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The Big Question: Will we see the rise of a viable third party?

By Mary Ann Dreas, Sydelle Moore and Tony Romm - 11/05/09 09:30 AM ET

Some of the nation's top political commentators, legislators and intellectuals offer some insight into the biggest question burning up the blogosphere today.

Today's question:

Independents and third parties [have been playing a bigger role](#) in recent elections. With poll numbers for both parties on the decline, is there a real opening for independent/third party candidates?

Rep. Charles Gonzalez (D-Tx.) said:

Structurally, much of the appeal of the independent and third parties is that they don't have the kind of structure that the Democratic and Republican ones do. If they become like the traditional parties, they will lose their allure.

Sooner or later, they've got to decide who they are. Motivation from frustration or anger only lasts so long. You have to recognize what the people are telling the established parties. Parties need to ask 'Why are we so unattractive?' 'What can we do within our own party structure?' 'Who is vulnerable?' 'Who can we accommodate views may not be in the majority of either party?' Democrats are guilty to a certain degree, and Republicans are horribly guilty; they don't have the variation. But Democrats have progressives, blue dogs, moderates, and huge, different areas of the country represented. I think we are more accommodating, but we're also guilty sometimes of not being as tolerant as we should be of the views held by some individuals and groups. This is a greater problem for Republicans, but it's a concern that should be shared by both parties.

David Boaz, executive vice president of [The Cato Institute](#), said:

There's a lot of dissatisfaction out there. David Broder quotes a Peter Hart memo to Democrats about "the disappointment and disgust the American public feels toward Washington. It is as strongly negative as the period of 1979-80 and 1973-74." So it seems like the time might be right for outsider candidates or even parties.

Sadly, however, 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. It's no accident that the only really successful independent presidential candidate in memory, Ross Perot, was both a celebrity and a billionaire. That's what it takes to get on the ballot and get a hearing.

Hope springs eternal, and I'd certainly like to see some outsider energy in politics. There are at least two groups with reason to be looking for options right now -- conservatives who are outraged at Obama's big-government plans and pretty ticked off at George W. Bush and the Republican establishment, too; and the large group of Americans who are fiscally conservative and socially liberal. And of course there's some overlap there.

The conservatives are likely to keep their revolt within the GOP. But what about the fiscally conservative/socially tolerant voters? Where do they go? Sometimes they swing between parties, as David Kirby and I wrote in "[The Libertarian Vote.](#)" They might be happier with a party of their own. But the obstacles to creating a viable alternative party are great. Perhaps even greater than the obstacles that would face a fiscally conservative, socially liberal candidate in either major party.

Herb London, president of the [Hudson Institute](#), said:

As someone who ran as a third party candidate and was among the most successful in American history (22 percent of the vote in a NY State gubernatorial race), I have had the experience to address your question.

It is alluring to assume a third party (or parties) has an opening in national politics. However, third parties may influence the major parties, but it would be far more desirable to incorporate the spirit and independence of third parties into the major parties.

The fear I have is that the proliferation of parties would lead to a political model on the order of Latin American elections in which coalitions are necessary to create a government. As I see it, the major parties need invigoration, a condition that might be achieved by "invitation" and encouragement to independents rather than the creation of new parties.

Rep. Steve Lynch (D-Mass.) said:

I think of independent and third parties as different animals. Most of our third parties are more single-issue dominated, like the Green Party for example. They haven't captured enough of the critical mass they need at this point to make a serious impact on the other two parties, except in very close elections.

On the other hand, the independent vote is a rejection of the Democrats and the Republicans. It's a default party of people disgusted with both parties, so they go independent. That greatly influences the dynamics of party politics in the United States today. I think it's a growing trend, and I think each party has to be aware of that.

If you just look at the recent elections, you see that wherever the independent vote shifts, the balance of victory shifts--that's the critical difference. I think it will be a challenge for Democrats to be in a leadership position yet retain support of independent voters that really gave us the huge majority in the Presidential election of 2008.

Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tx.) said:

Yes, but they have tremendous obstacles to overcome because the laws are biased against alternative

parties, and the media are very biased against alternative choices. We send out troops overseas and they die to spread democracy, and yet we have a lot of shortcomings in our democratic process here. We don't get a fair shake outside the mainstream media and the mainstream parties.

John Zogby, founder, president and CEO of [Zogby International](#) said:

We will continue to have two parties but I am not sure which of the two present ones will continue with a new centrist party.

Chew on that one.

John M. Snyder, public affairs director for the [Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms](#), said:

There probably is in areas or situations where major party nominees do not reflect the concerns of large numbers of voters. In general, though, it most likely behooves the major parties to include within their outreach a commitment to the real objectives of their traditional constituencies. It also appears reasonable for leaders of traditional constituencies to exert determinative influence on specific issues within the respective major parties. At the present time, it seems unlikely that the various specific constituencies are able to develop sufficient political strength to bring them electoral strength. This week's special congressional election in New York State demonstrates that, while Republicans better listen to and adhere to the demands of a strong traditional constituency, the strong traditional constituency better make sure it determines its interests are protected in the major party's policies and selection of general election candidates.

Rob Richie, executive director of [FairVote](#), said:

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. Minnesota state Sen. Mee Moua commented that "The effects of IRV are huge, and I believe it is one of the best changes in our voting system since the Voting Rights Act of 1964."

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. Backed [in recent years](#) by the likes of Barack Obama, John McCain and Howard Dean, IRV would increase major parties' accountability to the majority and allow voters to vote their heart -- and their head.

Larry J. Sabato, Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia said:

I've been asked this question frequently—for about forty years. Third party and independent candidates play hugely valuable roles from time to time, both nationally and locally. They can be cattle prods for the balky, inertial major parties. But 99% of major offices are held by Democrats and Republicans. The election laws, written by Ds & Rs, are designed to make sure the political pie is divided into two, not three or four, pieces. This will change on the twelfth of never. Also, the phoniest game going in polling is the definition of "independents". Calling oneself an independent is fashionable. But when you scratch

just below the surface, you find that a large majority of self-described independents actually are either Democrats or Republicans—and they vote that way about as often as people who actually adopt the D or R label.

Glenn Reynolds of [Instapundit](#) said:

The Daggett and Hoffman experiences may dampen enthusiasm for third parties, but on the other hand, enthusiasm for the two parties we've got is nothing to write home about either. Voters increasingly feel that both parties are more-or-less equally corrupt, and the Tea Party movement -- which, contrary to White House spin, isn't especially Republican-friendly -- demonstrates that dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, Ralph Nader helped cost the Democrats the 2000 elections, and most Nader voters regretted that. Ross Perot helped put Bill Clinton in, and most Perot voters regretted that. Ultimately, it's a bootstrapping problem: To succeed, a third party must look like it can win, not just spoil. Or -- as was the case with NY-23 -- the offering from an existing party must look disappointing enough that people don't care.

John F. McManus, president of the [The John Birch Society](#), said:

In 1966, Georgetown University Professor Carroll Quigley (Bill Clinton named him as his mentor) assessed and approved of the political reality the question poses in his monster book *Tragedy and Hope*. In addition to providing details about the "secret society" formed to create world rule, 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. Traditional-minded candidates can still be elected as Dems or Reps at the local level. And yes, there is an opening for third/independent party efforts - mostly at the congressional level. But in order to succeed, it has to be able to overcome the mass media characterization of anything but the Dem/Rep stranglehold as "extreme," even while most media heavies continue to give a pass to far-out leftists in either party whom they label "moderates." Grrrrr!

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