

“Confined to the margins of US politics”

Evaluate this view of minor parties and independent candidates in presidential and congressional elections.

Introduction

Many would agree that in US politics, minority parties and independent candidates are pushed to the background... to the margins. They have little to no chance of winning any presidential election, it is almost certain that either the Democrats or Republicans will win. By way of example, in the 2008 presidential election, John McCain and Barack Obama, the residing president, were the most memorable candidates. Together they took 98.6% of the popular vote, leaving 1.4% to the smaller third parties.¹ This trend is visible in past presidential elections, with George Bush and John Kerry taking 99% of the popular vote in the 2004 presidential election² and again in 2000 with George Bush and Al Gore taking 96.3% of the popular vote.³ Although on rare occasions third parties have influenced results in these elections, which will be discussed later. This suggests that the status of third parties in US politics is something of a paradox; that they are both unimportant and important.⁴ This essay will submerge into the reasons why the third parties have been left behind in US politics, evaluating their importance and their roles.

What is a Third Party?

The term third party is used in the US for any political party that is neither one of the two major parties; Democrats and Republicans. The term may also refer to independent politicians who are not affiliated with any party at all.⁵ For example, Ross Perot ran as an independent party in the 1992 presidential election. Saying this, there are many other types of third parties, national, regional and state-based; permanent and temporary; issues-based and ideological. The Reform Party, the Libertarian Party and the Green Party; are all examples of national third parties, these three had candidates on the ballot in all 50 states in the 2000 presidential election. Even though these national third parties are perhaps the most well-known, they rarely win a sizeable proportion of the votes in elections.⁶ Going back to the statistics referred to in the introduction, the 2008 presidential election showed that between the third parties, they only managed to get 1.4% of the popular vote. This suggests that the third parties are confined to the margins of US politics.

The Two Party System – consequence for third parties?

A consequence of the first-past-the-post electoral system is a two party dominance in the US. The first-past-the-post is a winner-takes-all system which is used in all elections, whether for presidency, congress or state.⁷ This makes it difficult for third parties to get a look in. Because although votes for the third parties are wide spread (they have votes in nearly all states), the votes are minimal, therefore because of this system they receive no reward, putting minority parties at a serious disadvantage. By way of example, Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential

¹ Wikipedia. n.d. *United States Presidential Election, 2008* [Online]. Available at: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_2008 [Accessed 03 October 11]

² Wikipedia. n.d. *United States Presidential Election, 2004* [Online]. Available at: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_2004 [Accessed 03 October 11]

³ Wikipedia. n.d. *United States Presidential Election, 2000* [Online]. Available at: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_2000 [Accessed 03 October 11]

⁴ Anthony J. Bennet, *US Government & Politics* (Oxfordshire: Hodder Education, 2009), p. 138.

⁵ Wikipedia. n.d. *Third Parties* [Online]. Available at: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_party_%28United_States%29 [Accessed 03 October 11]

⁶ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 138.

⁷ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 139.

election won 19% of the votes but won no Electoral College, his votes spread throughout the entire US. This suggests that only major parties benefit from this the first-past-the-post electoral system, thus creating a two party system.

A two party system is whereby the two major parties consistently gain above 80% of the popular vote in elections.⁸ America is clearly a two party system as can be seen in 1980 where the Democrats and Republicans accumulated 92% of all votes and in 2004 they accumulated 99% and so on. However, despite its name, the two party system does not deny the existence of third parties. In fact, third parties can do well. For instance, in 1968, George Wallace won 45 Electoral College Votes with 13% of the vote, although they were concentrated in a small number of southern states. But despite this, every state governor is either a Democrat or Republican; and every president has been either a Democrat or Republican (since the Abraham Lincoln).⁹ This advances the claim that third parties are confined to the margins of US politics.

Furthermore, because of what is known as big tent politics, the notion that political parties seek to attract a diverse range of people. In essence, as catch-all parties. They cover a wide range in the ideological spectrum. And because they are supposedly very different, electorates tend only to vote for one or the other. Thus there is not much room for third parties, as the electorates' needs are almost always covered by the two major parties.¹⁰

Ballot Access Laws

In each state there are laws which regulate how third party candidates can qualify to get their name on the ballot paper. The US is the only country where the rules for elections are not written by government, but by the state. This is a major disadvantage to third parties. Although there is no ban on any particular party, states may require that the parties may have to be a particular size to get their name on the ballot.¹¹ Some states are straightforward, for example, Tennessee only requires 25 signatures on a petition. Other states, such as New York and California are more rigorous. In New York, a third party candidate must gain a certain number of signatures in every county in the state. In California, the number of signatures required is equal to 1% of the electorate in the state. John Anderson in 1980 estimated he had to gather around 1.2 million signatures nationwide to get on the ballot in all 50 states. He spent around \$3 million doing that.¹²

Financial Difficulty

Because of the ballot access laws in each country, and the extensive measures which must be taken in states such as California. Third parties spend the majority of their funds doing that. As mentioned, John Anderson in 1980 spent \$3 million getting signatures nationwide. This then leaves very little money on their actual campaigning. What's worse is that people are much more reluctant to give money to parties that are certain to lose. This creates a catch 22 situation for minority parties because they need the funding to get votes but people will not donate as they in turn believe that they won't get any votes and will not win... it is a dilemma where there is no escape! Third parties in this sense are bound to fail.¹³

⁸ Britannica. n.d. *Two-Party System* [Online]. Available at:
www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/611292/two-party-system [Accessed 03 October 11]

⁹ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 139.

