DURING MOMENTS OF INTENSE PARTISANSHIP, people can rebel against the choice between Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism if they feel the parties are too extreme in their views. On such occasions third parties can gain some traction, despite the many obstacles the two-party system has placed in their way. Americans generally like the idea of third parties because they prefer more options when they vote. According to a 2020 survey, one-in-five individuals would have backed an independent third-party congressional candidate if one had been listed. But few third-party congressional candidates find much public support come Election Day, and those who do win find themselves outsiders in an institution built by and for the two major parties.

Even though they rarely elect candidates, third parties can make a difference in electoral outcomes. In 2020, Libertarian Party candidate Jo Jorgensen received 38,491 votes in Wisconsin, more than Joe Biden’s winning margin of 20,682 votes. In Arizona, Jorgensen received 51,465 votes, again far greater than Biden’s winning margin of 10,457 votes. Similarly, in Georgia, Jorgensen got 62,229 votes, nearly six times more than Biden’s plurality of 11,779 votes. And in Pennsylvania, Jorgensen received 79,441 votes, nearly equal to Biden’s winning margin of 82,155 votes. If all these Libertarian-minded voters had supported Donald Trump, he would have been reelected with 289 electoral votes—19 more than the necessary 270, despite losing the popular vote by more than seven million.

Third parties can also matter in Congress. Presently, three US senators serve without having been elected on a major party label—Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Angus King of Maine, and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. But all have cast their lot with the major parties (Sanders and King are independents who caucus with the Democrats, and Murkowski is a Republican who lost her party’s primary but won election as a write-in candidate). They know that remaining outside the major party caucuses offers little in the way of access to power.
On rare occasions, elected members will leave a major party. Two House Republicans left their party during the 116th Congress to become independents after disputes with their leadership. Michigan Republican Justin Amash broke with Donald Trump in 2019 and called for his impeachment. Amash was promptly excluded from the Republican conference, and his defection was greeted with derision by his former GOP colleagues. Donald Trump labeled him “one of the dumbest and most disloyal men in Congress.” At the end of the congressional session, Amash was joined by fellow Michigan Republican Paul Mitchell who left the party after Donald Trump’s repeated assertions that Joe Biden’s victory was fraudulent. Mitchell argued that Trump and like-minded Republicans were doing “long term harm to our democracy” with their baseless accusations of voter fraud.

Despite the precarious position of third-party officeholders, third parties continue to form and some even endure. This is particularly true at the state and local level. In the last quarter century, independent and minor party candidates have won the governorships of Maine, Connecticut, Minnesota, and Rhode Island and have run credible campaigns in other states. Political scientist Richard Davis notes that there are several states where third parties have made their presence known. For example, in Oregon, the Independence Party organized in 2007; in Rhode Island, the Moderate Party formed in 2009; in South Carolina, the American Party started in 2014; in Utah, the United Utah Party formed in 2017; and in Minnesota, the Reform Party has reconstituted itself into the Independence Party. The Libertarian and Green Parties have also run candidates at the state and local level.

When we speak of third parties or minor parties (the terms can be used interchangeably) we refer to entities that, like Republicans and Democrats, have formal organizational structures and procedures, write platforms, nominate candidates for office, and have formal officers, like state party chairs. (Independents, on the other hand, are typically well-known free agents who run for office without the support of formal party structures.) They persist for long periods of time—far longer than one election.

Splinter parties differ from minor parties in that they are “one-hit wonders” that emerge when candidates with a following set aside their major party affiliation and go it alone, typically because they are unable to resolve a significant disagreement with the major party. Notable splinter presidential candidates include J. Strom Thurmond in 1948, who deplored Harry S. Truman’s embrace of civil rights and splintered from the Democratic Party to run for president as a Dixiecrat; George C. Wallace in 1968, a Democrat who rejected Lyndon B.
Third Parties in the Twenty-First Century

Johnson for the same reason and ran for president on the American Independent Party; and John B. Anderson in 1980, a Republican who disagreed with the conservative policies of Republican nominee Ronald Reagan.

Splinter parties can exert influence in national politics when the major party coalitions fracture and they play a spoiler role. One such example happened in 1912 when Theodore Roosevelt ran as a third-party Bull Moose Progressive. Although Roosevelt lost, he split the Republican vote, denying incumbent Republican president William Howard Taft a second term.

