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29 March 2005

2004 AP Free-Response Question #3: Minor Parties

One of the distinguishing aspects of American politics is the dominance, with only minor aberrations, of the two-party system. This is largely due to winner-take-all elections and other access barriers that make unlikely the success of a third-party candidate at the national level; that in turn convinces most voters—even those supporting the positions of the minor party—to stick with one of the major candidates. Though they rarely win elections, third parties do make important contributions to American politics, by forcing the major parties to coopt their proposals and by energizing otherwise disaffected members of the electorate.

Two-party dominance is not an inherent tendency in democratic government and is, in fact, relatively rare; indeed, power is shared with smaller parties in most of Western Europe. The factor creating a two-party dynamic in the United States, then, is largely the electoral system. Most politicians in the United States are elected by plurality, meaning that the winning candidate is the one receiving the most votes. Many European countries, in contrast, allow proportional representation, so that a minor party earning three percent of the vote can have three percent of the seats in parliament. While minor parties can often win seats in the latter system, it is very hard to do so in the former. On top of that, minor parties often must collect tens of thousands of signatures to appear on state ballots and do not always succeed. They also do not have access to federal funds unless they earned at least five percent of the vote in the previous election, and they are generally

excluded from the presidential debates (which, after all, are run by the Democratic and Republican parties).

These electoral obstacles to victory lead to perhaps the greatest problem of all for minor parties: the feeling—expressed in the cartoon—that a vote for a candidate who can't win is a wasted vote. Most voters fear that voting for a third party will allow the worse of the two major candidates to win. In the 2000 election, for example, most progressives ultimately sided with Al Gore—even though their ideals were closer to those of Ralph Nader—because they could not stand George W. Bush. As a result, Nader garnered only 2.7 percent of the popular vote, even though his support had been about twice that high in polls prior to election day. The same was true, and to a much greater degree, in 2004, when Nader went from a high of seven percent in the polls down to 0.3 percent in the actual election.

The cause of this wasted-vote syndrome is the perception among most voters that a campaign is only effective if it results in a victory. History, however, presents many examples of third-party movements that lost the battle but eventually won the war. By publicizing issues that neither major party is willing to champion and, in the process, depriving the major parties of votes that they had previously taken for granted, third-party movements can force the established parties to adopt new policy stances necessary for bringing disaffected voters back. Perhaps the best example was that of the People's Party, which ran in 1892 on a platform of civil-service requirements, shorter working hours, a progressive income tax, direct election of Senators, secret balloting, a Subtreasury System, and “free and unlimited coinage of silver.” By 1896, the Democratic Party had adopted the Populists' stances on income taxes, regulation of

railroads, and “free silver”; moreover, almost all of the abovementioned proposals were eventually implemented. Another example of cooptation is the election of 1924, in which Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette ran on the Progressive Party ticket and with the backing of the Socialist Party. A significant portion of La Follette’s platform—including progressive income taxes, creation of a “national super-water-power system,” the abolition of injunctions in labor disputes, protection of the right to unionize and bargain collectively, and the abolition of child labor—was later implemented as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Third parties also contribute to the American political system by motivating voters who feel left out by the dominant parties. In 2000, for example, a considerable portion of Nader’s votes (37 percent in Florida, according to one exit poll) came from people who would have otherwise stayed home. Nader, furthermore, drew the biggest crowds of any candidate in the 2000 presidential race (not counting the Democratic and Republican conventions): in Madison Square Garden, for example, 15,000 supporters paid \$20 each to hear Nader speak. By energizing voters and mobilizing campaigners who would not have supported either major-party candidate, third parties can enliven elections and at the same time train activists who will go on to advocate the party’s agenda outside of the electoral arena.

The contributions of minor parties throughout American history are quite impressive considering the obstacles that they face: a winner-take-all electoral system, ballot-access hurdles, limited access to presidential debates, and a resultant attitude among many voters that a vote for a third party is a wasted vote. Though they have rarely won national elections, third parties have substantially impacted American politics,

by forcing the major parties to champion previously ignored positions and by energizing and mobilizing citizens disaffected with politics as usual.