

'Confined to the margins of US Politics' Evaluate this view of minor parties and independent candidates in presidential and congressional elections.

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Unlike many other democratic nations, the United States does not hold direct elections for their president. Instead, the U.S. has elected its presidents through the Electoral College. When voters cast their ballot, they are actually voting for a slate of electors who have pledged their support for that candidate. The electors pledged to the candidate receiving the most votes in a particular state get to represent that state in the Electoral College.¹ This differs from congressional elections in which both house of the US Congress- the House of Representatives and the Senate are directly elected.² It has and is still being debated that due to these systems, third parties and independent candidates are being 'pushed aside' and are struggling to gain votes in such an unfair system. This essay will revise points for both arguments and conclude with said reforms.

Presidential Elections

Due to the 'winner takes all' First Past the Post system in the US, minor parties and independent candidate's votes are distorted. In 1996, Bill Clinton won only 49% of the popular vote, yet he won just over 70% of the Electoral College votes. In the 11 elections between 1968 and 2008, the Electoral College was said to have distorted the result on 8 occasions. This leaves everyone except the two major parties; Republicans and Democrats at a loss, as they have so few votes that they will not be represented at all. However, supporters say that without the Electoral College, the two-party system would collapse and create political chaos. The Electoral College maintains the two-party system by allocating electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. As a result, under the current system a third-party candidate can receive 25% of the popular vote and still not win any electoral votes. Under a direct popular vote system, minor political parties could splinter the country, preventing any candidate from receiving a national majority of the vote.³

In 1980 Congressman John Anderson, running as an independent, won 6.6% of the popular vote and in 1996 the Reform Party won 18.9% of the vote. Neither of these candidates won a single electoral college vote, the system makes it so that only the two main parties will ever get into power. Similar to the British system, the minor parties and individual candidates are side-lined in order for the two-horse race to continue.⁴ Yet, it has been argued further that the promotion of a two horse race is essential, as in an election for the president, who is both chief executive and head of state, he is a symbol of national unity. In

¹ <http://www.stateuniversity.com/blog/permalink/The-Electoral-College-Pros-and-Cons.html>

² US government and Politics Anthony Bennett

³ www.stateuniversity.com

⁴ US government and Politics Anthony Bennett

such a system the winner will therefore tend to receive more than 50% of the popular vote, a definite aid to uniting the nation. However, three elections in 1992, 1996 and 2000, the winner did not gain more than 50% of the popular vote and so it is clear that America is not united in wanting a two party system.⁵

Although the Republicans and Democrats dominate the American political landscape, third parties have a long and active history of influencing U.S. presidential elections.

In the 2000 election, candidates of 12 other parties appeared on some or all state ballots. In 2004, there were again 12 third parties fielding candidates. Some, like the "prohibition parties" (primarily against the sale of alcohol) and various socialist groups, garnered only enough voter support signatures to qualify for the ballot in a few states. Others, however, were on the ballot in more than half of the 50 states: the Green Party, an environmentally concerned group (28); the Constitution Party, a Christian fundamentalist group (38); the Libertarian Party, a group that is fiscally conservative and socially liberal (49); and the Independent/Reform Party candidacy of Ralph Nader, a liberal reform group (37 with qualifications for several additional states undergoing judicial review). In addition, third parties rarely have the large state-wide organizations of the major parties; they have less expertise in running campaigns; they get less media coverage. Since they are not already in power and are less well known, they find it harder to raise money and, because extraordinarily large sums are needed to compete in U.S. nationwide races, they have to spend more time fundraising than campaigning on their issues. Still, some third-party candidates are successful at the local and state level, and there have been independent party representatives in Congress.⁶

So third parties can, however, produce dramatic results. Their candidates can be "spoilers" - in a close presidential election, they can take away enough votes from a major-party candidate that he loses a state's popular vote and, hence, its electoral votes and the presidency. This has happened several times in U.S. history. In 1912, former president Teddy Roosevelt's third-party candidacy took more than 27 % and split the Republican vote, allowing Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win the presidency. In more recent times, George Wallace in 1968 and Ross Perot in 1992 took significant percentages of voters from both major parties in the general election. Many people believe that the 2000 Nader campaign took enough votes (2.8 million) away from Democratic candidate Al Gore that it caused Gore to lose the Electoral College election to George W. Bush. For that reason, Nader's repeat candidacy in the 2004 election was closely watched by both major parties, but he won less than 1 % (.38 %) of the popular vote.⁷ This demonstrates that sometimes, if only

⁵ US government and Politics Anthony Bennett

⁶ <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2007/August/20070820180912Inkai0.4578668.html>

⁷ <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2007/August/20070820180912Inkai0.4578668.html>

rarely, minor parties and independents are effective, if only to take away votes from major party candidates. This shows that evidently they are not always confined to the margins of US politics.