Minor party candidates can also play spoiler when elections are remarkably close. In 2000, Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader castigated the Clinton administration for not seriously pursuing campaign finance reform and becoming too strongly associated with corporate interests—a charge that redounded to the detriment of Clinton’s vice president and 2000 Democratic nominee Al Gore. Nader won backing from progressives who were disenchanted with what they saw as the conservative direction the Democratic Party had taken under Clinton. With their support, Nader won 2.7 percent of the popular vote—more than the margin of victory in a close presidential election won by George W. Bush.

Why Third Parties Form

Playing a spoiler role is consequential, but why do third parties form in a political system where two large parties win almost every election? Political scientist Clinton Rossiter once described the United States as having a “tyrannical” two-party system, where “we have the Republicans and we have the Democrats, and we have almost no one else . . . in the struggle for power.” Still, in 2020, Libertarian presidential nominee Jo Jorgensen appeared on all fifty state ballots and the District of Columbia; Green party nominee Howie Hawkins appeared on thirty state ballots; even Kanye West was on the ballot in twelve states. They all lost (Kanye won a paltry sixty thousand votes). So, why go to the effort?

The answer is that, despite the famous adage, winning isn’t always everything. Some third parties compete because their adherents feel the major parties do not speak to their concerns. We will see that the history of splinter parties encompasses a litany of grievances against one or both major parties, often short-lived but intensely held. So, for instance, if you were a segregationist in 1948 and could not support the Democratic candidacy of a president who had advanced a civil rights agenda, but did not align politically with the Republican alternative, you had a rationale for supporting the Dixiecrats. Or, if you were a supporter of
balanced budgets in 1996 and felt that neither major party was serious about your concerns, you may have been drawn to the Reform Party and the candidacy of Ross Perot.

In other instances, third parties draw adherents from people with ideological views that are not addressed by the major parties. This explains the appeal of the Green Party, whose environmental agenda extends beyond the policy positions of the Democratic Party. It explains why Bernie Sanders, the democratic socialist who twice sought the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, has throughout his career been elected to public office as a socialist. His views have historically placed him to the left of the most liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

Third-party leaders and the voters who support them understand that the odds of victory are long, because third parties face enormous institutional barriers and constraints imposed by American political culture. In this chapter, we will examine significant third parties in American history and explore the institutional and cultural obstacles to their success.

Institutional Barriers to Third Parties

Several institutional and cultural factors make it difficult for third parties to compete with Republicans and Democrats. In some instances, these barriers are intentional, placed there by the major parties for the express purpose of maintaining their dominance. In other cases, the barriers are rooted in American political culture and development. Institutional barriers include single-member electoral districts, the Electoral College, the executive-centered nature of American governance, ballot access restrictions, direct primaries, campaign finance laws, and restrictions placed on third parties barring participation in the presidential debates. Cultural barriers include the tendency for voters to seek compromise and the historically centrist nature of American public opinion that has reinforced the dominance of two large political parties that until recently have looked for supporters in the middle of the political spectrum.

**Single-Member Electoral Districts.** In some democracies—including Austria, Germany, Japan, and Israel—a voting system known as proportional representation is used to elect legislative candidates who, in turn, choose the leader of the government. This system has two important components that influence party formation. First, more than one elected official is sent to the national or provincial assembly from each legislative district. Second, the number of representatives elected is directly proportional to the votes that a party receives on election day. If, for example, the Socialist Party of Austria receives 20 percent
of the ballots, and a district has five members, then the Socialists can expect to send one member to parliament from that district. The key element that fosters minor party activity is that there are benefits even when the party does not win a plurality of votes. Extremist or rigidly ideological parties are encouraged to participate because the multimember proportional representation system makes it possible for them to achieve representation in the legislature and participate in government.

This is in sharp contrast to the United States, which relies on a winner-take-all single-member district system for choosing most of its officeholders. Single member districts, like US House districts, send only one member each to the legislature. This system awards all the representation for that district to the plurality vote winner—the candidate receiving the most votes. No matter how hard candidates of minor parties might work, they will not receive any representation unless they win the most votes on election day, and as minor parties this outcome is very unlikely. This is why Duverger’s Law, named after political scientist Maurice Duverger, states that in winner-take-all systems two large parties that can assemble broad coalitions of voters are likely to form, while third parties will be discouraged from competing.