¹⁰ Lawblog. 2009. *Confined to the Margins of US Politics* [Online]. Available at:
www.peterjepson.com/law/US-2%20Max%20Kirby.pdf [Accessed 03 October 11]

¹¹ Lawblog. 2009. *Confined to the Margins of US Politics* [Online]. Available at:
www.peterjepson.com/law/US-2%20Max%20Kirby.pdf [Accessed 03 October 11]

¹² Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 139.

¹³ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 140.

Major party candidates qualify for matching funds by raising at least \$5,000 in contributions of \$250 or less in at least 20 states. This is not very difficult provided their size. But third party candidates qualify only by winning at least 5% of the popular vote in the previous election. This problem is two-fold. First of all, very few third parties achieve this. In the last 50 years, only three third party candidates have managed it; Wallace (1968), Anderson (1980) and Perot (1992 and 1996). The second problem is the parties themselves. Most third parties are temporary; they often only take part in one election as John Anderson did. This constitutes to the lack of resources available to third parties, creating a domino effect on many aspects of a successful election campaign. Third parties cannot fund the production of party broadcast nor televise it. They cannot campaign in many states due to the cost of travel. This then brings about the image of insignificance which leads to people not wanting to donate money to the parties. The news programmes in turn do not think of the third parties as newsworthy, and are consequently hindered by the lack of media coverage between states.¹⁴ This suggests that third parties are limited within presidential and congressional elections.

The Importance of Third Parties

While the third parties presidential candidates have little to no chance of winning a presidential election, it does not mean that they are useless, far from it! America's third parties have traditionally promoted key concepts and policies that have been integrated into our social and political lives. They are seen as protest vehicles, bringing issues which have been neglected by the two major parties to the public eye.¹⁵ In the 1800's it was the Prohibition and Socialist Parties which promoted women's suffrage. By 1916, both the Republicans and Democrats supported it, and by 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified giving women the right to vote.¹⁶ This trend is adamant in the 1980's, where the Populist and Socialist parties supported a progressive tax system that would base a person's tax liability on their amount of income. The idea led to the ratification of the 16th Amendment in 1913.¹⁷ Although this confirms that the third parties do not have the power to change laws, which in turn advances the claim of being confined to the margins of U.S. politics. It is suggested that they promote issues which have the opportunity to become laws through influence... America's third parties are far from useless.

Richard Hofstadter recognised that a function of a third party *"has not been to win or govern, but to agitate, educate and generate new ideas. When a third party demands become popular enough, they are appropriated by one or both of the major parties and the third party disappears... they are like bees; once they have stung, they die."*¹⁸ The point which was made here is that third parties create new ideas. They do not worry about getting elected but instead producing policies. As they know that they would never be able to implement them by themselves.¹⁹ These ideas are then adopted by the two major parties on the basis of its popularity. Once achieved, the party dies out like a bee once it has stung. This in effect, demonstrates the importance of third parties, their ideas are adopted, and not always rejected. Therefore minor parties are successful to the extent that their ideas are brought forward into the mainstream of the political sphere.

¹⁴ Anthony J. Bennet, op.cit, pp. 139-40.

¹⁵ MCN. n.d. *The Role of Parties* [Online]. Available at: www.home.mcn.net/~montanabw/polisci101.html [Accessed 03 October 11]

¹⁶ About. n.d. *Why Third Parties* [Online]. Available at: www.usgovinfo.about.com/cs/politicalsystem/a/thirdparties.htm [Accessed 03 October 11]

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Quote. n.d. *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.* [Online]. Available at: www.en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Richard_Hofstadter [Accessed 03 October 11]

¹⁹ Lawblog. 2009. *Confined to the Margins of US Politics* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-2%20Max%20Kirby.pdf [Accessed 03 October 11]

Furthermore, on rare occasions a third party can hold the balance of power, affecting the outcome of an election. This has been seen a few times throughout history, in 1968, 1992 and 2000. In the 2000 presidential election, Ralph Nader's 2.7% of the popular vote cost Al Gore the presidency. Al Gore certainly would have won the election had he received just 1% of the votes Nader received. Ironically, data from an exit poll suggested that at least half of those Nader voters would have voted for Al Gore had Nader not run, the other half would not have voted at all. This shows the significance of third parties. Perhaps they are not just confined to the margins of US politics, but instead are equally at the forefront, for a short time... but enough to make a significant difference to an election outcome.

Conclusion

Third party candidates in US politics have no chance of winning any presidential election, that's a given! Many would agree that they are consequently pushed to the background... to the margins of US politics. This is true in that sense. However according to Richard Hofstadter the function of third parties is not to win presidency, in fact, third parties know well enough that they have no chance of being elected. Their function is to promote concepts, and if these concepts are popular, they are then appropriated by major parties. In this sense, third parties are not just confined to the margins of US politics but instead are equally at the forefront, because their function has produced positive advancements, through amendments, legislation etc. Third parties make US politics, US politics!

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