

Can the American Two-Party System Survive the 21st Century?

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Abstract

Controversy surrounding the 2008 election, the first which produced a black American president, largely ignored the importance of the role played by the nation's two major parties in determining the November outcome. American political scientists are accustomed to the lack of attention given these parties, as they realize the utter weakness of the parties. These parties exist, at the national level, in name only. Candidates hoping to win office, at the local, state and national levels, know that it is nearly impossible to do so without attaching a "D" or "R" after their names on their respective ballot-slots. But the parties do not run things; the candidates, and their organizations, do.

In most of the democratic world, political parties play a huge role in recruiting, nominating and electing party candidates to office, and in effectively overseeing the process of governing once the elections have produced winners. In the United States, the parties, at the national level, do not recruit candidates, though they help with funding. The candidates call the shots—defining their own positions on issues (with little or no regard for so-called "party positions" on those issues), choosing their own running mates, and running their campaigns as they see fit. This means, of course, that once the winners take office, they owe nothing to their nominal parties. (In Congress, the parties are strong, but only within the two chambers, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The parties do not determine who will run, or what positions the candidates should embrace.)

Whether weak, virtually non-existent national parties is good for America is an issue—a debate topic, in fact—for another article. Here I examine, within the context of America's feeble national parties,

the issue of two-partyism. America has never had a multi-party system, where more than two parties competed for the presidency and Congress, for any notable period of time. The two competitive parties have, from time to time, changed, but once in place they never have had to concern themselves with outside competition. When outsiders emerged, it invariably was due to the candidacy—the leadership—of a celebrity candidate, who managed to capture the attention of millions of people. But once the celebrity candidate left the scene, the “third party” movement always withered. With these minor intrusions noted, two dominant parties have held, throughout American history (or at least since President George Washington, a fierce opponent of political parties, left office) a monopoly on party-competitiveness.

The persistence of the two-party model in America can be explained by several factors: A basically classless society; a legislative structure which provides single-member districts and winner-take-all elections; and federalism, which works against the formation of new national parties. And today—after nearly one and one-half centuries of the same two national parties, another factor—familiarity—inhibits strong third-party challenges. That is, Americans have grown accustomed to the Democrats and Republicans, as they have grown accustomed to certain holidays, practices and ways of greeting one another.

In recent years, however, several serious challenges to the two-party dynasty have appeared, and although the challengers have not won national office, they have revealed the willingness of millions of Americans to reconsider their loyalty to the longstanding two-party monopoly. A key to the success of any third-party (or independent) movement is the ability of the movement leaders to convince voters that the challengers can actually win office. Typically, potent outsider challengers poll extremely well until election-time nears, when voters conclude that their preferred candidate, the outsider, cannot win, and instead choose to vote for the candidate of the two major parties whose views or positions most closely line up with those of their preferred outsider. But things may be changing.

In this article I examine six national elections—those of 1948, 1968, 1980, 1992, 1996 and 2000—in which third parties, or independent

challengers, did remarkably well. I argue that these elections, while producing no national winner, nevertheless revealed the willingness of Americans to consider an alternative to the two-party dynasty. Moreover, I contend that these contests point to the likelihood that, in the near future, an outsider—whether it be a party or an independent (i.e., unaligned) candidate—will capture national office.

Understanding the History of America's Two-Party System

Even though the United States government has never outlawed a political party, third parties—i.e., all parties other than the two dominant ones—have failed in virtually all important respects, throughout the history of the American republic. Indeed, it is almost standard for those teaching courses on American civics to remark matter-of-factly that the United States, unlike most world democracies, features a “two-party system.” This means, of course, a competitive two-party system, in which third parties may compete but have no realistic chance to unseat the main parties in a presidential contest or in capturing control of congress or any state legislature. ¹

This is not to suggest, however, that cracks in the two-party model have not appeared in recent years. In 1998 Minnesota elected a governor from the reform Party; two independents serve in the United States Senate; and in 1992, during the summer of an election year, an independent candidate for the presidency actually led, in a major opinion poll, when running against a sitting president and the man who would ultimately win the election. ²

Furthermore, polls show, quite consistently, that Americans are not especially fond of the two major parties. ³ But since the national parties have next to no real power—their indirect power stems from the fact that any candidate seeking national (or, except in Nebraska, where state legislators are chosen on a non-partisan basis, statewide office) needs to use one major-party label or the other in order to be seen by viewers as a legitimate contender—citizens do not hold the parties (outside of those in the legislatures, where parties do exercise real power) responsible for the failings of public policies. Instead, they attach the blame (and, occasionally, credit) to individual office-holders and the institutions in which they serve.

