The Two-Party System Is the Hallmark of American Politics

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One of the cornerstones of a vibrant democracy is citizens' ability to influence government through voting. In order for that influence to be meaningful, citizens must send clear signals to their leaders about what they wish the government to do. It only makes sense, then, that a democracy will benefit if voters have several clearly differentiated options available to them at the polls on Election Day. Having these options means voters can select a candidate who more closely represents their own preferences on the important issues of the day. It also gives individuals who are considering voting a reason to participate. After all, you are more likely to vote if you care about who wins and who loses. The existence of two major parties, especially in our present era of strong parties, leads to sharp distinctions between the candidates and between the party organizations.

Why do we have two parties? The two-party system came into being because the structure of US elections, with one seat tied to a geographic district, tends to lead to dominance by two major political parties. Even when there are other options on the ballot, most voters understand that minor parties have no real chance of winning even a single office. Hence, they vote for candidates of the

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two major parties in order to support a potential winner. Of the 535 members of the House and Senate, only a handful identify as something other than Republican or Democrat. Third parties have fared no better in presidential elections. No third-party candidate has ever won the presidency. Some historians or political scientists might consider Abraham Lincoln to have been such a candidate, but in 1860, the Republicans were a major party that had subsumed members of earlier parties, such as the Whig Party, and they were the only major party other than the Democratic Party.

Election Rules and the Two-Party System

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain why the structure of US elections has resulted in a two-party system. Most of the blame has been placed on the process used to select its representatives. First, most elections at the state and national levels are winner-take-all: The candidate who receives the greatest overall number of votes wins. Winner-take-all elections with one representative elected for one geographic district allow voters to develop a personal relationship with "their" representative to the government. They know exactly whom to blame, or thank, for the actions of that government. But these elections also tend to limit the number of people who run for office. Otherwise-qualified candidates might not stand for election if they feel the incumbent or another candidate has an early advantage in the race. And since voters do not like to waste votes, third parties must convince voters they have a real chance of winning races before voters will take them seriously. This is a tall order given the vast resources and mobilization tools available to the existing parties, especially if an incumbent is one of the competitors. In turn, the likelihood that third-party challengers will lose an election bid makes it more difficult to raise funds to support later attempts.[1]

Winner-take-all systems of electing candidates to office, which exist in several countries other than the United States, require that the winner receive either the majority of votes or a plurality of the votes. US elections are based on plurality voting. Plurality

voting, commonly referred to as first-past-the-post, is based on the principle that the individual candidate with the most votes wins, whether or not he or she gains a majority (51 percent or greater) of the total votes cast. For instance, Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 even though he clearly lacked majority support given the number of candidates in the race. In 1860, four candidates competed for the presidency: Lincoln, a Republican; two Democrats, one from the northern wing of the party and one from the southern wing; and a member of the newly formed Constitutional Union Party, a southern party that wished to prevent the nation from dividing over the issue of slavery. Votes were split among all four parties, and Lincoln became president with only 40 percent of the vote, not a majority of votes cast but more than any of the other three candidates had received, and enough to give him a majority in the Electoral College, the body that ultimately decides presidential elections. Plurality voting has been justified as the simplest and most cost-effective method for identifying a victor in a democracy. A single election can be held on a single day, and the victor of the competition is easily selected. On the other hand, systems in which people vote for a single candidate in an individual district often cost more money because drawing district lines and registering voters according to district is often expensive and cumbersome.[2]

In a system in which individual candidates compete for individual seats representing unique geographic districts, a candidate must receive a fairly large number of votes in order to win. A political party that appeals to only a small percentage of voters will always lose to a party that is more popular.[3]

Because second-place (or lower) finishers will receive no reward for their efforts, those parties that do not attract enough supporters to finish first at least some of the time will eventually disappear because their supporters realize they have no hope of achieving success at the polls.[4] The failure of third parties to win and the possibility that they will draw votes away from the party the voter had favored before—resulting in a win for the party

the voter liked least—makes people hesitant to vote for the third party's candidates a second time. This has been the fate of all US third parties—the Populist Party, the Progressives, the Dixiecrats, the Reform Party, and others.

