

'To what extent is it fair to say America is a land of 100 parties'

To the rest of the world, it appears that the USA only has two main parties which have governed the country since independence in 1776. However, America is such a vast country with 50 states, many of which are far apart geographically and indeed some of them are bigger than many countries in the world. This coupled with the fact that the USA operates a federal system has led the scholar Anthony Bennett to conclude that "America does not have two but 100 parties-50 state Republican parties and 50 state democratic parties". He goes on to say that "to be a Maryland Republican is quite different from being a Georgia Republican" which implies the parties are built by a combination of how the states are made up rather than by ideology. He also states that both parties contain such a huge spectrum of opinion and philosophical belief. Therefore it can be argued America operates under a multi-party system which coalesces into two great coalitions for the purpose of governing rather than standing up for ideological issues.

The argument that America is a land of 100 parties stems from the fact that many argue that Republicans and Democrats are not actual parties in the true sense of the word. Whilst the Democrats may be seen as more left-wing than the Republicans, this is not a true division and both organisations attempt to win elections by trying to woo people of all backgrounds and beliefs. The USA is by its very nature Conservative where left-wing parties have never succeeded in mainstream politics. When Communism tried to spread in the mid-20th Century there was an obsessive backlash where suspected Communists were classed as "aliens" and virtual enemies of the state. In the 1970's, Carter was perceived as a weak President and the US experienced a decline in economic and International power. He favoured "big Government" and since then it appears that the vast majority of Americans are suspicious of Government intervention and so the Democrats have needed to change. They will intervene to help the disadvantaged but not at the risk of alienating other Social Groups who support them and therefore the aim of the party is more around gaining votes in which the winner takes all in the First Past the Post system rather than pursuing a left of centre agenda. In the same way, 2010 has seen a rise in popularity of the "Tea Party" within the Republican movement which wants to bring the party more to the right and return the USA to fundamental policies but again party strategists do not wish to lose votes from those who believe in market forces but do not hold extreme right-wing views.

The above points out that both parties contain Groups with differing beliefs. Alan Grant argues that up to the 1980's, these parties were seen as "loose confederative associations of state and local structures which only came together once every four years to select and attempt to elect a Presidential candidate". This adds weight to the point that these parties contained a host of other parties within them. However, both parties have now strengthened their national organisations in terms of committee headquarters and offices, fundraising and contributions from interest Groups. This does not change the fact that the parties are still made up of so many various factions. Indeed, and this quote has come from decades ago, D.W Brogan

said that the two major parties "were like two bottles with different labels -both empty". More recently in 1997 political commentator Mark Shields said "as of today America has two Republican parties separated by the issue of abortion". Bennett shows how a moderate Republican and a liberal Democrat exhibited the same voting patterns as despite being from different parties they both represented white, highly educated middle-class voters.

The fact is that the USA has only two major parties despite such a huge and diverse population. Therefore, given this range of backgrounds and beliefs, why have other smaller or minority parties risen to take part in Government? There have been some minor successes but again the face of US Politics does not seem to change. The most successful third party candidate has been Ross Perot who won 19.6% of the vote in 1992 and 10.1 % in 1996. However, other parties have returned paltry results but the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, whilst only winning 3.7% of the vote, may have cost Al Gore the election by taking votes from the latter. This may seem commendable but it actually resulted in the election of a party even further from its own stance and a President that was not interested in signing up to any world climate change accords. Some independent parties have been around for some time, the Libertarian party was founded in 1971 and the Natural Law Party exists in other countries too. The America First Party and The Constitution Party is both ultra-conservative and more right wing but with their religious bent may prevent moderates from voting for them.

These parties have not provided serious opposition as the USA is in effect a two party system. This dominance is exacerbated by the electoral system. Also, both parties encompass such a wide range of views that they are in effect all inclusive. The most extreme left or right wingers are members of either party. Also, successful candidates will move on policy and their beliefs to ensure the concept of being all inclusive. For example, Bill Clinton took up traditionally conservative themes emphasising the importance of tax cuts, welfare reform and tough anti-crime measures. George Bush Junior is seen as right wing influenced by religion, but many of his domestic policies were moderate so as not to alienate regions in the cities of North-East USA. The USA should have more active and potent parties but partisan attitudes do not help and with both parties so intertwined in their policies, it is easier to switch from one to the other without being seen as "selling out". However, we are witnessing the rise of the Tea Party at the moment but this is just a faction of the Republican Party. Time will tell if this faction was brave enough to split and form its own party but maybe again the political system will prevent this from happening.

A further facet to the argument comes from the fact the USA has a Separation of Powers whereby both parties each have a congressional wing and a Presidential wing. Therefore, James MacGregor Burns describes the political scene as a "four-party system". This stems from the fact that for a party to govern in both houses the need to attract different voter sets. For example, Presidential Democrats want to win the national election and to do so would concentrate on winning and wooing support in the urban areas of large industrialised states. However Congressmen are

concerned with the narrow interests of the locality they represent and therefore concentrate on rural and urban influences.

From this side of the Atlantic we see a two party system that culminates in the excitement of the Presidential election. However, if we delve deeper into the process, we can see that this could in fact be a four party system as the parties need to concentrate on electing a President but also winning Congress. There are also many disparate voters and members within both parties and each of the 50 states also have its own local politics and elections. Therefore, I would conclude that the USA may have 100 parties that come together as two but they are not political parties as we define them and in the end the White House is contested between Republican & Democrat. There should be many more minor parties that could set up and challenge but the processes in place makes this extremely difficult to achieve. There is a potential for America to be the land of many parties but from the outside we see only two.