The two-century-old story of American political parties is, in many ways, a remarkable one, if for no reason other than its predictability. The nation's first presi-

dent, George Washington, railed against parties, even in his exit from office, when he chose not to run for a third term (which he almost certainly would have won, easily). But when he left, the factions of the day—Federalists, those who favored a strong central government and who were generally conservative by most measures; and Anti-Federalists, who distrusted big government, centralized power, and, specifically, Federalists—quickly formed the nation's first parties. The Federalists became the Federalist Party, and the anti-Federalists became the Democratic-Republican Party. 4

The first two-party system in America (lasting from roughly the 1780s until about 1801), then, featured the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (sometimes called simply the "Republicans"). The most important distinction between these parties was their respective view of the role of the national government. 5 Federalists (including John Adams, vice-president to George Washington and the nation's second president; and Alexander Hamilton, Washington's Treasury secretary and the most important architect of foreign, domestic and economic policy during Washington's two terms of office) favored a strong central government. They feared anarchy far more than tyranny, and their argument centered on the failure of America's first constitution, the Articles of Confederation. Under this document the states were free to do basically as they pleased. No taxes could be levied by the national government alone; all treaties and declarations of war required the approval of all thirteen states; and each state was free to handle matters of currency and commerce as it saw fit. 6

The Democratic Republicans (led by Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, Washington's Secretary of State, Adams' vice-president and the nation's third president) favored states' rights over those of the national government. Indeed, Jefferson, who initially opposed the new Constitution (which would replace the Articles of Confederation), agreed to support the new document only after a Bill of Rights, specifying certain individual rights, was accepted by the Federalists. And of the ten amendments added, Jefferson regarded the tenth—the one which provides states all powers not specifically granted to the national government—as the "backbone of the Constitution."

The first two parties differed on other matters as well. Federalists favored a loose interpretation of the Constitution, an aggressive federal role in commerce, and a premium on order and stability. On the other hand, Democratic-Republicans supported a strict interpretation of the Constitution (which, of course, would restrict

the power of the national government), a limited role for government in practically all spheres, and the vigilant pursuit of civil liberties. 7

The Federalist Party eventually collapsed—Adams would be its only president, as Washington never considered himself a member of any party—and eventually the Democratic-Republicans became the Democrats. The second party system (from about 1836 until about 1850) was made up of the Democrats (led by Andrew Jackson, America's seventh president), who came together in the 1820s to elect Jackson, and the Whigs, who chose their name to indicate their closeness, in many ways, to Britain and its traditions.

The Democrats favored tradition, and were—like their predecessors, the Democratic-Republicans—very fearful of big government. Democrats also distrusted big business, and opposed most government-initiated projects. Basically, the party was made up of Jeffersonian agrarians who favored growth through expansion, even when such expansion necessitated war.

The Whigs were a party of modernization, and believed in the active use of government to improve the lives of people. They especially favored a powerful central government in matters of commerce and economic reform. Unlike the Democrats, who favored the Mexican War (which sealed the border dispute, between Mexico and the United States, for all time, with the enlargement of the United States), the Whigs opposed it. They were in favor of expansion through mostly internal means.

Both of these parties were headed for disaster. The Democrats would become the party of slavery (ironic, inasmuch as America's first black president, Barack Obama, is a Democrat), and the Whigs would miss the opportunity to latch onto the slavery issue and use it to forge a broader, more idealistic party.

