

Third Parties in a Two-Party Party System

I. Third Parties in a Two-Party System

The two-party system of two major parties competing with each other has been the standard pattern, the norm, in American history since the first party system took rise in the early 1790s. The only significant interruption to this pattern of two-party system has been the party-free ten years between 1818 and 1828 - the so-called Era of Good Feelings.

Many times throughout U.S. History, third parties have pushed themselves forward onto the political stage. I thought I could count them up from memory (about 15)¹: It turns out that over 100 third parties have entered the fray and fielded candidates. Most are unknown and most fall short of getting even 1% of the vote. It turns out also that quite often in the presidential elections you have as many as half a dozen or even a dozen or third parties putting up candidates. My outline lists a chronological table of the major third parties and the proportion of the vote they garnered plus an list of the number of minor parties which have run presidential candidates.

Only once in American History has a third party successfully means established itself permanently as a major party. Lincoln's Republican Party; ran John Charles Fremont in 1856 and elected Lincoln in 1860 . But special non-recurring circumstances made this possible.

In 1856, one of the two major parties: the Whig Party had split over the slavery issue and had virtually disappeared. This left an empty space in the two-party system and the newly born Republican party stepped into that space. The new Republican party constituted itself by absorbing most of the northern Whigs (like Lincoln) and adding many anti-slavery northern

¹The anti-Masons (1829-32); the Liberty and Free Soil Parties (1844, 1848); the Lincoln Republicans (1856); the Know Nothing Party (1856); the Greenback Party (1880); the Populists (1892); the Bull Moose Progressives (1912) and the Socialist Party 2% as high as 28% (1912); the La Follette Progressives (1924); Strom Thurmond's States Rights Party (1948) and the Henry Wallace Progressive Party (1948); the George Wallace American Independent Party (1968); and John Anderson Independent Party (1980); and the Ross Perot Independent Party (1992).

Democrats as well as out-and-out abolitionists. The Republican party also took over most of the Whig economic program and kept itself moderate enough on the slavery issue to attract

many in business men, and northern free soilers who didn't want slavery (and black people) forced on them by an aggressive Slave Power.)

The longest continuously running third party in American history is the Prohibitionist Party, which entered its first election in 1869 and was still going as late as the 1990s but its disappearance from the list of the running suggests it has finally given up the ghost.

The question then becomes why do Third Parties form in the first place and why have all of them (except this one) fallen short and failed.

II. Causal Impetus

Third parties arise out of dissatisfaction with the status quo and when people are disenchanted with what the two major parties have to offer. Most often it's the agendas that people who form third parties are unhappy about but often it is the leadership as well. So it's dissatisfaction with the existing parties - so strong as to be strong disaffection - that fuels and powers a third party.

Having said that, a qualification. Some of these tiny minor parties have no hope of ever breaking into the magic electoral circle, but they come forwards and sometimes continue on nonetheless. They do so, not to gain power but for educational and publicity purposes. They hope by exposure to convert people to an eventual policy-change. Eventually, perhaps, they can gain enough leverage to nudge one or the other of the major parties into taking up their proposed policy-change. That has happened several times in American history: the Liberty party and the Free Soil eventually got their moderate anti-slavery agenda adopted by the Lincoln Republican party; the Populist party ran as a third party in 1892 and got its agenda of free silver (currency expansion) adopted by the Democratic party in 1896.

III. Barriers and Handicaps

A big problem to face is how to explain the failure of third parties in American history to gain significant traction - except for the Lincoln Republican party? The best answer I've seen is a multiple-factor answer offered by the political scientists Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy Behr, and Edward Lazarus, Third Parties in America.(1984 and 1996). It turns out, as

they make very clear, that some high barriers and handicaps exist that stack the deck against third parties.

1. The winner-take-all system of American elections. The Constitution provides for what political scientists term “the single member plurality” (and “delegate system of elections.”) Here the winner of a plurality in each election district or state-wide election wins it all. (Congressional districts; Senate races; the presidential electoral college). There is no reward of seats or delegates to a second or third place finisher even if the candidate were to win a substantial proportion of the votes. (In 1992 Ross Perot won 18% of the popular vote for president but not one electoral vote.) By contrast, in a proportional representation system, second- or third-place candidates get a corresponding proportion of the seats. This “winner-take-all” system skews the odds against a party that enters the arena for the first time. Unless it wins a plurality or a majority in a given district or state, it gets nothing.

