

Confined to the Margins of US Politics

(Max Kirby – October 2009)

Introduction

It is quite apparent that in US politics, minority parties and independent candidates are pushed to the background. However some smaller parties have had a big effect on the outcome of elections. In 1992 Perot (United we stand) was said to have caused George Bush Snr loss and in 2000 Ralph Nader, who won many votes in states such as Florida which was seen as the reason Al Gore didn't win the election that year. Although some smaller parties have influenced the results in these elections, this is very rare.

Third parties have been left behind by a number of things, including the two party system, winner takes all, state ballot access laws, lack of resources, media coverage, lack of qualified candidates, easily portrayed as ideologically extreme, the parties tend to be temporary or regional and the adaptation of their key policies by the major parties. As well as discussing these points, I will also talk about the importance of the role of minority and independent parties in the US; roles like new ideas and healthy democratic outlet which help to hold the balance in the US. This evidence then leaves us with a paradox. Minority parties are both important and unimportant at the same time

If the only real power third parties seem to possess is influence, then they are, in effect, pressure groups who lobby on the major parties to adopt their ideas and beliefs into the party policy.

What is a third, 'minority' party in USA?

There is no definite third party in America; this is because there has never been a consistent winner of votes at national level. Minor parties in America rarely gain more than a minute percentage of the popular vote. There are different types of minority parties within the US; national, regional and state-based; permanent and temporary; issue-based and ideological. The most well known minority party are the nation parties who had candidates in all 50 states in the 2000 election. These parties were the Libertarian Party, the Reform Party and the Green party. The Green and Libertarian parties are permanent parties and consistently try but never get much of the popular vote.

Commenting on the paradox referred to in the introduction we can see third parties unimportance in the 2000 election. Out of the 11 minority parties who had candidates in the presidential elections they managed to have a combined popular vote of only 4%. 2.7% was from the green parties Ralph Nader and he still got no Electoral College vote, therefore making no direct impact in getting in. This lack of votes could be explained by the two party system.

Explaining the two party system in relation to smaller parties

¹*There is no reasonable expectancy, under the rules of our system, that any such party could make a respectable showing in two successive elections. Indeed, if a new party were to make such a showing in just one election, the majority party closest to it would move awkwardly but effectively to absorb it*- C. Rossiter. This quote explains that under the existing two party system it is near on impossible for smaller parties to get a foot in the door.

A two party system might be defined as when two major parties consistently pull at least 80% of the popular vote in general elections. In 1968, the combined Democrat and Republican vote was at 86%, 1980-92% and 2004-99%. This clearly shows that America is in a two party system.

On first inspection we can see evidence for a two party system, as V.O Key put it ² *'while minor parties have arisen from time to time and exerted influences on governmental policy, the two major parties have been the only serious contenders for the presidency. On occasion, a major party has disintegrated, but in due course the bi-party system has reasserted itself.'* The term two party system does not preclude the existence of third parties. What it does mean is that only the main parties, such as the Democrats and Republicans, have a meaningful chance of achieving highest office or a majority in congress. Clear evidence of this is that every state governor is ether Republican or Democrat, and every president has been ether Republican or democrat since the election of Lincoln in 1853. We can support this two party system even father by divulging into congress. Liberman is the only independent now in congress showing the two party system really is strong in the US.

America is a country of great diversity. One might expect a wider range of parties who are concerned with many people's specific interests. This is clearly not apparent, yet it is not completely clear if America has a two party system. Vile stressed that ³ *'Spreading power as it does to different levels of government, tends to have a disintegrating effect on party structure so that national parties tend to be coalitions of state and local parties forming and reforming every four years, so that we have not a single two party system. We have a 50 state party systems'*

Because the two major parties encompass such a wide ideological spectrum, there is not much room left for other parties as the US electorates' needs are going to be pretty much covered by ether the Democrats or the Republicans. This is clear example of Americas big tent politics. Lord Bryce once suggested that the two main parties were ⁴*'two bottles, each having a label denoting the kind of liquor it contains, but each being empty'*. This is made

¹ C. Rossiter, Parties and Politics in America, Signet, 1960

² V.O Key, politics, parties and pressure groups, Crowel, 1964

³ M. Vile, Politics in the USA, Hutchingson, 1978

⁴ Lord Bryce, Modern Democracies, Macmillan, 1921

apparent by the fact that both parties agree on more than they disagree on. Both show a great attachment to the constitution and both parties value the ideas of the pioneering American and their values of free enterprise and individualism.

The two party system is further supported by the 'winner takes all', first past the post, voting system. Votes for the minority parties is usually wide spread but shallow, they pick up votes in nearly every state but because of the winner takes all system and the Electoral College they receive no reward, this allows the two party system to flourish and puts minority parties at a serious disadvantage.

State ballot access law

Laws in each state can regulate how third-party candidates can qualify to get their name on the ballot paper. The US is the only country in which the rules for elections, both presidential and congress are not written by the government, but by the state. In many states, barriers have been set up by the major parties which place smaller parties at a serious disadvantage.

