

INTRODUCTION

CHALLENGING THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

On average, 60 percent of Americans tell pollsters that they are in favor of third party alternatives.¹ Whereas early polls showed high support for the two-party system, in the last 30 years Americans have developed more negative opinions.² The Republicans and the Democrats, however, have been able to maintain their dominance. No third party has representation in the U.S. Congress or is in contention for control of any state legislature. As Joan Bryce put it in her dissertation on third party constraints, "The extent and scope of two-party dominance within the United States is unique."³ John Bibby and Sandy Maisel explained that the two-party system has come as a surprise to observers of American society:

That the United States should have the oldest and strongest two-party system on the globe is for many, particularly for foreign observers, a bewildering phenomenon. America appears to have all the ingredients for a vibrant and enduring multiparty system--an increasingly multiracial and multiethnic population, substantial regional variation, diverse and conflicting economic and social interests, a history of sectional conflicts, and substantial disparities in the distribution of wealth.⁴

¹ John F. Bibby and L. Sandy Maisel, *Two Parties--or More? The American Party System, Dilemmas in American Politics*, ed. L. Sandy Maisel (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 76.

² Christian Collet, "The Polls--Trends: Third Parties and the Two-party System," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60 (1996): 433.

³ Joan Bryce, "The Preservation of a Two-Party System in the United States" (M.A. diss., University of Western Ontario, 1996), 26.

⁴ Bibby and Maisel, 53.

To explain the paradox, this study investigates the institutional and social factors that influence the organization of American democracy. Political parties help form the structure of American politics, whether they are thought of as principled unions of like-minded people or attempts to gather power by organized groups. Minor parties play a role in American democracy, but are not a viable part of the struggle for power in the current American party system.

Giovanni Sartori's classification of the world's party systems counted the number of parties in a system by determining how many had coalition potential, the ability to help form a government, and blackmail potential, the ability to influence policy through defection. With little third party representation in American legislative or executive offices, only the Democrats and Republicans meet this criterion. According to Alan Ware, party systems typically differ from one another based on the penetration of the parties into society, the parties' ideological differences, the parties' stances on the regime itself, and the number of parties.⁵ The American party system is characterized by small ideological distance between parties and low levels of party fragmentation; both parties are liberal, pro-regime organizations that aim to satisfy the median voter.⁶ In any formulation, therefore, America maintains a two-party system.

Most democratic electorates have split into at least three parts, even in countries with homogenous populations.⁷ In the U.S., there is a great diversity of interests and opinions but the two-party system serves to mask those differences. The U.S. sustains a

⁵ Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 149.

⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁷ A. James Reichley, *The Life of the Parties: A History of American Political Parties* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 13.

two-party system even though many groups have attempted to challenge its hegemony. Advocates of multiparty democracy are quite disturbed by the dominance: "[The two-party system] would be indicted under anti-trust laws if it was a market," says Ralph Nader. "[It is] a deliberate, open conspiracy against democracy that leads to a poverty of public dialogue."⁸ Joseph Hazlett also found the limited political debate disturbing: "The monopolization of the American political process has stifled the free-market exchange of ideas and prevented their expression."⁹

This common critique leaves the two-party system unstable. Despite its longevity, the two-party system may not survive the social and political changes of our era. After Theodore Lowi's 1992 prediction that the two-party system was coming to an end, John Anderson confidently predicted a similar fate: "In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we will see the makings of a multiparty system."¹⁰ According to Alvin Toffler, the technological changes of our era require a reformulation of the political system: "The time has come for us to imagine completely novel alternatives, to discuss, dissent, debate, and design from the ground up the democratic architecture of tomorrow."¹¹

Most discussions of the American party system have failed to answer Toffler's call. News coverage and public debate about third parties is characterized by a

⁸ Ralph Nader, "Keynote." Speech at a conference entitled "Independent Politics in a Global World." Hunter College Auditorium, New York, 7 October 2000.

⁹ Joseph M. Hazlett, *The Libertarian Party and Other Minor Political Parties in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFaland & Company, 1992), 113.

¹⁰ John Anderson quoted in Lisa Zagoroli and Michael Steel, "Two-party System May Die in 21st Century," *Detroit News*, 4 January 2000, sec. A p. 3.