The third party system is what we have to this day—Democrats and Republicans. In the mid-1850s Republicans embraced a position opposed to the expansion of slavery, and later called for the abolition of the practice. Their first president and America's sixteenth, Abraham Lincoln, presided over the Civil War, which was fought over the issues of the extension of slavery and, relatedly, whether a state could secede from the union.

The first party system would lay the groundwork for the future of American parties

over the next two centuries. The parties were liberal and conservative adversaries; fairly broad-based; largely regional; and headed by famous, proven leaders. Parties would continue this way—even as particular parties would die, always from failure to address conditions or needs of the people—to this day.

The most common explanations for the endurance of America's two-party system are federalism, the existence of single-member, winner-take-all legislative districts, nationally and at the state (and, often, local) levels of government, and, unlike in Western Europe, the lack of strong ideological components within the American electorate. The last of these is especially important. America is, by worldwide democratic standards, a fairly conservative country. Perhaps this is, in part, because it is wealthy and a political, military and economic world leader, but it also has to do with the fundamental values rooted in the American people, which tend to repel extremist views. These values include a love of individual liberty, equality of opportunity, and tolerance of dissenting views. The last of these often makes it unnecessary for those with extremist views to rally together large groups, including political parties, to be heard.

Yet the history of American political parties, and the purported reasons for the endurance of the two-party system, makes it clear that massive reform is not out of the question. First, Americans have never much liked or trusted parties, which is why so few participate in party functions, such as state and local caucuses and conventions held by the parties. Instead, the vast majority of Americans simply vote (and voter turnout is not particularly impressive, either: in presidential elections turnout averages about 55% these days; and in mid-term congressional elections the figure is much lower—less than 50%).⁸

Second, the parties have not, in recent decades, initiated major policy changes. Significant policies such as the Marshall Plan (to re-build Western Europe after World War II), the Great Society of the 1960s, the minimum wage, Social Security, détente with the Soviet Union, and many others, were spearheaded by presidents and other leaders, and supported by various interest groups, and bolstered, in some instances, by broad public support. But they were not sparked or ushered in by the parties.

Third, national political figures, including Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, have shown little affection for their parties. Their campaigns for office as well as their governing practices were tailored after their own styles and prefer-

ences. And there is little reason to believe this will change in the foreseeable future. Increased reliance on political consultants, high-powered media campaigns, and national interest groups occupy the attention of America's political captains in a way that the parties simply cannot.

Fourth, in 1998 the nation—and especially the state of Minnesota—was rocked by the election of Jesse Ventura, a former professional television wrestler with virtually no political experience to his name, to the governorship of this average-sized state. Ventura did not exactly win by accident, either. While he received only 37% of the popular vote, he defeated Norm Coleman, a very popular former mayor of the state capital, St. Paul, and “Skip” Humphrey, the son of Hubert Humphrey, a former vice-president and the most revered political figure in Minnesota's history.

So how did Ventura win? Not by using well-honed political skills or charm. He was crass, often vulgar, and routinely dismissive of the positions of his opponents. And he frequently displayed amazing ignorance of the issues in the campaign. But he won by simply complaining about the status quo, by which Republican Coleman and Democrat Humphrey necessarily were defined. Ventura was a protest candidate, out of the mold of 1992 and 1996 presidential candidate Ross Perot, whose challenges to the parties we will examine shortly. He was protesting many things, including, perhaps most significantly, the monopoly held by the two major political parties, at least in name, in American elections.

Finally, over the last six decades the two-party system has been seriously threatened by third-party and independent incursions, as we will see shortly. Without the advantages of a federal structure (which makes national change slow and tedious) and the single-member, winner-take-all model used in legislative races across the country, it is likely that Americans would have, by this time in history, witnessed the collapse of the current two-party system or the establishment of a multi-party system. Practically speaking, the latter could happen only if legislatures accommodated third parties, which seems unlikely, at least in the near future. In the meantime, however, the two parties may face defeat at the hands of a strong third party or independent candidate. We now turn to the evidence supporting this proposition, which can be found in six serious challenges to the two-party status quo, beginning in 1948.

