

The Inevitable Quadrennial Third-Party Shooting Star

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

It doesn't matter how much people say they want another option, the system effectively precludes anyone but a Democrat or Republican from winning the presidency.

With Mitt Romney's path to the nomination looking inevitable, the lack of enthusiasm for his candidacy will invariably lead to chattering about the potential appeal of a third-party candidate. Failed Republican candidate Jon Huntsman has publicly flirted with an independent run, and a movement called Americans Elect is putting cash and generating pundit mentions in its push for a credible third-party nominee. But this talk shouldn't be taken too seriously. The chance that there will be a third party in America remains infinitesimal, and the likelihood of a serious, or even a spoiler, run for the presidency this year is incredibly small.

This may seem odd, as third-party supporters must feel that their time is at hand. A 2011 Gallup poll noted that more than half the country wanted a third party. Technological changes have given rise to online fundraising, a new ease in organizing people through social media, and the ability to bypass the mainstream media in getting news out — all of which must make it seem like third parties are ready to blossom.

Additionally, third-party candidates have had a big impact on recent elections. Ralph Nader's Green Party campaign in 2000 helped cost Al Gore the presidency, and Ross Perot's, garnering 19 percent of the vote, severely hampered President George Bush's reelection hopes in 1992. Currently, there are three senators — Joe Lieberman, Lisa Murkowski, and Bernie Sanders — who were elected as independents, though two of them were incumbents who lost a primary and came back to win the general election, while the third, the Socialist Sanders, ran with the effective backing of the Democratic Party in his state. Maine's popular ex-governor Angus King, who is set to run for Olympia Snowe's Senate seat, may add to this total.

But despite this, we will probably just be seeing the latest example of a third party grabbing inordinate media attention and then flaming out by Election Day. The last third-party candidate to even win an Electoral College vote was Southern protest candidate George Wallace in 1968. Only once has a third-party candidate come in second: Former president Teddy Roosevelt, who ran under the banner of the Progressive Party in 1912, received 88 electoral votes and 27 percent of the popular vote to beat out Republican William Howard Taft.

Roosevelt's candidacy shows some of the problems with third-party runs. Frequently, new parties are used as vehicles for well-known personalities who have little to no interest in growing the party beyond their own presidential or gubernatorial bid. After they lose, the party loses steam and dissipates. Americans Elect has tried to do avoid that problem by getting on all the ballots in 50 states, but it has failed to attract a name candidate — former Louisiana governor and failed Republican presidential candidate Buddy Roemer is the best it has so far.

Even worse is that when a new party arises, candidates from the other parties quickly incorporate any popular new ideas into their own platform, and the new third party suddenly finds itself without a distinctive platform. At the same time, as the new party tries to draw support from disaffected voters from both major parties, they discover that any position they've taken on critical issues that are not in their narrow wheelhouse is certain to alienate some

potential voters — just because a set of voters agree on taxes or spending issues doesn't mean they can't be driven apart by wedge social issues. As the two major candidates hammer away at a serious third-party contender for what seems to be these political inconsistencies, more voters retreat back to their traditional parties. The result is that third-party candidate support dims and the candidate ends up just playing a spoiler role.

These problems are compounded by basic practical hurdles, such as the difficulty for candidates in getting on the ballot in many states, or raising funds, especially without the institutional support that the two major parties provide. The Electoral College system, which effectively requires presidential candidates to gain support and get on the ballot in a wide variety of regions in the country, also hampers third-party candidates. Because of this difficulty in placing a true leader on the top of the ticket, any serious lower-level candidates are going to try their hardest to be on one of the two major party tickets. Even the spoiler role will be in doubt — thanks to Ralph Nader, every voter will be aware of the consequence of a protest vote.

As polls show, there is a constant feeling of dissatisfaction with the political process, and a long-held hope by many voters that a third party will swoop in and permanently change the political dynamic. But it's not happening. America has not seen a long-lasting national third-party movement in its history, and it won't be seeing one now.

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