In a proportional electoral system, however, parties advertise who is on their candidate list and voters pick a party. Then, legislative seats are doled out to the parties based on the proportion of support each party receives. While the Green Party in the United States might not win a single congressional seat in some years thanks to plurality voting, in a proportional system, it stands a chance to get a few seats in the legislature regardless. For example, assume the Green Party gets 7 percent of the vote. In the United States, 7 percent will never be enough to win a single seat, shutting the Green candidates out of Congress entirely, whereas in a proportional system, the Green Party will get 7 percent of the total number of legislative seats available. Hence, it could get a foothold for its issues and perhaps increase its support over time. But with plurality voting, it doesn't stand a chance.

Third parties, often born of frustration with the current system, attract supporters from one or both of the existing parties during an election but fail to attract enough votes to win. After the election is over, supporters experience remorse when their least-favorite candidate wins instead. For example, in the 2000 election, Ralph Nader ran for president as the candidate of the Green Party. Nader, a longtime consumer activist concerned with environmental issues and social justice, attracted many votes from people who usually voted for Democratic candidates. This has caused some to claim that Democratic nominee Al Gore lost the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush because Nader won Democratic votes in Florida that might otherwise have gone to Gore.[5]

Abandoning plurality voting, even if the winner-take-all election were kept, would almost certainly increase the number of parties from which voters could choose. The easiest switch would be to a majoritarian voting scheme, in which a candidate wins only if he or she enjoys the support of a majority of voters. If no

candidate wins a majority in the first round of voting, a run-off election is held among the top contenders. Some states conduct their primary elections within the two major political parties in this way.

A second way to increase the number of parties in the US system is to abandon the winner-take-all approach. Rather than allowing voters to pick their representatives directly, many democracies have chosen to have voters pick their preferred party and allow the party to select the individuals who serve in government. The argument for this method is that it is ultimately the party and not the individual who will influence policy. Under this model of proportional representation, legislative seats are allocated to competing parties based on the total share of votes they receive in the election. As a result, any given election can have multiple winners, and voters who might prefer a smaller party over a major one have a chance to be represented in government.

[...]

Electoral rules are probably not the only reason the United States has a two-party system. We need only look at the number of parties in the British or Canadian systems, both of which are winner-take-all plurality systems like that in the United States, to see that it is possible to have more than two parties while still directly electing representatives. The two-party system is also rooted in US history. The first parties, the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans, disagreed about how much power should be given to the federal government, and differences over other important issues further strengthened this divide. Over time, these parties evolved into others by inheriting, for the most part, the general ideological positions and constituents of their predecessors, but no more than two major parties ever formed. Instead of parties arising based on region or ethnicity, various regions and ethnic groups sought a place in one of the two major parties.

Scholars of voting behavior have also suggested at least three other characteristics of the US system that are likely to influence party outcomes: the Electoral College, demobilized ethnicity,

and campaign and election laws. First, the United States has a presidential system in which the winner is selected not directly by the popular vote but indirectly by a group of electors known collectively as the Electoral College. The winner-take-all system also applies in the Electoral College. In all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), the total of the state's electoral votes go to the candidate who wins the plurality of the popular vote in that state. Even if a new, third party is able to win the support of a lot of voters, it must be able to do so in several states in order to win enough electoral votes to have a chance of winning the presidency.[6]

Besides the existence of the Electoral College, political scientist Gary W. Cox has also suggested that the relative prosperity of the United States and the relative unity of its citizens have prevented the formation of "large dissenting groups" that might give support to third parties.[7] This is similar to the argument that the United States does not have viable third parties, because none of its regions is dominated by mobilized ethnic minorities that have created political parties in order to defend and to address concerns solely of interest to that ethnic group. Such parties are common in other countries.

