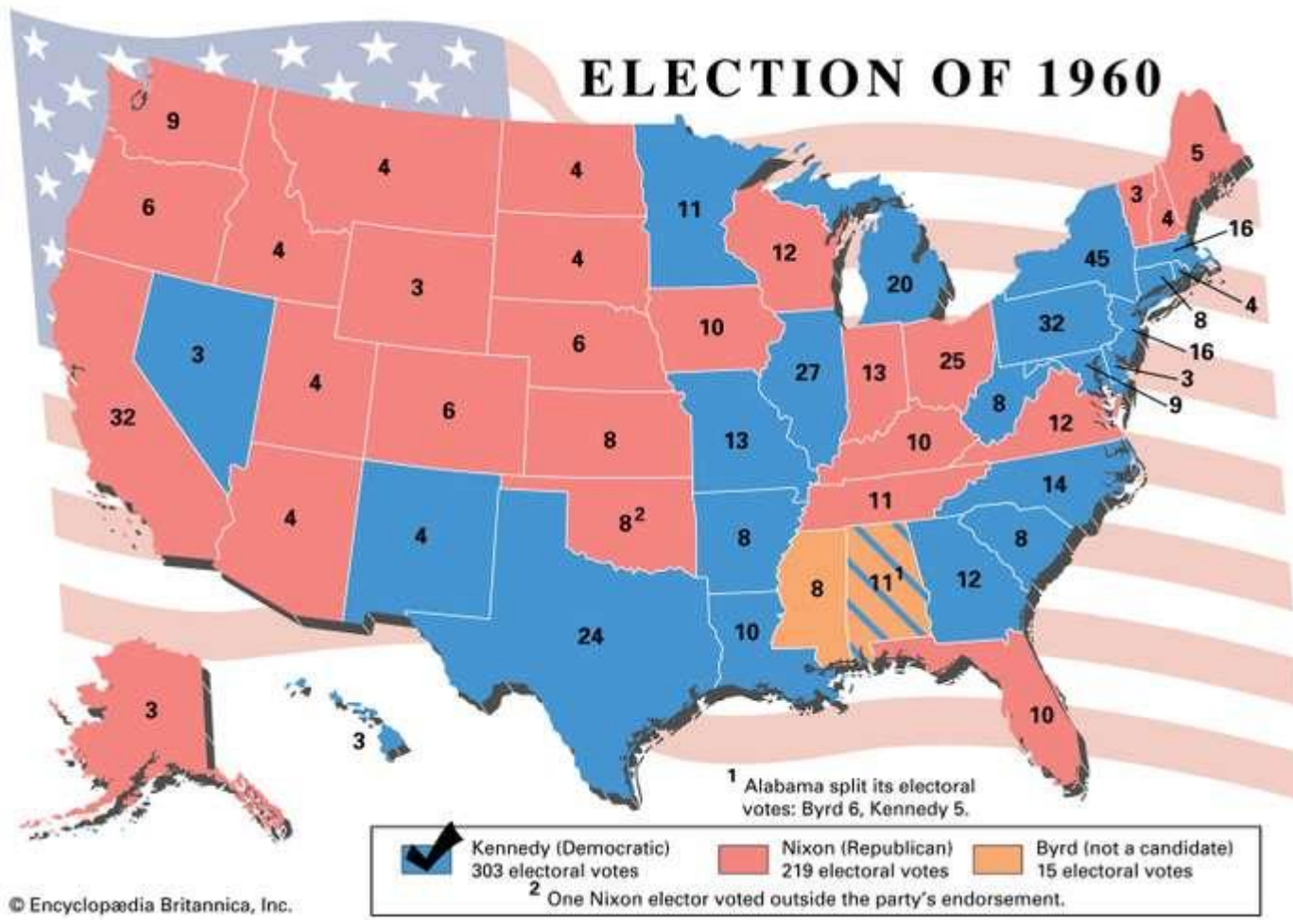
legislature), has penalized minor parties by requiring them to win a plurality of the vote in individual districts in order to gain [representation](#).