To better illustrate the contrast between the multimember proportional representation system and the winner-take-all single-member district method, imagine a situation in which four parties are competing for a single seat. Let’s say that Party A is at the far left of the ideological spectrum (the most liberal); Party B, left-of-center; Party C, right-of-center; and Party D, the far right (the most conservative). In this hypothetical election, Party A wins 20 percent of the votes; Party B, 30 percent; Party C, 27 percent; and Party D, 23 percent. Under the proportional system, each party will receive roughly the same number of legislators in the national assembly, with a small edge going to Party B. Under the winner-take-all single-member district system, only Party B would send legislators to the capitol. The British, who use the winner-take-all method, liken such electoral outcomes to horse races and have characterized winners in their system as being “first past the post.”

In a winner-take-all single-member district system, there are strong incentives for political parties located near each other on the ideological spectrum to merge. Using the previous example, operatives from Party C might say to Party D, “You know, we don’t agree on everything, but we think alike. If we joined forces, we could surely overtake Party B. After all, they netted only 30 percent of the vote in the last election, whereas together we grabbed 50 percent.” Under these rules, Party C’s operatives know that it does not matter whether
there are four, fourteen, or forty parties vying for support. In a winner-take-all single-member district system, there is no payoff for coming in second.

The Electoral College. At the presidential level, the Electoral College compounds the institutional barriers to minor party success. Recall from chapter 4 that most states award their electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis, and winning candidates need a majority of electoral votes to be elected president. This system punishes candidates like Ross Perot, who ran competitively nationwide but not at the level he needed to achieve to compete in the Electoral College. Perot won an impressive 19 percent of the vote in 1992, and his support was broad-based, but he didn’t win any electoral votes because he didn’t finish first in any state. Alternatively, third-party candidates with regional strength may finish first in some states and win some electoral votes but almost never in enough states to compile an Electoral College majority. Teddy Roosevelt won 88 electoral votes in 1912 on the strength of his standing as a former president, but it wasn’t close to what he needed to be elected.

Nor would third-party candidates likely be favored in the unlikely situation that they could prevent the major candidates from winning an Electoral College majority. Even if no candidate were to win an electoral vote majority and the presidential election was decided by the House of Representatives (this happened only once in the disputed presidential election of 1824, when the House chose John Quincy Adams), it is hard to imagine that a body composed entirely of Democrats and Republicans would select a third-party candidate.

The “I Don’t Want to Waste My Vote” Syndrome. Given the dominance of the two major parties, voters often do not want to “waste their vote” on a third-party candidate who is unlikely to win because there is so much at stake. The “I don’t want to waste my vote” phenomenon was very much in evidence in 2020. Because Donald Trump dominated the election landscape, and voters were of a mindset to vote either for or against Trump, third-party candidates found themselves shut out of the conversation. Billionaires, including Michael Bloomberg, Mark Cuban, and Howard Schultz decided to forego independent bids so as not to play spoiler and knowing that the “I don’t want to waste my vote” syndrome would doom their potential candidacies.

Ballot Access Restrictions. Regulations to limit ballot access also restrict minor party development. Getting a new party on the ballot and keeping it there poses extraordinarily difficult legal challenges. The major parties do not have this problem, as they have automatic ballot access by virtue of their dominance. For example, some states stipulate that a party whose gubernatorial candidate wins 10 percent of the vote is automatically listed on the next election ballot. Because
Democrats and Republicans almost always garner that many votes, they have virtually automatic ballot access. But minor parties must work to get on the ballot, and the process can be complex. In 2020, the Green Party was denied ballot access in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin because it had filed improper paperwork. Petitions by the party to state courts were rebuffed.

**Direct Primaries.** In political systems where nominations are controlled by party elites, intra-party dissidents can leave to form their own parties. In the United States, the direct primary system has the effect of channeling dissent into the two major parties.7 Frustrated voters can support a maverick candidate in a major party primary—and maverick candidates may be drawn to major party primary competition in order to be relevant, as happened in 2016 and 2020 when Bernie Sanders—a rare third-party candidate elected repeatedly to Congress as a socialist—left his long-standing position outside of the two major parties to compete in the Democratic Party’s presidential contests.

