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Editorial & Production
Offices:

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Third Parties: Always on the Horizon

Brian Doherty | November 5, 2009

The Hill gathers an august panel of politics watchers to muse on whether election 2009 shows there's gas in the ol' rusty Third Party tank. Some observations, from the realistic to the conspiratorial to a practical suggestion for change:

David Boaz: "...the two parties have pretty well locked up the political system. The noted political scientist Theodore Lowi wrote back in 1992, "One of the best-kept secrets in American politics is that the two-party system has long been brain dead -- kept alive by support systems such as state electoral laws that protect the established parties from rivals and by federal subsidies and so-called campaign reform. The two-party system would collapse in an instant if the tubes were pulled and the IVs were cut." But those tubes are firmly locked in place. Ballot access rules, campaign finance regulations, the ban on party cross-endorsements, direct government subsidies to the major parties, and other election rules make it very difficult to launch an independent candidacy or a third party."

John F. McManus, president of the [The John Birch Society](#): "In 1966, Georgetown University Professor Carroll Quigley....wrote: "Instead, the two parties should be almost identical, so that the American people can 'throw the rascals out' at any election without leading to any profound or extensive shifts in policy." This is surely what has occurred at the top of the two major political parties. It would be helpful to America if voters would seek alternatives to the Dems and Reps at all levels. But public awareness of political realities, while steadily increasing, is still far from where it ought to be to effect a needed return to the principles that made our nation great."

Rob Richie, executive director of [FairVote](#): "It's time for policymakers to acknowledge Americans' growing restlessness with the major parties. That's why in the long-term, elections in Minnesota's twin cities may have more influence on our politics than this week's higher-profile races. In Minneapolis, instant runoff voting (IRV) [earned high praise](#) in its first use for elections for mayor and city council, while neighboring St. Paul became the latest city [to adopt IRV](#), joining Memphis, Oakland and San Francisco..."

We should expect rising totals for third parties and independents -- and without IRV, more frustrated voters and distorted outcomes. In New Jersey, support for independent Chris Daggett plunged primarily because of voter fears that a vote for him would be "wasted" and "spoil" the election, as indeed Jon Corzine's campaign [apparently was counting on](#). In such multi-candidate races, IRV upholds majority rule by allowing voters to rank candidates in order of choice and using those rankings to simulate a traditional two-round runoff if no candidate wins a majority."

Past *Reason* magazine pieces by me on third parties as [consumption expenditure](#) and on the promise of [ballot fusion](#).

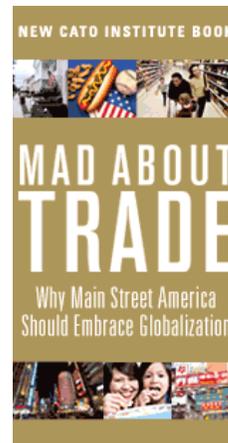
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J sub D | 11.5.09 @ 8:00PM | #

The more I consider it, the more I like IRV.

[reply to this](#)

24AheadDotCom | 11.5.09 @ 11:43PM | #

You mean Irv Perot I take it.

Meanwhile, what could take off would be a MOR party that concentrated as much on integrity as ideology. Here's what I wrote back in April 2006:

If there were a moderate third party that was slightly libertarian on social issues and very strongly opposed to illegal immigration and attempts to weaken U.S. sovereignty, they might win an election here and there and they would certainly scare the daylights out of the two horrific parties we're currently encumbered with.

The current system is extremely dangerous and any attempts to create a mainstream third (or fourth) party should be strongly encouraged.

And, here's what I wrote last month:

A true "third-party wave" would be much more moderate on financial matters, would be somewhat libertarian on social issues, would strike against the Dems where they're incredibly weak (their support for Balkanization for instance), and would strike against the corrupt Dem/GOP/Beltway establishment and their support for [illegal immigration](#). There would be a tremendous problem with getting funding from the usual sources and the establishment would go all out to prevent such a movement. However - as long as it wasn't itself corrupted - that movement could be incredibly popular.

[reply to this](#)

ColoneI_Angus | 11.6.09 @ 1:40PM | #

J sub D's first post: 8:00 AM.

Lonedickface replies to first post to be on top: 11:43PM.

Eat a fat choad.

[reply to this](#)

D.R.M. | 11.5.09 @ 8:05PM | #

IRV? Where ranking a candidate higher can reduce his chances of winning?