1948: The States' Rights Democratic Party and Henry A. Wallace

Commonly referred to as the “Dixiecrats,” the States' Rights Democratic Party,

which flourished only in America's south, broke away from the national Democratic Party over issues associated with a too-powerful national government which, Dixiecrats claimed, had become oppressive of the states. Critics of the Dixiecrats claim that the party simply broke away over the issue of forced racial integration, and for many individual Dixiecrats that surely was true. But many members of this rebel party were longstanding opponents of nationalism, of which race-related matters were only one part.

Dixiecrats were infuriated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's heavy-handed national economic policies and his support, at least rhetorically, for more progressive civil rights policies. His successor, Harry Truman, who became president in 1945, when Roosevelt died, was much more aggressive on economic and social policies, even though he lacked the skill and political clout to usher in the sort of changes seen under Roosevelt.

The party did not survive long, but had the 1948 presidential contest between Democrat Truman and Republican Thomas Dewey been a little closer, its presence could well have changed the outcome of the election. The Dixiecrat ticket was headed by South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond, and his vice-presidential running mate was the governor of Mississippi, Fielding L. Wright.

The Dixiecrats did not simply challenge the Democrats; they sought to replace the party of Jackson with their own.⁹ To do so they fought to have their own party placed on ballots as the official Democratic Party. And despite their disadvantages—they had little money, few big names, and were attempting to dislodge the party of Roosevelt, Jackson and Woodrow Wilson—they managed to secure the exalted position for their own party in the states of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Elsewhere, the party simply competed on a third-party basis.

Of course Dixiecrats did not win in 1948, but they did quite well on election day, winning four states and thirty-nine electoral votes, and amassing nearly 1.2 million popular votes. Also noteworthy is the fact that Henry A. Wallace, a leftist critic of Truman, carried almost exactly the same number of popular votes in the four-way race. This reflected enormous popular satisfaction, from the right and the left, with the Democratic Party.

1968: George Wallace and the American Independent Party

Twenty years after the heyday of the Dixiecrats, the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, successfully revived the older party's theme, which centered on states' rights and, generally, opposition to a powerful federal government. Insisting that there was not "a dime's worth of difference" between the two major parties, Wallace launched an all-out effort to capture the presidency, and formed the American Independent Party (AIP), which remains in existence to this day. Wallace had issues of importance to many voters, but he also was a forceful, impressive leader. 10

The AIP was established by representatives from forty states. Wallace's party positions were states'-rights oriented but also very conservative—on economic, social and foreign-policy matters. Wallace opposed forced racial integration, runaway federal spending and a growing federal government, but he was also a decided "hawk" on the Vietnam War, one who favored a massive and quick resolution of that conflict. So it was not surprising that he chose as his vice-presidential running mate Wallace retired Air Force General Curtis E. LeMay, also a hawk. Because of his national-issue orientation, Wallace attracted many voters from outside the south, even though his critics attempted to paint him as a regional candidate.

In the 1968 presidential election Wallace did extraordinarily well, and very nearly succeeded in denying either major-party candidate—Republican Richard Nixon or Democrat Hubert Humphrey—a sufficient number of electoral votes to win the election. (In the event no candidate receives a majority of electoral votes, which are awarded on a winner-take-all, state-by-state basis, the election is thrown into the United States House of Representatives, where each state is given one vote, and a majority of votes is required for victory. On two occasions, in 1800 and 1824, presidential elections were decided in the House of Representatives. The winners were Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, respectively.)

Wallace won five states and forty-six electoral votes, and received 9.9 million popular votes—13.5% of the total popular vote. 11 Wallace planned to run again in 1972, but was shot and crippled during the campaign. He remained active in politics until his death, but would no longer command the leadership position in the AIP.

What is especially significant about the Wallace campaign is the adversity he overcame en route to his impressive showing in the general election. He was cast as racist, tiny-minded and mean-spirited, by conservative and liberal elements of the media, and he was shunned by politicians of both parties. But in spite of all this,

Wallace ran a national campaign with impressive results. What resonated, with many voters, was Wallace's denunciation of the major parties; he argued effectively that, with the stranglehold enjoyed by the two parties, American voters were effectively denied a choice in national and state elections. And American voters responded to this claim.