2. ballot access restrictions. The major parties have rigged the system of registration in such a way as to make it very hard for a new party to get on the ballot. All the state ballots automatically make a place for the two major parties, but a new party has to negotiate demanding hurdles to get its candidate on the ballot. In California, for example, you get on by petition. But the law requires 100,000 names and the signature gathering has to take place within a very narrow window of only 8 weeks. Timing and rules vary state- by- state so that if you want to run a national campaign you have to deal with 50 different rules and procedures.

3. prevailing scepticism. People have grown so used to the two-party system that they do not believe a third party can win. This is a huge psychological barrier because it disadvantages the new party in terms of visibility, in terms of monetary resources, and in terms of voter support.

- visibility: i.e. access to the media. Because of the prevailing belief that a third party can't win, the third party gets neglected by the media.
- Money. Running a 21st century campaign takes huge outlays of money and donors are loath to give to a party if they think the party doesn't have a chance.
- Voter support. Voters are hard to move away from either of the major parties because they don't think third parties stand a chance and

because many people have developed loyalties and habits that inhibit their changing parties. There of course are always some people who will vote for a third party out of a commitment to principle but not enough to carry an election.

It is significant that the most recent serious major third party bid has been Ross Perot's third party and campaign in 1992. Perot did relatively better than any of his predecessors since Roosevelt and the Progressive Party in 1912. He got 18% of the popular vote. But Perot, a two-billionaire Texas oilman, by spending \$77 million of his own money, was able to underwrite an effective organization that got him on all 50 ballots; pay for an expensive media campaign; and get himself a place in the three-way TV presidential debates with Bush Sr. and Clinton.

4. vulnerability to co-option.

Third parties are vulnerable to co-option by one or the other major parties especially if it puts forth an agenda that has garnered large voter support. The best example of this is the Populist third party of 1892, a farmers' relief party, that championed expansion of the currency supply by the monetizing of silver (plus other very progressive reforms). Its slogan was "Free Silver" The Democrats in 1896 appropriated this policy-measure, put it into their platform, and ran William Jennings Bryan as their candidate. Bryan lost to McKinley, and the Populist Party, deprived of their big idea, soon disappeared.

IV, Three Notable Third Parties: two bottom-up parties (early and mid-19th c) and one current third party in today's news. Most third parties have been top-down leader-centered parties. The Anti-Masonic and Know Nothing parties are an exception. And today's Americans Elect offers a possible solution to the partisan stalemate.

1. the Anti-Masonic party 1830-34

Anti-Masonry was a bottom up grass roots crusade that emerged out of the hills and valleys of central and western New York state in an area known as the "Burnt-Over" district. Its impetus was popular resentment against, and fear, of an international organization with strong presence in the United States: the Society of the Masons. The Masons were an

international brotherhood largely made up of the educated and well born Americans of English descent like Washington, Franklin, and other notables . It's purpose was to gather and mobilize enlightened public spirited men men into doing good works for humanity. In the 1820s the Masons had 100s of lodges all over the United States - 228 in New York alone. Its membership was secret and hierarchical. Its ideology was not affiliated with any of the organized churches of the day but looks like secular humanism of good works for humanity.

The hard-working,common people of America tend to look with suspicion on silk-stocking elites organized in secret societies and established in positions of power. In the late 1820s Masonry took on something much more insidious : to outsiders it began to look like a dangerous network of powerful atheists purveying anti-Christian ideas conducting immoral secret rites, and misusing the power of government for their own selfish ends. A grass-roots movement got underway among rural and small town folk in New York state that sought to expose the evils of Masonry and put the Masons out of business.

The movement - the Anti-Masonic crusade - was triggered by the mysterious disappearance of a former Mason, who had gone public with a a published expose of secret Masonic rites. There took place an outpouring of mass excitement accompanied by much negative publicity and popular rallies. . At this point, the Anti-Masonic crusade got hijacked by professional placatory politicians by Thurlow Weed, the self-made journalist (who later became a Whig) and by other young and ambitious politicians like William H. Seward and Thaddeus Stevens. Their idea was to ride the anti-Masonic wave in to political power on the back of a popular third party committed to discrediting Masonry. State Anti-Masonry parties were organized in New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and other states; 50 Anti-Masons were elected to Congress; the first national nominating convention in U.S. history was held ; and William Wirt was nominated its candidate for president to run against Clay and Jackson. In the 1832 election, Wirt did poorly, being far outpaced by Clay and by Jackson, who won in a landslide. Shortly thereafter Weed, Seward, and Stevens abandoned the anti-Masonic party and joined with others in transforming the existing National Republican party into a new broader anti -Jackson party, the Whig party - presumably because it afforded them a much more promising vehicle for their political aspirations and

ambitions. With these spark-plugs removed and with Masonry widely discredited and in sharp decline (lots of resignations) the Anti-Masonic party simply faded away.