When you have a triangular wheel, sure, it's progress to trade it for a square one . . . but why would you do so when you can instead get a circular one?

The [Schulze method](#) kicks IRV's ass.

[reply to this](#)

J sub D | 11.5.09 @ 8:14PM | #

Get real. American voters get confused by punch card ballots.

[reply to this](#)

robC | 11.5.09 @ 9:18PM | #

Arrow's Theorem.

So shut up about your "better" method.

[reply to this](#)

John Thacker | 11.5.09 @ 10:36PM | #





Arrow's Theorem certainly shows that no method can satisfy all the obvious constraints one would want, so there is no perfect method.

OTOH, some methods certainly are better than others.

[reply to this](#)

robcc | 11.6.09 @ 12:58AM | #

True, and "easy to explain" wins out in most cases. Runoff are already understood (at least in those places that have them), so instant runoffs is an easy concept.

[reply to this](#)

James Anderson Merritt | 11.6.09 @ 12:36AM | #

I agree. Condorcet methods, such as Schulze's, do indeed seem superior. But I don't get all worked up about IRV vs. Condorcet at the outset, because the most important thing is to get ranked-choice ballots first. How they are counted can be determined (and changed) later.

[reply to this](#)

The Libertarian Guy | 11.5.09 @ 8:24PM | #

It doesn't help that Hannity, Limbaugh, Medved, and other right-wing schmucks bang the anti-third party drum on a regular basis... then again, Dems toyed with the idea of preventing Nader from getting on some state ballots, so the left has its anti-choicers as well.

[reply to this](#)

Suki | 11.5.09 @ 8:57PM | #

This is true. Limbaugh gives great grief to any caller saying they are independent or moderate.

[reply to this](#)

The Libertarian Guy | 11.6.09 @ 10:43AM | #

It's deeper than that... Limbaugh and the other anti-third party types believe votes belong to the GOP - but are more than happy to see Nader or the Green Party "steal" votes from Dems, who ALSO believe votes belong to THEM.

[reply to this](#)

Some dude | 11.5.09 @ 8:32PM | #

Which one was the conspiratorial one?

[reply to this](#)

Jonny Scrum-half | 11.5.09 @ 8:35PM | #

Daggett likely was hurt by having his name buried on the ballots. I voted for him, but it wasn't easy to find his name.

[reply to this](#)

robcc | 11.5.09 @ 9:16PM | #

Not really 3rd party, but Rand Paul is leading 35-32 in KY GOP Senate primary poll.

[reply to this](#)

Craig | 11.6.09 @ 1:41AM | #

It should be a lot easier to win a major party primary as a fringe candidate than a general election as a third party type. If you have 5% solid backing, and can get them all to vote, turnout is low enough in the primaries to have a chance.

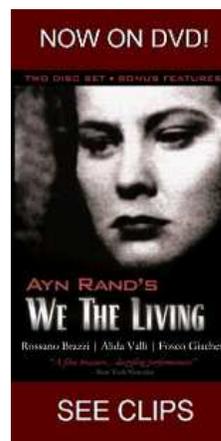
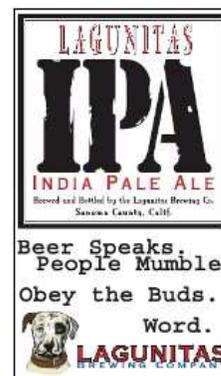
Ron Paul would have needed only 8 million votes to beat McCain -- about 4% of the adult population -- if he could have turned them out in the primaries. Lots of people thought it was hopeless though, and didn't bother.

[reply to this](#)

Fist of Etiquette | 11.5.09 @ 9:24PM | #

Runoff voting? What, you think county election bureaus are made of money?

[reply to this](#)



robc | 11.5.09 @ 9:25PM | #

Fist,

Hence IRV, can be done in one ballot.

[reply to this](#)

Fist of Etiquette | 11.5.09 @ 10:18PM | #

Instant runoff voting? What, you think I'm going to read the details of every proposal before commenting?

[reply to this](#)

Silentz | 11.6.09 @ 10:31AM | #

Psh...yeah no kidding...that'd be like asking Reason to put in a preview function. It just ain't gonna happen.

[reply to this](#)

Bob #2 | 11.5.09 @ 9:51PM | #

If America really got its way and elected the leaders it wanted, I'm not sure that would necessarily end up any better for the rest of us. At least with the Dems/Reps you know the kind of consistent awfulness you're going to be getting.