**Campaign Finance Laws and Presidential Debates.** The presidential campaign finance system poses another institutional barrier to minor party success. The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) stipulates that a presidential candidate is eligible for public funds, provided that the party’s nominee receives a given percentage of votes in the previous election. For “major parties,” a 25 percent threshold is required. If this goal is met, then the nominee is entitled to full funding (although neither major party has accepted this money since 2012).8 For minor party candidates, the threshold is only 5 percent, but the amount they receive from the federal government is far less than what their Democratic or Republican counterparts get. Ross Perot, who won 19 percent of the vote in 1992, was given $29 million in public funds in 1996—less than half of what Bill Clinton and Bob Dole received. Ralph Nader, who won 2.7 percent of the popular vote as the 2000 Green Party candidate, was not eligible for federal funds in 2004. Neither the Libertarian nor the Green Parties received public funding in 2020, and thanks to their poor showings (1 percent and .25 percent of the popular vote respectively), neither will receive public funds in 2024.

The inability of the minor parties to receive a share of public funding is a prime example of how Democrats and Republicans write the rules to oppose changes that would benefit others. The financial obstacles third parties must overcome have only increased since the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission. Today, with the cost of seeking the presidency exceeding $1 billion dollars for each major party, candidates need to rely on small dollars from activists and mega-dollars from wealthy donors. Minor parties have little access to either monetary source. Without help from the
federal government, they must try to gain as much media attention as possible to be visible to the public. But political journalists devote their time and attention to candidates they believe can win, putting third-party candidates in a catch-22.

This dilemma has also presented itself when third-party candidates have asked for time on the presidential debate stage. In 1996, the Commission on Presidential Debates (a private organization) ruled that Ross Perot was not a serious contender and declined his request to participate in the televised debates. A similar situation occurred in 2000, when the Commission on Presidential Debates ruled that Green Party candidate Ralph Nader was ineligible. The commission even denied Nader a seat in the audience for the first George W. Bush–Al Gore face-off, causing Nader to loudly complain about the unfair treatment. In 2020, no third-party candidate appeared on the debate stage with Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

Cultural Barriers to Third Parties

Institutional constraints like single-member districts, the Electoral College, direct primary laws, and ballot access restrictions perpetuate the existence of the two-party model in the United States. Cultural barriers present an additional obstacle to third-party development. A nation’s political culture encompasses the fundamental values and beliefs that influence society and guide political behavior. It is the umbrella under which political activities take place and where public questions are resolved. Several core values help maintain a two-party system, including adherence to peaceful resolution of conflicts, acceptance of compromise and incremental change, and a strong endorsement of the nation’s governing framework.

Americans accepted the constitutional arrangements that the Framers instituted in 1787 and, in 1801, peacefully recognized the transfer of power from the Federalists to the Democratic-Republicans—a transfer of power from one party to another that remains a rarity in today’s world. From these origins, Americans came to expect that power would be peacefully passed following legitimately held elections, which historically has had a moderating influence on public opinion.

Stability in the scope of political discourse has also contributed to the endurance of the two major parties. Despite a tumultuous history, American political debate has remained narrowly defined by the struggle between Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian localism. The battle between the two camps has attached to a wide range of issues, but the essential nature of the conflict about
the proper place for the federal government vis-à-vis the states has endured. The dominance of the two paradigms has left little room for third parties to mature and become established in the American firmament.

Significant Third Parties in US History

Although history has not been kind to minor parties, several have changed the direction of political debate and influenced election outcomes. From the Anti-Masons of the 1820s through to the present day, the history of our two-party competition has been periodically influenced by the emergence of third parties that, while too weak to win elections, were influential enough to shape them.

The Anti-Mason Party. For decades prior to the Revolution, nearly every large community had a Masonic Lodge, or what was called a Freemason organization. These secretive clubs were composed of middle- and upper-class white Protestants, often the leading businessmen of their communities who were interested in the issues of the day and had a strong belief in moral self-improvement. Prominent Masons included George Washington, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson. According to historian Phyllis F. Field, “In a nation with high rates of geographic mobility, Masonry provided a convenient way for nomadic American middle-class men to integrate themselves quickly into a new community and feel at home there.”