Why is the Anti-Masonic party important? According to Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought, it was the first political party in U.S. “to combine democratic popular participation with an evangelical moral passion.” Its message was anti-privilege but even more intensely it was a popular little man’s party charged with a crusading moralism. - a moralism that took aim at a presumed anti-Christian atheist conspiracy. In that sense it was a precursor of today’s Tea Party movement, which is a popular insurgency highly charged with moral fervor.

2. The Know Nothings. 1850s

This was an anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic third party that rose from below, peaked and declined in the mid-1850s. Its strength was in New England and New York. It began as a nativist protest movement; aimed at new immigrants and at the Catholic Church. Irish and German Catholics, many of them poor, were pouring into American cities in the 1840s and 1850s; crime and relief rates were disproportionately high; and these newcomers swelled the ranks of a militant Catholic Church growing 3 x faster than the Protestant church. Archbishop Hughes of N.Y. publicly affirmed that the goal of the Church was to convert all America to Catholicism from the president on down. Archbishop Hughes; Hughes also raised Protestant hackles by condemning all public schools as godless.

At first this nativist movement spawned a number of secret societies most notably the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. This secret underground group sought to restrict immigration and pledged its members to secrecy instructing them to reply to any questioners from the outside with the stock phrase: “I Know Nothing.” The Order then created a political arm, the American Party which ran candidates for elected office. The American party platform championed not an outright bar against further immigration, but an extension of the 5-year period to citizenship to 21-years; plus state laws that would bar all Catholics from public office; and no tax support for parochial schools.

The Know Nothings won control of the state governments of Massachusetts and Delaware and other states. Surprisingly, in Massachusetts the Know-Nothings put through a very progressive legislative agenda: abolition of imprisonment for debt; a married woman’s property act, aid to public schools, and the like. But in 1856 the party

split apart over the slavery issue . At their presidential nominating convention (Millard Fillmore nominated) Southern Know-Nothings refused to endorse a moderate anti -slavery plank. Northern Know-Nothings walked out and joined the Lincoln Republican party and in the national furor over slavery the Know-Nothing party became irrelevant and faded away.

James McPherson suggests that this Nativist party came from the same cultural soil as did anti -slavery -ism, and that Its proponents were pulled away when the slavery issue became salient. The principal supporters of the Know-Nothings were evangelical Protestants strong in Christian-nurtured conscience and brought up in households which schooled them in Puritan moral improvement. Know Nothings, who abandoned the American Party for the Republican party, viewed Catholicism and slavery alike as repressive and reactionary institutions. By 1857 slavery and the Slave Power (as the fight for Kansas showed) had, in their eyes, become the more dangerous of the two.

3. Americans Elect. 2012 - a contemporary party in the news today

Americans Elect is the name taken by an organization of little-known Wall Street executives who hope to build a bi-partisan party able to rise above the current polarized and stalemated climate of bitter partisanship. Their goal is to put an end to hyper-polarized politics and restore moderate constructive bipartisanship to American politics and government. Their current high command is Peter Ackerman and Elliot Ackerman and Kahill Byrd and they have already spent over \$11,000,000 in promoting their bipartisan cause.

1. As described in a piece by Ezra Klein, Washington Post, they intend first of all to create a bi-partisan presidential super- ticket to run for the presidency. Klein thinks this is not only wrong -headed but an unrealistic fantasy. It turns out, however, that their strategy is not to win so much as to place : win just enough votes to get on the ballot in 2014 and 2016.

2. More important is their strategy for reducing the current polarizing power of the primary. They are setting up what they term “a second nominating process,” which will make it possible for any moderate candidate either

Republican or Democrat to have an alternative fall-back if he or she loses the primary to an extremist challenger. Americans Elect has secured ballot lines in all 50 states by which means they hope to encourage closet moderates in both parties to collaborate in doing what's best for the country rather than thinking about the next primary and placating party extremists. Eventually Americans Elect hopes to induce enough moderates to take this path to restore constructive bipartisanship to the political process.