[reply to this](#)

Craig | 11.6.09 @ 1:42AM | #

America does elect the leaders it wants. Unfortunately.

[reply to this](#)

Rich | 11.5.09 @ 9:59PM | #

At least with the Dems/Reps you know the kind of consistent awfulness you're going to be getting.

Perhaps the "kind" -- the *magnitude* of the awfulness appears to be increasing.

[reply to this](#)

Shannon Love | 11.5.09 @ 10:42PM | #

3rd parties are always on the horizon because that is built into any system that doesn't use a party based proportional representative system. There's been a lot of game theory work on the subject. It has nothing to do with major parties locking out 3rd parties. As long as individuals hold office in their own right, any elective system will converge on a two party system.

And that's not necessarily bad. A diverse society like America cannot survive with a multitude of small parties. Historically such parties would have been based on religion, European ethnicity and local region. It is doubtful the nation would have survived such balkanization for very long.

Forcing people to compromise and forge broad alliances before the actual election causes people to abandon attachments to smaller groups like religion and race and instead forge broad coalition on abstractions like class or economics.

[reply to this](#)

Groovus Maximus | 11.6.09 @ 3:54AM | #

Parties are made up of individuals and they are directly accountable to us, agreed. As is the rest of government, yet the bureaucracy and sheer size of government gives the congress vermin plenty of cover and a sense of omnipotence behind which to operate.

Add an all too willing lapdog press to be complicit in furthering the agenda of a bloated, faceless government and yeah, I tend to like partisanship.

I prefer the gridlock of the two-party system, particularly when the executive in one branch, and the legislative the other. Tends to slow down hasty, ill-conceived legislation and other mischief that government cretins are prone to enact. Re: Clinton's second term.

Compromise is merely a waste product of this system and coincidental when wise legislation is passed.

[reply to this](#)**adam** | 11.6.09 @ 8:15AM | #

How do these people explain Britain, which has a winner take all system, yet has three parties that consistently get seats in parliament. One (liberal democrats) have consistently smaller numbers than the conservatives and labour, but they still get about 20% of the seats in any given election.

[reply to this](#)**Gabe** | 11.6.09 @ 9:38AM | #

so the government giving hundreds of millions of dollars to the two corrupt parties and setting up huge barriers to entry for 3rd parties(signature requirements etc) makes no difference on elections?

so the two corrupt parties really have no problem with ending the policies of party protectionism? facts seem to differ with your fantasies.

[reply to this](#)**Leah** | 11.5.09 @ 11:40PM | #

What do you think of GOOOH? (www.goooh.com) While the concept isn't exactly a traditional third party, it certainly offers something different than what we're used to. Read the FAQs on their page if you aren't already familiar. It's been interesting to see how they seem to be picking up steam here lately in the current political climate.

[reply to this](#)**twv** | 11.6.09 @ 12:29AM | #

The Schultze method is a Condorcet method of voting. Surely, that's been known to be the best method of voting for "representatives" for the last 200 years or more. Maybe after a number of jurisdictions get used to IRV, we can bring up Condorcet's mathematics and advance the better system. Right now, getting Americans to think beyond $2+2=4$ is a bit of a stretch.

Yes, our public schools have done a fine job.

Now, regarding the Arrow Theorem -- that was about consistent policy. These voting methods do not address the question of consistency. They address preference falsification and skewed results leading to long-term incumbencies. Condorcet voting plus term limits might help alleviate those problems.

The re-establishment of constitutional limitations on federal power might help solve consistency problems.

[reply to this](#)**Craig** | 11.6.09 @ 1:26AM | #

If a clean cut billionaire hero businessman with Larry King and CBS helping him out couldn't crack 20%, what chance does any third party candidate have?

[reply to this](#)**Groovus Maximus** | 11.6.09 @ 3:40AM | #

First, Perot was a trailblazer but he didn't expect to win. He may have been a billionaire, but after the oil, he made the majority of his fortune processing medicare claims ala his computer and tech companies.

Government corporatist rent-seeker.

Second, it could be argued that he ran because he didn't like Bush41 and knew he would siphon votes so Clinton could win. At various times in the campaign he showed himself to be ill-tempered and vindictive.

Third, he spoke in "glittering generalities" and other feel-good platitudes that were folksy and effective at first, but when cornered on issues, he looked visibly uncomfortable and irritated. (Sound familiar? But Perot was a rich, old southern white guy.)

