



Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process

BY KRISTINA NWAZOTA *July 26, 2004 at 8:40 PM EDT*



Voter in California

But, despite an active political presence, only two parties — the Democrats and Republicans — dominate the modern American political process, between them fielding all of the candidates that have become president since the mid-1800s.

Why, in a democracy, do only two parties dominate? What of the 52 other parties, many of which have contributed ideas and policies that have become mainstays of American political life and law? The answer, according to historians and scholars, is the political process that has relegated third parties to the sidelines and the nature of the parties themselves.

The Green Party, Reform Party, Libertarians, Constitution Party and Natural Law Party represent the most active third parties currently in the United States. All of these parties have fielded presidential candidates in the last several elections.

Ralph Nader, an independent candidate in the 2004 presidential race, made his name as a consumer advocate and as the two-time presidential nominee of the Green Party. As the Green Party candidate in 2000, he gained more than 2 million votes, coming in third behind Al Gore and George W. Bush. But controversy marred the Green Party accomplishment. Democrats blamed Nader for causing Gore's defeat by siphoning off votes simply by his presence in the race.

The Green Party platform centers largely on the environment, while Libertarians, which make up the third largest political party in the country and the oldest of the third parties, believe in a reduced role of the government. They maintain that the government should serve only as a form of protection for citizens. Although no Libertarian Party candidate has ever become president, several of its members hold elected office in state and local government.

The American Taxpayers Party, which changed its name to the Constitution Party in 2000, advocates a strict interpretation of the Constitution and more power for states and localities. Its most popular candidate Howard Phillips ran for office in 1992 but received less than 1 percent of the vote.

Third Parties Success & Influence

The most successful of the third parties in any one election was the Reform Party, which in 1992 nominated Texas billionaire Ross Perot as its candidate for president. Perot ran on a platform that advocated reducing the federal budget deficit, an issue previously ignored in elections but one that would become a major part of almost every presidential campaign since. Perot received 19 percent of the vote.

“[H]e was the first candidate really in a big way to float the idea that the deficit was a bad thing,” said historian Michael Beschloss. “By the time Bill Clinton was elected that fall, if he had not done something about the deficit he would have been in big trouble and that was largely Ross Perot's doing.”

Third parties have had a major influence on U.S. policy and political debate despite their minor presence in Congress — currently only one U.S. senator and one member of the House of Representatives is an independent.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Socialists popularized the women's suffrage movement. They advocated for child labor laws in 1904 and, along with the Populist Party, introduced the notion of a 40-hour work week, which led to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

"What happens is third parties act as a gadfly," said Sean Wilentz, director of the American Studies program at Princeton University. "There'll be an issue that's being neglected or that is being purposely excluded from national debate because neither party wants to face the political criticism that it would bring. A classic example was slavery."

"It's a kind of bitter sweetness," he added. "[Third parties] are the ones that raise the issues that no one wants to raise and in the process they change the political debate and even policy, but they themselves as a political force, they disappear."

Obstacles Third Parties Face

In fact, American voters have not elected a third party president since Abraham Lincoln when the then-minority Republican Party beat the Whigs and the Democrats in 1860 on the anti-slavery platform. Voters often worry that a vote for a third party candidate is "wasted" since he or she is unlikely to win.

Also, according to Beschloss, third parties often organize around a single personality or a single issue and that can lead to less popularity among voters.

Perhaps the most significant of the obstacles facing third party candidates is the winner-take-all system. In most states, the presidential candidate with the highest percentage of votes gets all the state's electoral votes.

"There's no reward for second place," said John F. Bibby, University of Wisconsin professor and co-author of the book, "Two Parties — Or More? The American Party System". "With a single elected president if you're going to have a chance to win the states, which are all awarded on a winner-take-all basis, again you don't have a chance. The incentive is to form broad-based parties that have a chance to win in the Electoral College.

In his book, Bibby and co-author L. Sandy Maisel point to Ross Perot in 1992, who had widespread appeal but not enough to win a state completely.

Third party candidates also are at a disadvantage because of federal campaign finance laws, rules that dictate who can enter presidential debates, and a lack of media attention.

“It’s very difficult for third parties to get media coverage,” Bibby said. “In Nader’s last run, the questions they asked him “Why are you running?” (came) all the time, not about the substance of his campaign.”

In addition, a significant amount of paperwork is required to become a viable candidate. When Ralph Nader announced in February 2004 that he would seek the presidential nomination, he was required to collect 1.5 million signatures in all states to appear on the ballot. Deadlines for those signatures begin as early as May 2004.

Campaign finance rules say that a political party can only get government funding to run a race if it received a certain percentage of votes from the previous election. Often this leaves third party candidates to fund their own campaigns. With less media coverage, the candidates are left to find other means of exposure to raise the millions of dollars it takes to run a successful campaign.

Political analyst and comedian Bill Maher expressed disbelief that Americans would willingly accept only two choices for president. “It’s silly,” he said, “that a country that prides itself on choice allows only two.”

Others argue that the two-party system is one that promotes stability by avoiding a more divided government.

“The U.S. Constitution was written long before parties came into being. The framers distrusted parties,” Sean Wilentz said. “But once parties did emerge, the system that the framers set up tended to encourage coalitions that fight it out and those coalitions tend to be two in number.”

The Democrats and the Republicans, according to Wilentz, over the decades have come to represent two basic and contrasting ideas about how politics and policy should be run.

“[The Republicans] are very much a conservative party and the Democrats are very much a liberal party, and I think that they stand because more and more they have come to represent those two points of view,” he said.

Bibby agrees. “It’s the nature of American society and the beliefs of Americans in that we have relatively few on the extreme,” he said. “Most Americans are relatively moderate and they can operate comfortably within a system where one party is slightly to the right and the other slightly to the left. They don’t see any great need for an alternative.”

In either case, this year's presidential election promises to continue the trend. Analysts favor the Republican or Democratic Party to win, and of the 81 other candidates hoping to enter the race, the public will probably only know the name of a very select few.

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