[Ezra Klein, March 12 POST. "Will many incumbents - or newcomers - choose this path? Probably not, and definitely not at first. But if a high profile incumbent, under threat of a primary challenger from the far right or left takes the Americans Elect route, the practice might spread. Then if nothing else, we'd see more clearly how much polarization is baked into the system, and how much is a product of the of the particular people inside it." }

A final summary note: Third Parties have played a role in American History usually harmless and inconsequential, once in a while harmful, occasionally constructive. As many students have noted, more often than not they appear briefly and fade away without making any impact. At worst they can split the vote for a reasonable candidate and let an extreme politician slip into office (cite former moderate Senator Bob Bennett of Utah and former congressman Mike Castle of Delaware who lost primaries to tea party opponents who condemned political moderation.). At best, they bring to the table new ideas which sooner or later enter the political mainstream. Examples:

- The Liberty and Free Soil parties brought forward the strategy of containing slavery, which the Lincoln Republicans then espoused.
- The Populists pushed the idea of government aid to distressed farmers through government furnished credit and currency expansion, which Woodrow Wilson and later the New Deal took up.
- The Bull Moose Progressives of 1912 brought to the table the idea of government-managed pension and unemployment insurance, which eventually became Social Security.

Appendix: Minor Party Presidential Candidates 1830-2008

This selected list of minor party candidates and their parties is not fully comprehensive. It includes candidates who received relatively high vote totals as well as selected lesser candidates and their party names.

Note how since the Civil War presidential elections have produced increased numbers of minor party candidates.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Candidate</u>	<u># additional candidates</u>	<u>Party</u>	<u>% popular vote</u>
1832	William Wirt		Anti-Mason	2.6%
1840	James Birney		Liberty	.28
1844	James Birney		Liberty	2.3
1848	Martin Van Buren		Free Soil	10.12
1852	John P. Hale		Free Soil	4.91
	Jacob Broom		Native American ("No- Nothing")	.08
1856	Millard Fillmore		American (No -Nothing)	21.53
	John C. Fremont		Republican ² *	33.1
1860	John C. Breckinridge		Southern Democrat	18.09
	John Bell		Constitutional Union	12.61
1872	James Black	+ 1	Prohibition	
1876	Peter Cooper	+ 2	Greenback	.90
1880	James B. Weaver	+ 2	Greenback	3.32
1884 and 1888		+ 6		
1892	James B. Weaver	+ 2	Populist	8.50
1896 and 1900		+10		
1904	Eugene V. Debs		Socialist	2.98
	Sillas C. Swallow		Prohibition	1.91
	Thomas E. Watson		Populist	.84
	Charles E. Corregan		Socialist Labor	.25
1908	Eugene V. Debs	+5	Socialist	2.82
1912	Theodore Roosevelt		Progressive	27.39
	Eugene V. Debs	+2	Socialist	5.99
1916		+2		
1920	Eugene V. Debs		Socialist	3.42
	Aaron S. Watkins	+2	Prohibition	.70

² The Republican party began in 1854-55 as a minor party but by 1856 had replaced the Whigs as a major party.

1924	Robert M. LaFollette		Progressive	16.56
1924	William Z. Foster	+4	Communist	.13
1928	Norman Thomas		Socialist	.72
1928	William Z. Foster		Communist	.13
	William F. Varney	+2	Prohibition	.09
1932	Norman Thomas	+3	Socialist	2.22
	William Z. Foster		Communist	.26
	William D. Upshaw		Prohibition	.21
1936	William Lemke		Union	1.96
	Norman Thomas		Socialist	.41
	Earl Browder		Communist	.26
	William D. Upshaw	+1	Prohibition	.21
1940 and 1944		+8		
1948	J. Strom Thurmond		States' Rights Democrat	2.40
	Henry Wallace	+4	Progressive	2.38
1952, 1956, 1960, 1964		+17		
1968	George C. Wallace		American Independent	13.5
	Dick Gregory		Peace and Freedom	.06
	Eldridge Cleaver	+4	Peace and freedom	.01
1976	Eugene J. McCarthy		Independent	.93
	Roger MacBride		Libertarian	.21
	Lester Maddox		American Independent	.21
	Lyndon H. LaRouche	+7	U.S. Labor	.05
1980	John B. Anderson		Independent	6.61
	Ed Clark	+9	Libertarian	1.06
	Barry Commoner		Citizens	.27
	Gus Hall	+11	Communist	.05
1984		+12		
1988		+11		
1992	H. Ross Perot	+13	Independent	18.86
1996	H. Ross Perot		Reform	8.40
	Ralph Nader	+3	Green	.71
			(Libertarian, Taxpayers, Natural Law)	
2000	Ralph Nader		Green	2.74
	Pat Buchanan	+3	Reform	.43
2004	Ralph Nader	+8	Independent	.38
			(Green, Libertarian, Constitution, Peace & Freedom, Socialist, Socialist Workers)	
2008	Ralph Nader	+3	Independent	.56
			(Libertarian, Constitution, Green)	

Data taken from Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, Edward H. Lazarus, Third Parties in America (Princeton, 1996), appendix A and table entries for elections of 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008 in on-line Wikipedia.