Forth, Admiral Stockdale, G-d love him.

At that time the climate wasn't ripe for a TPC.

I would argue that now is a much more fertile climate for viable TPC's.

[reply to this](#)

Br'er Rabbit | 11.6.09 @ 6:14AM | #

If "they" hadn't gone after "his daughter's wedding" Perot might have pulled it off ;-)

[reply to this](#)

dead_elvis | 11.6.09 @ 1:43AM | #

"Forcing people to compromise and forge broad alliances before the actual election causes people to abandon attachments to smaller groups like religion and race and instead forge broad coalition on abstractions like class or economics."

So race bating and cries of "burn the heathens!" is preferable to cries of "soak the rich!" and "the poor are dirty ne'er do wells that corrupt society"?

The process of demonizing the other isn't made any more palatable by broadening the groups.

[reply to this](#)

Nash | 11.6.09 @ 2:01AM | #

Third parties really only better identify politician ideologies to voters who may or may not need it. In Europe they end up just joining coalitions anyway much like they do over here. Please see Blue Dog democrats aligning with the GOP on Health-care and Ron Paul going Progressive Democrat on Iraq and Conservative GOP on Taxes.

They aren't really necessary.

[reply to this](#)

Ebenezer Scrooge | 11.6.09 @ 3:06AM | #

Make all parties irrelevant by assigning legislature duties, in a process similar to jury duty.

Appointing congress by the luck of draw can't be any worse than what we have now. And it just might be better.

[reply to this](#)

MIZUNA | 11.6.09 @ 7:17AM | #

Used to argue for 3rd, 4th and 5th parties, but friends remind me of what a mess "Coalition governments" are in other countries.

Just want a laissez-faire party vs. a tax (or borrow) and spend party. Easy choice for all of us.

[reply to this](#)

robcc | 11.6.09 @ 9:40AM | #

Sounds like a feature, not a bug.

[reply to this](#)

Naga Sadow | 11.6.09 @ 7:20AM | #

As I understand it, just about every platform offered by a third party is stolen by the other two parties at some point for the last hundred years.

[reply to this](#)

Enjoy Every Sandwich | 11.6.09 @ 8:12AM | #

Huh, calling them "third" parties is a mistake. There's only one party now.

[reply to this](#)

Pro Libertate | 11.6.09 @ 9:33AM | #

The Nazis were a third party.

[reply to this](#)

J Goebbels | 11.6.09 @ 10:53AM | #

We prefer the term 'National Socialist'

[reply to this](#)

Pro Libertate | 11.6.09 @ 9:33AM | #

Just kidding!

[reply to this](#)

creech | 11.6.09 @ 9:46AM | #

I think Naga Sadow hits the nail on the head. Therefore, it would appear now is the golden opportunity for the Libertarian Party to use politics to insert more of its platform into the Republican Party. How? By approaching the Democrats and asking their help in securing as many third party races against GOP congressional and senate candidates as possible.

Practically, this means Democrat candidates would treat LP candidates as equals in demanding their inclusion in debates, in mentioning them and their ideas in every interview, in urging freedom-loving Republicans to vote LP if they can't stomach their candidate, in using legislative power to ease the ballot access laws. Given enough "balance of power" victories for the LP that cause the defeat of Republicans, the Republicans will be forced to incorporate libertarian ideas into future campaigns and platforms. The LP can demand concessions under the threat of continuing to see that the GOP remains a minority party for a long time.

Former GOP congressman Bob Dornan saw this threat a number of years ago. The LP has failed to use this tool.

What matters is that libertarian ideas get adopted in our lifetime, not that particular LP candidates win office.

[reply to this](#)

robc | 11.6.09 @ 9:52AM | #

Interesting concept just popped into my head and I would like to see the pro-condorcet people work this one out:

Im about to vote, 3 candidates - A B and C.

I prefer candidate A to candidate B.

I prefer candidate B to candidate C.

I prefer Candidate C to candidate A.

Now how should I mark my ballot condorcet bitches?

Then again, I would like to see Mises handle that one (its neither ordinal nor cardinal). :)

[reply to this](#)

tarran | 11.6.09 @ 11:39AM | #

Robc, that's impossible.

Imagine you are in a room with three pretty girls.

Are you really going to start talking to A and then dump her to talk to the more attractive C and then drop her because hey there's the really cute B, oh wait, there's A again?

At some point you are going to stop going around the circle...

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