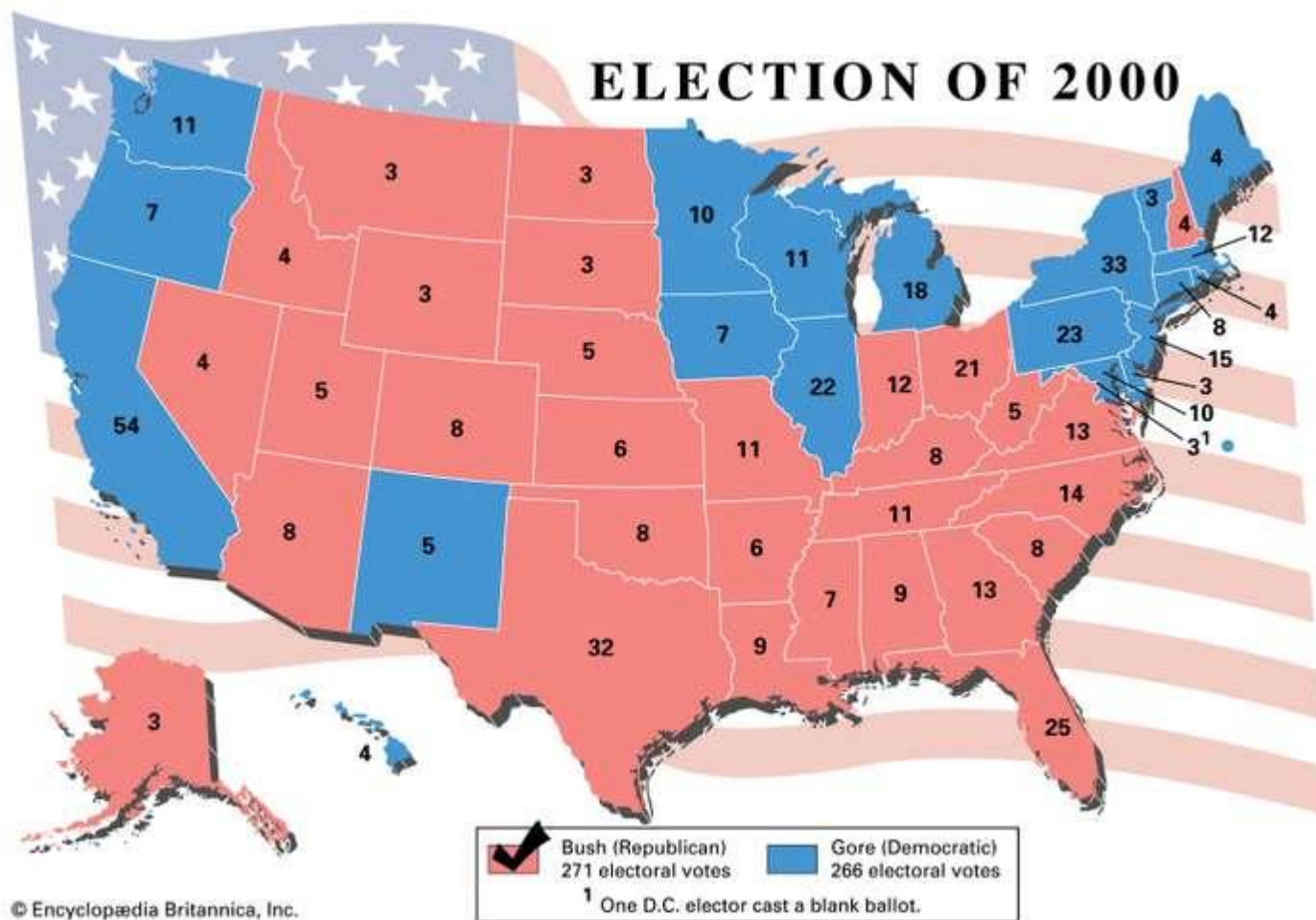
The Democratic and Republican Party candidates are automatically placed on the general election ballot, while minor parties often have to expend considerable resources collecting enough signatures from registered voters to secure a position on the ballot. Finally, the cost of campaigns, particularly presidential campaigns, often discourages minor parties. Since the 1970s, presidential campaigns (primaries and caucuses, national conventions, and general elections) have been publicly funded through a tax checkoff system, whereby taxpayers can designate whether a portion of their federal taxes (in the early 21st century, \$3 for an individual and \$6 for a married couple) should be allocated to the presidential campaign fund. Whereas the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates receive full federal financing (nearly \$75 million in 2004) for the general election, a minor party is eligible for a portion of the federal funds only if its candidate surpassed 5 percent in the prior presidential election (all parties with at least 25 percent of the national vote in the prior presidential election are entitled to equal funds). A new party contesting the presidential election is entitled to federal funds after the election if it received at least 5 percent of the national vote.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties have undergone significant ideological transformations throughout their histories. The modern Democratic Party traditionally supports [organized labour](#), minorities, and progressive reforms. Nationally, it generally espouses a liberal political philosophy, supporting greater governmental intervention in the economy and less governmental regulation of the private lives of citizens. It also generally supports higher taxes (particularly on the wealthy) to finance social welfare benefits that provide assistance to the elderly, the poor, the unemployed, and children. By contrast, the national Republican Party supports limited government regulation of the economy, lower taxes, and more conservative (traditional) social policies. In 2009 the [Tea Party movement](#), a conservative populist social and political movement, emerged and attracted mostly disaffected Republicans.