But Masonic elitism and secret rites created a public backlash—especially among religious fundamentalists. An anti-Mason movement was born following the mysterious disappearance of New York Freemason William Morgan in 1826, after he threatened to reveal the secret rituals of the group. Anti-Masons maintained that secretive cliques were conspiring against the working class and, through their bizarre rituals such as frequent cross burnings, were a threat to Christianity. Within four years of their humble beginnings in 1826, the anti-Masons became a powerful political force—the first significant minor party to emerge in the young nation. In 1831, they held a presidential nominating convention—a novel idea for its day—and chose as their candidate former attorney general William Wirt.

The Anti-Mason Party finished a distant third in the 1832 presidential election when Wirt proved to be an ineffectual campaigner. It garnered 100,000 votes (8 percent) to finish behind Democrat Andrew Jackson and Whig Party candidate Henry Clay. However, Wirt finished first in Vermont, winning that state’s seven electoral votes—the first time a third-party candidate had amassed

By the mid-1830s, the Anti-Mason Party began to fade, partly because President Andrew Jackson endorsed policies that gave political leverage to working-class voters. More than anything else, the Anti-Mason Party disappeared because the Freemason movement was out of step with the democratic impulses of the 1830s. There was less public concern about elitism in the years after Jackson’s election established the broad-based citizen-centered political party.

*The Free-Soil Party.* Several antislavery groups nipped at the edges of the political system prior to the 1840s. The most notable of these were the Burn-burners, the Conscience Whigs, and the Liberty Party. Controlled by extremists and religious fanatics whose ideas about ending the interstate slave trade were considered radical—even in a time of rising opposition to slavery—these groups were relatively short-lived.

The Free-Soil Party had better luck. The impetus for their founding in 1848 was the debate over the Wilmot Proviso, which limited the extension of slavery into the new western territories. Operating on a platform of “free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men,” the Free-Soil Party combined opposition to slavery with a desire for cheap western land. As the Free-Soil Party gained followers, it became more pragmatic than its abolitionist predecessors. It advocated policies that would allow Blacks to vote and attend school. At the same time, Free-Soilers bowed to existing racial prejudices by arguing that the Wilmot Proviso would keep Blacks in the South. Free-Soilers did not endorse the abolition of slavery, nor did they denounce either the Fugitive Slave Act, or the three-fifths clause of the US Constitution (which counted Blacks as “three-fifths” of a person for the purpose of determining representation in the House). Other planks that broadened the Free-Soil Party’s appeal included cheaper postage rates, reduced federal spending, tariff reform, the election of all civil officers, and free homesteading in the west.

In 1848, the Free-Soil Party held a convention in Buffalo, New York, with nearly 20,000 delegates and spectators in attendance. Hopes were high when they nominated former president Martin Van Buren for president and Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams, for vice president. Despite the ticket’s high name recognition, Van Buren and Adams won just 10 percent of the popular vote and failed to carry a single state. Congressional results were equally disappointing, as the party won a mere twelve seats.
Shortly after the 1848 election, the Free-Soil Party disappeared. Most Free-Soilers returned to the parties they previously supported, albeit with a renewed determination to change their parties’ respective stands on slavery-related issues. This movement back to the major parties caused considerable strife that resulted in the current two-party alignment of Republicans and Democrats when Republicans replaced the Whigs and Democrats became the party of the South.

The American (Know-Nothing) Party. For many Americans living in urban areas, immigration was a primary concern prior to the Civil War. A vast number of working-class, native-born Protestants were deeply troubled by the heavy influx of Irish Catholics beginning in the early 1840s. Jobs, cultural differences, and the transformation of the United States into an ethnic polyglot became contentious political issues. In 1854, the American Party emerged in response to these anxieties. Originally organized around two groups known as the Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and the National Council of the United States of America, adherents were dubbed the Know-Nothings after a reporter asked a member about their secret meetings only to be told that he “knew nothing.” The party’s core philosophy was simple: “Americans should rule America. . . . Foreigners have no right to dictate our laws, and therefore have no just ground to complain if Americans see proper to exclude them from offices of trust.” The Know-Nothing platform included planks mandating that immigrants live in the United States for twenty-one years before being allowed to vote; that they never hold public office; and that their children should have no rights unless they were educated in public schools. Taking aim at Catholics and their allegiance to the Pope, the Know-Nothings declared, “No person should be selected for political station (whether of native or foreign birth), who recognizes any alliance or obligation of any description to foreign prince, potentate or power.”