Finally, party success is strongly influenced by local election laws. Someone has to write the rules that govern elections, and those rules help to determine outcomes. In the United States, such rules have been written to make it easy for existing parties to secure a spot for their candidates in future elections. But some states create significant burdens for candidates who wish to run as independents or who choose to represent new parties. For example, one common practice is to require a candidate who does not have the support of a major party to ask registered voters to sign a petition. Sometimes, thousands of signatures are required before a candidate's name can be placed on the ballot, but a small third party that does have large numbers of supporters in some states may not be able to secure enough signatures for this to happen.[8]

Given the obstacles to the formation of third parties, it is unlikely that serious challenges to the US two-party system

will emerge. But this does not mean that we should view it as entirely stable either. The US party system is technically a loose organization of fifty different state parties and has undergone several considerable changes since its initial consolidation after the Civil War. Third-party movements may have played a role in some of these changes, but all resulted in a shifting of party loyalties among the US electorate.

[...]

Summary

Electoral rules, such as the use of plurality voting, have helped turn the United States into a two-party system dominated by the Republicans and the Democrats. Several minor parties have attempted to challenge the status quo, but usually they have only been spoilers that served to divide party coalitions. But this doesn't mean the party system has always been stable; party coalitions have shifted several times in the past two hundred years.

Notes

1. Robert Richie and Steven Hill, "The Case for Proportional Representation," *Boston Review*, February–March 1998, https://bostonreview.net/archives/BR23.1/richie
.html (March 15, 2016).
2. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2005. *Electoral Design System: The New IDEA Handbook*. Stockholm: International IDEA, 153–156, http://www.idea.int/publications/esd/upload/esd_chapter5.pdf (March 15, 2016).
3. Duverger, Maurice. 1972. "Factors in a Two-Party and Multiparty System." In *Party Politics and Pressure Groups*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 23–32.
4. Jeffrey Sachs. 2011. *The Price of Civilization*. New York: Random House, 107.
5. James Dao, "The 2000 Elections: The Green Party; Angry Democrats, Fearing Nader Cost Them Presidential Race, Threaten to Retaliate," *The New York Times*, 9 November 2000.
6. Bruce Bartlett, "Why Third Parties Can't Compete," *Forbes*, 14 May 2010.
7. George C. Edwards III. 2011. *Why the Electoral College is Bad for America*, 2nd. ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 176–177.
8. Kevin Liptak, "'Fatal Flaw:' Why Third Parties Still Fail Despite Voter Anger," http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/21/politics/third-party-fail/index.html (March 13, 2016).

Two Parties Are All That Are Necessary for America

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American politics operate on a two-party system, meaning that two major political parties dominate voting in most elections and consequently dominate elected offices. In modern United States elections, the two major parties are the Democratic and Republican parties. These parties are associated with liberal and conservative views respectively, and nearly all elected officials are affiliated with one of the two. Campaign endorsements, funding, and resources are allocated to candidates on the basis of nomination by one of these two parties.

Although the American political structure has consistently been a two-party system, third parties occasionally influence elections, and third party candidates sometimes obtain elected positions. "Third party" technically refers to the third largest party in a two-party system, but in the US it generally refers to any party running in an election other than the major two. Many third parties have gained some traction throughout American history—at one point, the Socialist Party held 600 mayoral offices, and Theodore Roosevelt obtained a significant number of votes in his presidential bid as the Progressive Party candidate in 1912. Today, the largest three "third parties" as measured by the number of registered voters affiliated with them are the Libertarian Party,

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the Green Party, and the Constitution Party. None of them hold a substantial number of public offices.

There are numerous logistical reasons third parties have not been more successful in the US (as they have been in other democratic countries), including the country's election structure, ballot rules, and debate rules. American elections are structured as "winner-take-all" votes—in other words, regardless of the margin of victory, the candidate that wins the popular vote attains office while the runner-up does not gain representation. This system is in contrast to proportional representation systems, in which parties are allocated representation based on the proportion of the popular vote they receive. With regards to ballot access, candidates for major elections, such as presidential elections, must meet state-determined criteria to be included on election ballots. Ballot access laws often mandate that candidates pay large fees or collect a large number of signatures to be listed, which often restricts the ability of third party candidates to be put on the ballot. Lastly, since the onset of televised presidential debates in the 1960s, with only a couple of exceptions, third party candidates have been barred from participation. This policy limits their ability to publicize their views and gain a following among the electorate.