Although there is no outright ban on any particular party, (except the hizb-ut-tahrir, a global Islamic political organisation) states may require that the parties may have to be a certain size to get their name on the ballot paper. In some states like Tennessee where the requirement rests at just 25, and Arkansas where they require only 50, this is easy for third parties. But some states have build hurdles and unrealistic obstacles that it is near on impossible for smaller parties to achieve. For example, it was no surprise to see 6 third party candidates on the ballot paper in Tennessee in 2002, but in New York no independent or third parties ran in the 2002 election. In some states, such as Georgia and Texas, a candidate would have to run as an independent or nothing at all if they are not part of the major parties. Both these states in question made it very difficult for Nader to get on the ballot paper in 2000.

These state laws have often been challenged in the court as a denial of 'equal protection' under the law, and as a violation of the general right of a party to exist. However this has been constantly denied by the courts and the restrictions have been deemed as constitutional under the 10th amendment that protects state ballot access laws. We then have a situation where the constitution seems to contradict with itself; the Supreme Court would therefore have to make a decision as to what the purpose of the constitution ought to be.

Some states, for instance New York and California require candidates to get a certain amount of signatures from each state to be allowed on the state ballot paper. In 1980, John Anderson estimated that he had to gather around 1.2 million signatures nationwide to get on the ballot in all 50 states and would have to spend around \$3 million on just doing that, that doesn't count campaigning or anything else need to gain votes in elections.

Financial Difficulty for Minor Parties

⁵*Even the most successful minor party challengers amass only a fraction of the resources available to their Democratic and Republican opponents. Former President Theodore Roosevelt, the best financed third party candidate on record, spent only 60 percent of the average major party total in 1912; George Wallace spent 39 percent and John Anderson only 49 percent when they ran.* Third parties must spend a majority of their funds on ballot access, as explained earlier. This then leaves very little money on their actual campaigning, people are not going to fund them as much as the major parties because people will not invest in something that is bound to lose. This creates a catch 22 situation for minority parties because they need the funding to get the votes but people will not donate to the parties because they feel that they won't get any votes and is a waste of an investment.

The financial aspect has a knock on effect on many significant things needed for a candidate to have a successful election campaign. Third parties can barely fund the production of a party broadcast let alone the costs of putting on air or televising it. They may not be able to campaign in as many states as they would have liked because they cannot afford to spend money on travel. This then can make their campaign look small and insignificant, which then makes them seem unimportant to news station so they do not broadcast them on the news or invite them to the presidential debates. In 2000, for example, Nader was excluded, even though he took 2.7% of the popular vote. This is because he was seen as a threat to both major party candidates and has been said that he did steal votes from Gore, stopping him winning the 2000 election.

Minor parties have been seen as a threat to the major parties, and with state ballot access laws, and the banning from certain debates. This can be used to argue that the major parties do feel threatened by the minor parties influence and are trying to curb it through the two above and campaign smearing, shown through the unforgettable quote which tried to stop George Wallace's votes coming through 'if you liked Hitler, you'll love Wallace!' such tactics would suggest that major parties are fearful of minor parties becoming too powerful.

The importance of third parties

Richard Hofstadter observed that a function of a third party ⁶*has not been to win or govern, but to agitate, educate and generate new ideas. When a third party demands become*

⁵ Third parties in America: citizen response to major party failure By Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, Edward H. Lazarus

⁶ R.Hofstadter, the age of reform: from Brian to FDR, Knopf, 1955

popular enough, they are appropriated by one or both of the major parties and the third party disappears... they are like bees; once that have stung, they die.' The point that Hofstadter was making the point that is that third parties are a source of new ideas. They can think more of principles than power; they *can* think the unthinkable because they will never be able to implement them. Through them, ideas can be catered for that the major parties would not consider as they may be too controversial, but can get issue based votes really thinking. A clear indication of this is At various times; socialist, prohibitionists and progressives have taken up controversial matters and therefore have acted as 'vehicles for expression' of political discontent. Some of the best ideas have been from those outside the political mainstream.

A third party can hold the balance of power and/or affect the outcome of an election. Third parties do arise during election time and have changed the outcome of the US presidential election. In 1992 Perot, who stood for his Independent United We Stand, created a high profile campaign which stole many main party voters. His personal movement took 19% of the popular vote, a sizable chunk, but didn't win a single state. Despite this, the amount of votes he managed to collect did stop Bush Snr. from retaining the presidency.

A Healthy Democratic Outlet (conclusion)

Even if the third parties do not see their policies adopted and do not get a congressional seat, small parties have, at the very least drawn attention to the way people feel. They form an outlet for those people who dislike the character and attitudes of both the main parties. They allowed those who beliefs are not mainstream to have a voice, this is a good democratic step in American politics, even if the step seems insignificant in the bigger picture. In a democracy, they have a right to exist and put forward their ideas which deserve to be considered, if only to be rejected.

From this we can conclude that third parties do not make much of an impact and yes they are pushed well to the margins in US politics. And if the system stays as it is, which it will, then third parties will continue to struggle to gain any representation.