

US Elections: A New Political Party Is Needed

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Set aside any Obama euphoria you feel. The other important news is that third-party presidential candidates had a miserable showing this year, totaling just over one percent of the grand total with 1.5 million votes nationwide, compared to some 123 million votes for Barack Obama and John McCain.

It couldn't be clearer that Americans are not willing to voice their political discontent by voting for third-party presidential candidates. The two-party duopoly and plutocracy is completely dominant. The US lacks the political competition that exists in other western democracies. Without real political competition there is insufficient political choice.

A key problem is that for many years, third parties have not offered presidential candidates that capture the attention and commitment of even a modest fraction of Americans, unlike Ross Perot (8.4 percent in 1996 and 18.9 percent in 1992), and John Anderson (6.6 percent in 1980).

This year, among the four most significant third-party presidential candidates, Ralph Nader without a national party did the best with 685,426 votes or 0.54 percent of the grand total (a little better than in 2004 with 0.4 percent but much worse than in 2000 running as a Green Party candidate with 2.7 percent). He was followed by Bob Barr the Libertarian Party candidate with 503,981 votes or 0.4 percent of the total (typical of all Libertarian candidates in recent elections, including Ron Paul in 1988), followed by Chuck Baldwin of the Constitution Party with just 181,266 votes or 0.1 percent, and then Cynthia McKinney of the Green Party with only 148,546 votes or 0.1 percent.

Showing the problem of ballot access, engineered by the two major parties, is that there were only 15 states where all four were on the ballot. In all but one, Nader received more votes than the other three third-party candidates. In four states only one of the four candidates was on the ballot; in one state none of them were (Oklahoma).

Nader's best state was California with 81,434 votes, as it was for McKinney 's with 28,624 votes. Baldwin was not on the ballot there. Alan Keyes received 30,787 votes in California . Barr's best state was Texas with 56,398 votes. None of the other three were on the ballot there. In his home state of Georgia where he had been a Representative Barr received 28,420 votes (and none of the other three were on the ballot). Baldwin's best state was Michigan with 14, 973 votes. Nader was not on the ballot there.

In round numbers, Barack Obama raised \$639 million or about \$10 per vote, and John McCain raised \$360 million or \$6 per vote, compared to Ralph Nader with \$4 million and \$6 per vote, Bob Barr with about \$1 million or \$2 per vote, and Cynthia McKinney with only about \$118,000 or less than \$1 per vote. Money matters, but the ability of the two-party

duopoly to keep third-party presidential candidates out of nationally televised debates matters more for media attention, money and votes.

It must also be noted that there were countless congressional races with third-party and independent candidates, but none were able to win office, with only a very few reaching the 20 percent level. That third-party candidates can win local government offices means little because political party affiliation at that level is overshadowed by personal qualifications.

I say that current third-party activists should admit defeat, shut down their unsuccessful parties, and move on. Unlike so much of American history, current third-parties no longer play a significant role in American politics or even in affecting public policies. They have shown their inability to matter.

We need a new, vibrant political party that could bring many millions of American dissidents, progressives and conservatives, and especially chronic non-voters, together behind a relatively simple party platform focused on structural, government system reforms (not merely political change). Examples include: replacing the Electoral College with the popular vote for president, restoring the balance between Congress and the presidency, eliminating the corrupting influence of special interest money from politics, preventing the president to use signing statements to nullify laws passed by Congress.

What would unite people is a shared priority for revitalizing American democracy. It should position itself as a populist alternative and opponent to the two-party plutocracy. It should define itself as against the corporate and other special interests on the left and right that use money to corrupt our political system. Possible names: Patriotic Party, United Party or National Party. With Thomas Jefferson as its spiritual founder it should seek the political revolution he said was needed periodically.

Here is what helps. Despite considerable enthusiasm for Barack Obama, there is widespread unhappiness with both the Democratic and Republican Parties. One indication is that so voters register as independents. Plus there has always been a chorus of negative views about the two-party system. In one pragmatic sense this is the ideal time to create a new party. Why? Because of the incredible loss of stature of the Republican Party. Why not envision a new party that could replace the Republican Party on the national stage and provide a sharp alternative to the Democratic Party? In other words, we don't need a new third party as much as we need a new major party.

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