More than four decades after Wallace challenged the major parties, his AIP remains a small party with a loyal group of members.

1980: John Anderson the Independent

The 1980 presidential election will always be remembered as the one which ushered in the era of "Reaganism"—which featured conservative national government for the first time since the 1920s. Throughout Ronald Reagan's campaign he promised a huge reduction in taxes, a conservative approach to social policy-making, a hard line on communism, and an overall reduction in the role of the federal government in Americans' lives. He was running against a president, Democrat Jimmy Carter, whose approval ratings were extremely low and who, in retrospect, is generally considered a failed leader.

Both major-party candidates were challenged by an Illinois congressman, John Anderson, who embraced a political philosophy now commonplace—one combining fiscal conservatism with social liberalism. Political commentators routinely describe this ideology as "moderate." Anderson was challenging, then, the excesses of President Carter regarding fiscal matters—overspending, high deficits and high taxes—and candidate Reagan regarding social matters—opposition to legalized abortion and the Equal Rights amendment, accommodation of religion in public life, and the vigorous pursuit of criminal elements throughout society.

Anderson's appeal was broad, attracting Democrats, independents, Republicans, and voters of all ages and socio-economic classes. In the middle of the campaign polls showed that he was the favorite candidate with 20% of voters. (Typically, an independent or third-party candidate who garners a broad or deep audience polls much better during the early stages of a campaign than in the latter stages, when many voters conclude that, since their favorite candidate, the outsider, has no realistic chance of winning, their best option is to vote for the candidate among the major-party contenders whose positions most closely resemble their own. In 1968, for instance George Wallace polled around 25% in the thick of the campaign, but

dropped to just over 13% on election day. The same thing happened, as we will see shortly, to Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996. In Minnesota in 1998, however, Jesse Ventura beat the odds, as voters believed he was, in the final days of the gubernatorial campaign, within striking distance of the major-party front-runners. His loyalists therefore stuck with him, and he pulled off a three-percentage-point victory on election day.)

Anderson's campaign became a huge issue in the campaign as Reagan and Carter dueling over the televised debates, which voters watch in huge numbers. Carter refused to engage in a debate which included Anderson, while Reagan insisted that Anderson, whose polling was credible though not nearly equal to that of Carter or Reagan (who ran neck-and-neck until the final days of the campaign, when Reagan pulled well ahead, eventually winning by ten percentage points in the popular vote, capturing 90% of the electoral vote, and losing only six of fifty states). Reagan ended up debating Anderson, with Carter on the sidelines. Finally, Reagan gave in to Carter's insistence that the two major-party candidates debate one-on-one, which infuriated Anderson, his supporters, and backers of independent and third-party candidates throughout the country.

Indeed, this is one of the institutional advantages long enjoyed by the two major parties. Not only does the mainstream media—both print and electronic—give short shrift to independent and third-party movements in its daily coverage of politics, it also prefers, in most instances, to exclude their candidates from debates. (In 1992, the national media made an exception in the case of Ross Perot, whose poll numbers were so high, and his presence in the race so attention-grabbing, that most organs of the media actually welcomed his presence in the race.)

By election day, Anderson, who was fifty-eight at that time, won only 6.6% of the popular vote, and did not come close to winning any state outright. Unlike George Wallace and Strom Thurmond, both of who enjoyed deep sectional support, Anderson's popularity was not concentrated in any region of the country, or any state. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that, in an election seen by many as critical, at the height of the Cold War and during a time of deep economic turmoil, nearly seven percent of voters still cast their votes for a candidate who had, in essence, no real chance to win the election. This surely was a reflection of the growing popular dissatisfaction with the major political parties, and it would carry over into future national elections, as we shall now see.