The popularity of the Know-Nothings is one of the darker tales in US history. In 1854, the party achieved extraordinary success by capturing scores of congressional and state legislative seats, mostly in the Northeast. In Massachusetts, where immigrants were pouring in at a rate of one hundred thousand per year, the Know-Nothings won an astounding 347 of 350 state house seats and all the state senate, congressional, and statewide contests, including the governorship. In New York, they elected forty members of the state legislature and took control of the governorship. The party also won the governorships of Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut.

In 1856, the Know-Nothings became caught up in the politics of slavery. At the party’s convention in Philadelphia, Northern delegates wanted to nominate a presidential candidate who opposed the extension of slavery into the...
new western territories. Southerners blocked the move, and Northern delegates bolted out of the convention hall. The remaining Southern delegates nominated former president Millard Fillmore as their candidate for president and Andrew Jackson Dodelson of Tennessee for vice president. The Fillmore-Dodelson ticket captured 875,000 votes, or 21 percent of the popular vote, and eight Electoral College votes (from the state of Maryland). After two stunning showings at the polls, the Know-Nothings faded rapidly. Passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act accentuated the slavery issue and created deep sectional divisions within the party. The Republicans—a Northern, antislavery party—burst on the scene, and most Northern Know-Nothings joined their ranks. In the South, the Know-Nothings were absorbed by the former Whigs. By 1860, the Know-Nothings were no more.

The Greenback and Populist (People’s) Parties. During the early 1870s, the nation entered hard times, and midwestern farmers suffered from plummeting crop prices. Railroads were the only means by which to ship midwestern farm goods to major markets in the East, and privately owned companies charged exorbitant rates. Adding to the farmers’ plight was a deflation of the currency, which made it difficult for them to pay their high bills.

The first efforts to organize agricultural interests culminated in the formation of hundreds of local groups called farmers’ alliances, or granges. Mixing political and social activities, the granges united farmers into a cohesive voting bloc. Many who belonged to the granges were supportive of a third party, and after the economic panic of 1873 the Greenback Party was created. The Greenback Party (also known as the Greenback-Labor Party) proposed an inflated currency based on cheap paper money known as “greenbacks” that were first introduced during the Civil War. Their argument was simple: by making the greenback legal tender, there would be enough money in circulation to ease the burden of indebted farmers and laborers.

In 1878, Greenback congressional candidates won more than one million votes and fourteen US House races. Two years later they nominated General James Weaver of Iowa as their presidential candidate. By that time, however, the national economy improved, and the Greenback Party lost its initial appeal. Weaver won just 300,000 votes, and the Greenbacks sent just eight members to Congress. In 1884, the Greenbacks found their presidential support almost cut in half.

Overproduction and increased world competition led to another agricultural crisis in the early 1890s. The remaining Greenbacks merged with a new party called the Populists, or People’s Party, in 1891. Unlike the Greenbacks, the
Populists’ demands were more radical and far-reaching: “We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. . . . From the womb of governmental injustice, we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires.” Among other things, the Populist platform proposed public regulation of railroads and telegraphs; free coinage of silver and gold (to increase currency in circulation); creation of postal savings banks; prohibition of alien ownership of land; a graduated federal income tax; direct election of US senators; and a reduction of the workday to eight hours.

The Populists readily won adherents in the Midwest, West, and even the South. One historian summarized the new party’s appeal this way: “The Populist Party was the embodiment of an attitude, a way of looking at life that had been prevalent for almost 20 years, and a general position taken against concentrated economic power.” The Populists selected former Greenback James Weaver as their 1892 presidential nominee. Weaver won just 8 percent of the popular vote (about a million votes) and twenty-two Electoral College votes, with nearly all his support coming from western states. But the Populists effectively split the Republican vote, giving Democrat Grover Cleveland a chance to capture the presidency. Democrats also won control of both houses of Congress—a rarity in this Republican-dominated era. Populist strength grew in 1894, when they won nearly 1.5 million votes and elected six US senators and seven House members, all from the West.