¹¹ Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler, *Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995), 90.

remarkable continuity that focuses on the political novelty or the spoiler role. Instead of following that example, this study will discuss the potential for parties other than the Democrats and Republicans to play larger roles in American politics by gaining representation in state legislatures and Congress and by being competitive in many state and national elections. It will show that a transformation to a multiparty system is possible through an electoral reform movement of varied targets and methods.

Building a multiparty democracy is certainly not a goal that all would agree to pursue. This study does not assume that a belief that more parties are better is an undeniable truth. It acknowledges that some will disagree with its ends entirely. The study is also conscious, however, of the millions of Americans who vote for third party alternatives, the thousands who spend their lives building minor parties, and the larger group of Americans that, despite enfranchisement, feels left out of the decision-making process of American government. For them, this project is proof that change is possible and it is also a guidebook for achieving radical transformation.

This study, therefore, admittedly has a purpose; it is designed to further a particular agenda. It does not claim to be a disinterested study of party systems to answer the normative question of what structure is best for American government. It does not engage in a comparison of policy outcomes or government stability as products of different party systems. Instead, it assumes that a multiparty system is desirable and moves forward in assessing its probability and finding the best means of achieving the objective.

It is only disinterested, then, in the same way as Machiavelli's *The Prince* is a consideration of the best royal strategies. This study has no interest in a particular

method of achieving change; it can proceed without allegiance to any currently proposed strategy because its only interest is in achieving the end of multiparty democracy. In the same way that *The Prince* can be appreciated by those uninterested in the maintenance of monarchy, this study can be educational even for those who disagree with its objective. The study hopes to provide insight into the American electorate, the social changes of our era, the institutional constraints to third parties, and the means of achieving political change in the United States that should be useful for any reader.

The study examines the conditions under which multiparty democracy would come to fruition but it is not an exercise in institutional design from the ground up. It does not merely conclude that every legislature should be elected proportionally and leave it to others to figure out how to implement the proposed change. Instead, it attempts to work within the context of American political development, including the social and institutional constraints to change. It does accept the need for reform of American political institutions, often using the Progressive movement as a model, but it does not ignore the founding heritage. The two-party system is not, after all, enshrined in the Constitution.

Though the American founders did not envision any kind of party system, it is fair to say they expected many small political coalitions. As James Madison and Alexander Hamilton wrote in *Federalist 51*, "In the extended Republic of the United States, and among the great variety of interests, parties and sects which it embraces, a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles other than those of justice and general good."¹² The Founders certainly did not anticipate two

¹² James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist 51," *The Federalist Papers*, 8 February 1788. Available: <<http://www.mcs.net/~knautzr/fed/fed51.htm>>. Accessed 17 April 2001.

permanent major parties. They set up an Electoral College, for example, in order narrow down the choices for the Presidency before the top three candidates were sent to Congress for a final selection.¹³

After the founding, however, the two-party system developed quickly. Scholars generally agree that the U.S. party system has undergone major realignments at particular strategic points but none has produced a multiparty system. The first party system began shortly after the founding in the 1780s. It featured the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans and lasted until the rise of Andrew Jackson in the 1820s. The Democrats and the Whigs made up the second party system, which lasted until the pre-Civil War elections that saw the Republican Party rise to prominence. The third party system was characterized by reconstruction and lasted until the election of 1896. Though competition in the fourth party system was between the same major parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, it featured different constituency bases for each party. The fifth party system was created by the same kind of realignment in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Some scholars believe the U.S. is currently in the midst of its sixth party system, one that is less fixed and more volatile.¹⁴

Each party system was dominated by two major parties but other parties have been a constant presence in American history. Third parties have often helped cause party realignments. The Anti-Masonic party influenced the rise of the Whigs, the Liberty and Free Soil parties set the stage for the Republicans, and the Populist uprising was

¹³ Hendrik Hertzberg, "Are There Viable Alternatives to the Status Quo?" Panel Discussion at *The Two-Party System and Its Discontents* Conference, American University, Washington, DC, 13 May 1999.