1992: Ross Perot the Independent

In many respects the presidential election of 1992 was the least significant national election of the century. The economy was in reasonably good shape, no social upheavals were brewing, and, just one year earlier, the Soviet Union collapsed for good—thus ending the forty-five-year-old Cold War. But this did not mean that Americans were suddenly satisfied with the major parties. Texas billionaire Ross Perot, a political novice, believed that there was underlying dissatisfaction with government in the country, and he waged a very costly (mostly self-financed) and consequential challenge, taking on President George H.W. Bush and Democratic candidate Bill Clinton.

In many ways Perot's positioning on issues mirrored that of John Anderson. He was a fiscal hawk and a social liberal—favoring, for instance, expanded abortion rights. And he chose to run as an independent, as Anderson had. But unlike Anderson, Perot had lots of money to spend and was taking on two challengers with significant problems. President Bush, who enjoyed success in the first Gulf War, forcing Iraq's Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, nevertheless was viewed by an increasing number of Americans as a leader out of touch with their interests. He also suffered a credibility problem. In 1988 he used a line from a Clint Eastwood movie to highlight his position on new taxes. "Read my lips—no new taxes" he said repeatedly. Then, in 1990, he caved in on the issue, much to the chagrin of Republicans, the delight of Democrats, and the bewilderment of most voters.

Clinton had his own set of problems. He was viewed by many as a young, flashy outsider, the governor of a small state (Arkansas) who lacked national experience. He further was plagued by charges of infidelity, drug use and draft-dodging.

Perot took advantage of both candidates' problems and created an enormous following. In the summer of 1992, before temporarily dropping out of the race (in withdrawing, he claimed that a representative of President Bush threatened to disrupt his daughter's wedding), Perot, who initially selected one top Republican and one top Democrat to run his campaign, led both Bush and Clinton in a national poll. His support was broad, like Anderson's, but also deep. If he had sustained his campaign, and avoided any major gaffes, it is conceivable, based on the depth of his support, that he could have won the presidency—a feat unmatched by any outsider in American history.

When Perot reentered the race he faced an uphill struggle. Although his campaign

was colorful and imaginative, he never matched his earlier spring or summer poll numbers. In the end he managed to capture 18.8% of the popular vote. 12 Perot did not win a plurality of popular votes in any state, which left him without any electoral votes. But he did manage something which shocked supporters of the two-party system: He came in second, in popular votes, in two states—Maine, which Clinton won, and Utah, which Bush won. Moreover, he was the most successful third-party candidate since 1912, when former a former president, Theodore Roosevelt, came in second in the popular and electoral votes to Woodrow Wilson (President William Howard Taft, a Republican, came in third that year).

1996: Ross Perot and the Reform Party

In 1996 Perot tried again, this time taking on President Clinton and Republican challenger Bob Dole. But his campaign, coordinated with the party he formed and ran under, the Reform Party, lacked the zeal of his 1992 effort.

Again, Perot failed to win any states outright. But he did manage to win 8.4 percent of the popular vote. Significantly, 1996 was a year when economic indicators in the country were very good, and popular satisfaction with the economy, and with life generally, was very high. Yet even with this general feeling of satisfaction, more than eight percent of voters rejected the two major-party candidates. Furthermore, the new Reform Party would take off in many states across the country, and would catapult Jesse Ventura into the Minnesota governor's office, only two years later.

By the end of the 1996 campaign Perot was sixty-six years old, and his large-scale political ambitions had faded. But his impact on American politics had been considerable—especially his assault on the national two-party system, which he proved, again, was vulnerable.

2000: Ralph Nader and the Green Party

The 2000 presidential election will always be remembered as the one in which more than a month passed before the winner was recognized. That year featured two challengers, Texas Governor George W. Bush, son of the former president, and Vice-President Al Gore. The election was extremely close; Gore won the popular vote by about 400,000, less than one-half percentage point, and Bush won the electoral vote—the one that decides who becomes president—by four votes, 271-267 (one elector pledged to Gore ended up voting for Joseph Lieberman, Gore's

running mate; but it is likely that this elector would have voted for Gore if doing so could have put Gore over the top).