Then, in 1896, something unusual happened: both the Populists and the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan for president. Bryan endorsed many Populist planks, most notably, the elimination of the gold standard. Although Bryan lost, many of the Populist Party’s proposals were accepted by both parties and incorporated into law during the twentieth century.

The Progressives: 1912–1924, 1948, and Today. In chapter 3, we outlined the rationale behind the Progressive movement, its numerous successes against machine-dominated locales, and its eventual coalescence into a third party in 1912 behind former President Theodore Roosevelt. Calling for a “new nationalism,” Roosevelt bolted the Republican Convention to form the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party, running on a platform that promised stricter regulation of corporations; downward revision of tariffs; popular election of US senators; women’s suffrage; and support for the referendum, ballot initiatives, and recall elections. With 27 percent of the popular vote and eighty-eight Electoral College votes, Roosevelt finished in second place behind Democrat Woodrow Wilson. William Howard Taft, the Republican nominee, finished third—the first time that had happened to a GOP presidential candidate since the party’s inception.
Roosevelt’s strong showing in 1912 was the high point of the Progressive movement. Thereafter, President Woodrow Wilson pursued a Progressive agenda—including passage of new antitrust laws, banking regulations, and scores of business reforms. But the Progressive Party did not die completely, especially in states with strong populist traditions. In 1924, Robert La Follette—a former US representative, US senator, and governor of Wisconsin—became the Progressive Party’s presidential nominee. La Follette was an articulate champion of labor reform, business regulation, a graduated income tax, and a constitutional amendment providing for direct election of judges to the federal courts. His party’s platform proposed public ownership of the nation’s waterpower, strict control and conservation of natural resources, farmers’ cooperatives, and legislation to make credit available to farmers and small businessmen. La Follette captured 17 percent of the popular vote (4.8 million ballots) but won only thirteen Electoral College votes (from his home state of Wisconsin). With his death in 1925, La Follette’s brand of progressivism died as well. Though his children and grandchildren became active in politics and continued to push the Progressive agenda, they did not attract much attention beyond the Wisconsin borders.

In 1948, the Progressive Party reemerged. That year, a left-wing group led by former vice president Henry A. Wallace bolted from the Democratic Party. At issue was President Harry S. Truman’s “get tough” policy toward the Soviet Union, which Wallace strongly opposed. The Progressive Party accused Truman of being vociferously anticommunist, which they said stemmed from “the dictates of monopoly and the military” and resulted in “preparing for war in the name of peace.” To the utopian-minded Progressives, peace was “the prerequisite of survival.” The Progressive Party called for a wholesale reversal in how the US government dealt with domestic communism. It favored eliminating the House Un-American Activities Committee and rejected any ban of the US Communist Party, or the required registration of its members, likening such legislation to the Alien and Sedition Acts.

In July 1948, Progressive Citizens of America selected Wallace as its presidential candidate. As the Progressive Party standard-bearer, Henry Wallace drew large crowds including many young liberals, blue-collar workers, and Black voters. His liberal supporters worried Truman, who would need them to win, and Truman attempted to undermine Wallace by linking him to the US Communist Party. At campaign stops, Truman vowed, “I do not want, and I will not accept the political support of Henry Wallace and his communists.” Wallace’s public statements made Truman’s task an easy one. A Gallup poll taken shortly
before the Progressive convention found 51 percent agreed that the Progressive Party was communist dominated.21

Despite Wallace’s political shortcomings, he influenced the election result. When the ballots were counted, Wallace received 1,157,172 votes (slightly more than 2 percent). This was enough to throw three states to GOP presidential nominee Thomas E. Dewey: New York, Maryland, and Michigan. If Wallace had done somewhat better in California and had not been kept off the Illinois ballot, the 1948 contest might have been decided in the House of Representatives.