Possible Reform

By allocating Electoral College votes in each state proportional to the popular vote in that state there would be a more equitable allocation of Electoral votes. Such a system would be much fairer to national third parties and independent candidates. However, it would also encourage more voters to vote for such parties, thereby making it more likely that no candidate would gain an absolute majority of Electoral College votes and throwing the election into Congress.

Congressional Elections

Following Duverger's law, the winner take all system for presidential elections and the single-seat plurality voting system for Congressional elections have over time created the two-party system. Third party candidates very rarely win any elections. For example, such a candidate only won a U.S. Senate election twice (0.6%) since 1990. Therefore, it is very rare to have a national officeholder not affiliated with and endorsed by one of the two major parties.⁸

Although third party candidates rarely actually win elections, they can have an effect on them. If they do well, they are often accused of having a spoiler effect. Sometimes they have won votes in the Electoral College, as in the 1832 Presidential election. They can draw attention to issues that may be ignored by the majority parties. If such an issue finds acceptance with the voters, one or more of the major parties may adopt the issue into its own party platform. Also, a third party may be used by the voter to cast a protest vote as a form of referendum on an important issue. Third parties may also help voter turnout by bringing more people to the polls. Third party candidates at the top of the ticket can help to draw attention to other party candidates down the ballot, helping them to win local or state office. In 2004 the U.S. electorate consisted of an estimated 43% registered Democrats and 33% registered Republicans, with independents and those belonging to other parties constituting 25%.⁹ However, Bennett quotes 'the first task for someone wishing to gain a seat in Congress is to secure the nomination of one of the two major parties. Third party candidates very rarely win seats in Congress.'¹⁰

The two major parties, in Schattschneider's words, "monopolize power" (1942, p. 68). They are able to do so via three routes. First, barriers-powerful constitutional, legal, and administrative provisions-bias the electoral system against minor party challenges and discourages candidates and voters from abandoning the major parties. Third party

⁸ <http://www.hlrecord.org/news/nesson-says-judge-sank-his-piracy-defense-in-riaa-v-tenenbaum-1.952585>

⁹ http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/neuharth/2004-01-22-neuharth_x.htm

¹⁰ US Government and Politics Anthony Bennett

movements are further handicapped because they have fewer resources, suffer from poorer press coverage, usually run weaker, less qualified candidates, and do not share the legitimacy of the major parties. Citizens do not accord minor party candidates the same status as the Democratic and Republican nominees; they see third party challengers as standing outside the American two-party system. These handicaps, by and large a side effect of the way the electoral system is set up, raise the cost of third party voting. A third party vote, therefore, does not merely signify the selection of one of three equally attractive options; it is an extraordinary act that requires the voter to reject explicitly the major parties.¹¹ Therefore we can see that independent candidates and minority parties are very much pushed aside in this bias and un-proportionate system.

The single-member-district plurality system governing most American elections discourages the emergence, growth, and survival of third parties. Under this arrangement, parties compete for an individual office-say, a Senate seat-and the candidate who obtains the most votes wins. The only way for a party to receive any immediate rewards is for it to gain a plurality of the votes. Unlike a proportional representation system where 20 % of the votes usually yield some seats in the legislature, in a single-member-district plurality system a party can receive 20 % of the votes in every state and yet not win a single seat. Because citizens know third parties have very little chance of winning, they prefer not to waste their votes on them. Small parties become discouraged and either drop out or join with another party. At the same time, the system encourages the two major parties to try to absorb minor parties or prevent them from flourishing in the first place.¹²

Conclusion

From this essay, it is clear that minority parties and individual candidates are indeed marginalized in US politics. Although, it is not to say that they don't play an important role, for example as aforementioned they draw attention to ignored policies that the electorate might have. However, due to the winner takes all system in both congressional and presidential elections, they will never have a significant amount of power and the two horse race will continue.

¹¹ http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Political_Reform/Third_Parties_America.html

¹² http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Political_Reform/Third_Parties_America.html