While many electoral policies in the US stack the odds against third party success, perhaps the greatest barrier to third party candidates is the vast amount of resources that major parties hold. The two major parties have shifted names, platforms, and constituencies over time, but they have always served as gatekeepers to financial and human resources. Moreover, throughout the past few decades, major party politicians have been able to neutralize third party threats by adopting or discrediting the views of third party candidates. Both major parties are at risk of losing voters if third party campaigns gain traction, so they have both tended to act in ways that promote the two-party system.

Ideological Third Parties and Splinter Parties

Third party politicians tend to be more ideological than Republicans or Democrats because they do not have to play to the American middle.

America's democratic system is predominantly a two-party system. This means that two major political parties dominate in most elections and consequently dominate elected office. Currently, the two major American parties are the Democratic and Republican parties, although the top two parties change over time. A third party is any party that supports a candidate for election other than the two major political parties; at the current moment, a third party would be any party other than the Democratic and Republican parties. Though third parties represent a very small fraction of Americans participating in politics, they do influence elections by drawing votes away from either of the two main parties. Third parties tend to be more ideological and extremist than the Democrats or Republicans. Since third party candidates do not have a legitimate chance of winning national election given the structure of the current system, most third parties do not tend to try to pursue moderate voters and instead stay close to their ideological roots.

The three main third parties are the Libertarian Party, the Green Party, and the Constitution Party. All have over 100,000 registered voters. However, even as these parties are the largest of the third parties, they represent only a fraction of American voters and are more ideologically oriented than Democrats or Republicans. The Libertarian Party supports laissez-faire policies, small government, and is characterized by being socially liberal and fiscally conservative. The Green Party is a progressive party that emphasizes eco-socialism. The Constitution Party is a socially and fiscally conservative party backed by the religious right. Beyond the Libertarian, Green, and Constitution Parties, third parties in American politics tend even farther towards the fringe, emphasizing ideology and avoiding speaking to a broad base. An example of a small right-wing third party would be the America

First Party. The AFP is characterized as paleoconservative because they are socially and fiscally conservative. The AFP seeks to enact a smaller government by eliminating federal programs, such as the Department of Education. The AFP further seeks to cut taxes and allow for more robust integration of church and state.

An example of an extreme left wing party is the Peace and Freedom Party. The PFP was created in 1968 as a way to protest participation in the Vietnam War. Today, the PFP advocates to protect the environment. It seeks to advance personal liberties and universal, high quality and free access to education and health care. The PFP seeks to enact a more socialist economy.

Some third parties are organized entirely around one issue, rather than seeking to enact a broad, fringe ideology. For example, the United States Marijuana Party seeks to end the war on drugs and legalize marijuana. Though it is unlikely that anyone from the United States Marijuana Party will ever be elected to national office, they seek to raise attention to the issues that they find important and put these issues on the national stage.

The Impact of Minor Parties

Third party candidates exert influence by focusing the election on particular issues and taking votes away from major candidates.

Third parties face many obstacles in American politics. They are usually not even allowed on ballots due to lack of popular support and signatures to warrant a place under local laws. The problem feeds upon itself as the marginality of third parties means that they are not well known enough to attract national attention, and therefore unable to raise the funds that could promote their politics and make them well known. Numerically, third parties have won very few elected positions. Since 1877, there have been 31 US senators, 111 US representatives, and 22 governors that were not affiliated with a major political party.

However, third parties do play an important role in national politics. Third parties usually organize and mobilize around a single issue or position, putting pressure on candidates from major

political parties to address these issues. For example, segregationist American Independent Party candidate George Wallace gained 13.5% of the popular vote in the 1968 election. In response, the Republican Party adopted a "Southern Strategy" to win the support of conservative Democrats in the South who opposed the new Civil Rights movement.

Although it is unlikely that a third party candidate will ever garner a plurality of the vote, they can influence the election by taking votes away from a major party candidate. This was at issue during the 2000 election when Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader took votes away from Democrat Al Gore, a situation that some felt contributed to the victory of Republican George W. Bush.