At the state level, political parties reflect the diversity of the population. Democrats in the Southern states are generally more conservative than Democrats in [New England](#) or the Pacific Coast states; likewise, Republicans in New England or the mid-Atlantic states also generally adopt more liberal positions than Republicans in the South or the mountain states of the West. Large urban centres are more likely to support the Democratic Party, whereas rural areas, small cities, and

suburban areas tend more often to vote Republican. Some states have traditionally given majorities to one particular party. For example, because of the legacy of the Civil War and its aftermath, the Democratic Party dominated the 11 Southern states of the former Confederacy until the mid-20th century. Since the 1960s, however, the South and the mountain states of the West have heavily favoured the Republican Party; in other areas, such as New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the Pacific Coast, support for the Democratic Party is strong. *Compare*, for example, the 1960 and 2000 presidential elections.





American presidential election, 1960 Results of the American presidential election, 1960. Sources: Electoral and popular vote totals based on data from the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, 4th ed. (2001). *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

American presidential election, 2000 Results of the American presidential election, 2000. Source: Federal Election Commission. *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

By the early 21st century, political pundits were routinely dividing the United States into red and blue states, whose assigned colours not only indicated which [political party](#) was locally dominant but also signified the supposed prevalence of a set of social and cultural values. According to the received wisdom, the red states—generally located in the South, West, and Lower Midwest—were Republican, conservative, God-fearing, “pro-life” (on the issue of abortion), small-town and suburban, opposed to big government and [same-sex marriage](#), and enamoured of [NASCAR](#). The blue states—found mostly on the coasts, in the Northeast, and in the Upper Midwest—were similarly reductively characterized as Democratic, liberal, [secular](#), politically correct, “pro-choice” (on abortion), urban, and [connoisseurs](#) of wine, cheese, and latte.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties select their candidates for office through primary elections. Traditionally, individuals worked their way up through the party organization, belonging to a neighbourhood party club, helping to raise funds, getting out the vote, watching the polls, and gradually rising to become a candidate for local, state, and—depending on chance, talent, political expediency, and a host of other factors—higher office. Because American elections are now more heavily candidate-centred rather than party-centred and are less susceptible to control by party bosses, wealthy candidates have often been able to circumvent the traditional party organization to win their party's nomination