¹⁴ Bryce, 10-20.

responsible for the 1896 transition.¹⁵ Even within party systems, third parties have had an impact. When Theodore Roosevelt ran for President in 1912, the Democrats nominated their most progressive candidate, Woodrow Wilson. Socialist parties of all kinds, including those that joined in the Robert LaFollette Progressive campaign of 1924, advocated many of the programs later enacted as the New Deal.¹⁶

Early third parties also had some independent success. The Anti-Masonic Party, America's first third party, served as New York's second-largest party by 1828; they were also a major party with control of the governor's office in Pennsylvania and Vermont.¹⁷ The American "Know Nothing" Party, which was based on nativist anti-immigration feeling, won many local elections and claimed up to 50 U.S. House seats. The 1860 Presidential election in the southern United States was primarily a competition between two third parties, the Constitutional Union party and the Southern Democratic Party. The Southern Democrats defended slavery while the Constitutional Union Party attempted to maintain peace. The Liberal Republicans, who broke away from the Republican Party after the Civil War on issues such as tariffs, reconstruction, and civil service reform, led successful fusion campaigns in Missouri, Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana. The Greenback Party, which tried to organize laborers and farmers to campaign for unlimited money circulation, won fusion gubernatorial elections in Michigan, Maine, and

¹⁵ Bibby and Maisel, 49.

¹⁶ Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 91.

¹⁷ J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 49.

Massachusetts.¹⁸ The Populists were more successful; they held up to 18 seats in the House and three seats in the Senate along with numerous state-level offices.¹⁹

Whereas third parties of the nineteenth century were formal political organizations that resembled the major parties, twentieth century third parties have been short-lived campaigns based around one major figure.²⁰ The Bull Moose Party was built by Theodore Roosevelt's run for the presidency; it was able, however, to re-elect Hiram Johnson governor of California. Campaigns by Progressive LaFollette, Socialist Norman Thomas, Progressive Henry Wallace, and State's Rights Party candidate Strom Thurmond were even less successful in building third parties. The George Wallace American Independent Party campaign, a response to the counterculture and mass social movements of the 1960s, was unable to sustain itself as a permanent competitive party. Eugene McCarthy ran as an independent in 1976 but received only 1 percent of the vote.²¹ John Anderson received over five and a half million votes in 1980 but did not create a sustainable party. Ross Perot's 1992 campaign was the most successful recent independent campaign but the subsequent history of the Reform Party is hardly promising for building multiparty democracy. Ralph Nader's Green Party campaign will likely turn out to be another example of short-term third party prominence based on a well-known candidate.

¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹ Gene Clanton, *Congressional Populism and the Crisis of the 1890s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 181.

²⁰ Rosenstone et al., 11.

²¹ Gillespie, 106.

Building on this history, this paper assesses the strengths and weaknesses of past independent and third party efforts in order to determine what would be necessary to build a permanent multiparty system. It borrows liberally from the literature on current third parties but does not confine itself to providing advice for established third parties. A multiparty system, after all, would most likely draw at least as much from divisions within the current parties as from the rise of current minor parties. This study is not a prescription for a particular third party that could realign the party system.

Instead, it takes a broad approach to challenging all of the barriers to a multiparty system through a multi-faceted electoral reform movement. Since the topic of party systems and political change is connected to virtually every major issue, this study is an open-ended work that hopes to expand the discussion rather than furnish all the answers. It does not provide a step-by-step instruction manual for multiparty system advocates. Instead, it explores the social basis for multiparty democracy, the constraints for third parties identified by scholars, and all of the proposed methods for achieving change.

It moves forward in five sections, presenting most of the current literature on party systems and American electoral reform. Chapter Two analyzes social and ideological groups in the American electorate, showing that crosscutting cleavages of opinion and interest could form the basis of multiparty democracy. It reviews voting behavior studies based on demographics and political beliefs and considers the social basis of parties in other multiparty systems. Chapter Three attempts to show that major reform in the direction of multiplicity is possible. It explores the social changes of the modern era primarily using literature on globalization, the information age, and

postmodernity; it finds historical parallels with the era that gave rise to the Progressive movement.

After showing the sociological basis for both multiparty democracy and the reform movement needed to implement it, the study next explores the barriers to a multiparty system. Chapter Four reviews institutional constraints for minor parties, including the legislative and presidential electoral system, ballot access laws, anti-fusion laws, media coverage, and financial constraints. It also assesses the internal failures of third parties and major party responses. Chapter Five investigates the potential methods for challenging those constraints, including legislative action, legal strategies, initiative campaigns, academic work, and interest group activity. Chapter Six examines the potential of independent candidates, current third parties, and coalitions to challenge the two-party system and explains how to build an electoral reform movement. The study concludes with specific recommendations to multiparty system advocates and an Epilogue that explores the broader implications of the study even for those unconcerned with creating a multiparty system.