Several third-party candidates ran against the major-party nominees in 2000, and the most potent challenger was consumer-advocate Ralph Nader, who ran as the Green Party nominee. The Green Party is supported by very liberal voters who favor strong environmental-protection laws, a more "dovish" foreign policy, liberal social policies, and liberal economic policies.

During the campaign many Democrats urged Nader to drop out of the race, fearing that his candidacy could, in a close contest between Bush and Gore, tip the race to Bush. The fear was based on the rules governing the presidential contest, in which states hold winner-take-all competitions, and a plurality—not a majority—of popular votes is required to win the electoral votes of a given state. Gore's supporters believed it was likely that Nader's natural voters would come, disproportionately, from the Gore camp, since Gore, though not as liberal as Nader, was far more liberal than Bush.

The worst fears of the Gore camp materialized as the election results poured in. In a few states Gore conceivably would have won had Nader's name not been on the ballot. Most notably, Gore almost certainly would have won the state of Florida, absent Nader. Of the six million Floridian voters, Bush defeated Gore by 537 votes. Nader picked up about 95,000 votes in Florida, and estimates, based on exit-polls of voters, show that, had Nader's name been left off the ballot, Gore would have won Florida—and therefore the presidency—by about 25,000 votes.

Nationally, Nader won no states or electoral votes, but he did win nearly three million popular votes, about 2.7% of the total. 13 Significantly, then, a substantial number of voters were willing to support an outsider in the presidential contest, even with warnings by those supportive of the second-choice candidate of most rebel-voters, that doing so could cause their least-favorite candidate to prevail.

Conclusions

The relative success of third-party and independent candidates in recent decades reflects broad dissatisfaction, among the American electorate, with the major political parties. Despite the legal and institutional advantages enjoyed by Democrats and Republicans, millions of voters have, when given the opportunity, cast their votes for outside candidates—even when those candidates stood virtually no

chance of winning office. This, along with the dismal voter-turnout levels, suggests very strongly that the right outsider could win the presidency, as Ross Perot might have succeeded in doing had he not dropped out of the race early, only to reenter a weakened candidate.

Critics of this view might argue that the opposite is true: Since the track record of the major parties is nearly perfect—they have won every presidential election, occupy nearly every seat in Congress, and boast fifty governors—is it not obvious that the parties are doing something right?

But defenders of and believers in America's major parties surely recognize the aforementioned advantages enjoyed by the major parties in elections. These advantages would seem to make it nearly impossible for any outsider to compete effectively in national or state political campaigns. In fact, however, we have seen that, even in races where the outcome is a toss-up, huge numbers of voters have refused to support the major-party candidate.

Moreover, the fact that national and state office-holders formally align themselves with the Democratic and Republican parties does not mean that they owe their respective parties anything. The candidates simply use the "R" and "D" labels because American voters are accustomed to thinking about politics in two-party terms. During their campaigns and while in office, Democrats and Republicans virtually ignore the formal leaders of their parties; instead, they make political and policy decisions based on their own considered judgments about what is best. In most European democracies such behavior would lead to discipline by the parties. (It is worth noting that America's major parties do control politics in Congress. The majority party in both houses chooses leaders, assigns committee seats, and punishes members on occasion. But this does not translate into party power outside of Congress, especially during presidential and congressional election campaigns.)

Political scientists who study American politics have lamented, for more than fifty years, the evident weakness of these parties. The American Political Science Association tried, in 1950, to address the matter with a series of reform proposals designed to strengthen the parties—but to no avail. The parties lacked the clout to carry through on any meaningful reforms. Today, the parties simply state their issue-positions and philosophies, for the nation to hear, once every four years, at the national party conventions. But these statements invariably reflect the wishes of the presidential nominees, and in any event do not bind, formally or informally, the candidates.

The most significant barriers to an independent or third-party candidate winning the presidency involve campaign funding and media exposure. However, as Ross Perot demonstrated, once these barriers are overcome (in his case, because of his celebrity status before becoming a candidate, as well as his personal fortune) a viable outsider could well emerge victorious. And if such a thing happens, it may signal the end to the current two-party system in the United States.

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