Progressive ideas have been a recurring force in US politics, although progressivism has assumed different meanings in different eras. Originally, its focus was centered in the religious belief that the human condition could be infinitely improved. By the end of the nineteenth century, progressivism meant ridding the political system of corrupt influences. At the turn of the twentieth century, Progressives wanted greater participation by average citizens in government affairs, and they believed government could be improved by bringing scientific methods to bear on public problems.

In the late twentieth century, a new progressivism emerged in the image of nineteenth-century progressivism, centered around the desire to rid the political process of the influence of big money in order to make it more responsive to ordinary voters. In 1991, the Progressive Caucus was created in the House of Representatives. Today, it has 94 House members and one US senator, Bernie Sanders, making it the largest group within the House Democratic caucus.22 Its core principles are fighting for immigrant rights and reforms; making voting easier; advocating fair trade; promoting climate justice; supporting labor unions; universal healthcare; racial equality; and criminal justice reform.23 Given the split within the Democratic Party between moderates and progressives, the Progressive Caucus has assumed growing importance as more members have joined its ranks. With Congress so evenly divided between the parties, progressive support, with backing from more moderate members, is essential to pass any legislation.

States’ Rights Party (1948) and the American Independent Party (1968). After the Civil War, the roots of the Democratic Party became deeply planted in the South. During the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt broadened the Democratic coalition to include labor, middle-and lower-class urban residents, Catholics, Blacks, and Jews, transforming the Democratic Party into a majority coalition. Relations between progressive Northern Democrats and conservative Southern Democrats became a marriage of convenience. Northern Democrats controlled
the White House, thanks to their Southern partners, and Southern Democrats chaired important congressional committees, thanks to their party’s majority status and adherence to the seniority rule.

By the late 1940s, the marriage between Northern and Southern Democrats was heading for divorce. Civil rights split the two factions apart in 1948, when the Democratic Convention adopted a strong pro-civil rights plank. Many southern delegates walked out and reconvened in Birmingham, Alabama. The gathering adopted the name States’ Rights Party and quickly became known as the Dixiecrat Party, given its overwhelming southern base of support. The convention reiterated a Jeffersonian plank extracted from the 1840 Democratic Party platform: “Congress has no power under the Constitution to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several states, and...such states are the sole and proper judges of everything appertaining to their own affairs and not prohibited by the Constitution.” This states’ rights argument was designed to keep racial segregation intact.

The delegates nominated J. Strom Thurmond, then governor of South Carolina, as their presidential candidate. On Election Day, Thurmond garnered 1.1 million votes (2.4 percent) and won thirty-eight Electoral College votes from five southern states. The party closed shop after the 1948 election, and Thurmond went on to have a successful political career in both major parties while retaining his segregationist views. In 1954, Thurmond won a write-in Senate campaign after the state Democratic Party rejected him. Ten years later, Thurmond formally switched his party registration from Democratic to Republican. In 2002, he retired from the US Senate as a Republican at age one hundred.

The final blow to the Democratic coalition assembled by Franklin Roosevelt came in 1968. Once again, the breakdown centered on efforts to broaden legal protections for Blacks. The American Independent Party was established in 1968 as the personal organization of Alabama governor George C. Wallace. Elected governor in 1962 as a Democrat and ardent segregationist, Wallace entered the national spotlight one year later when the federal government ordered the integration of public colleges. In a televised display of defiance, Wallace and his state troopers blocked access to the University of Alabama to two incoming Black students before eventually stepping aside.

After an unsuccessful (but impressive) primary campaign against Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, Wallace abandoned the Democratic Party in 1968 to form his own party, which followed his get-tough, law-and-order, segregationist beliefs. With old-time populist themes and a powerful gift for oratory, Wallace won nearly ten million votes, or 13.5 percent of the total. His forty-six electoral votes
from five southern states came from Democrats who used the Wallace candidacy as a way station before entering the Republican Party. In 1972, Richard M. Nixon won the vast majority of the 1968 Wallace supporters. By the 1980s, Wallace voters began supporting Republicans for other offices such as governor, members of Congress, and state legislature. Wallace, meanwhile, reentered Democratic presidential politics in 1972, only to be shot and permanently paralyzed at a rally in Maryland. Although he later won the Alabama governorship as a Democrat, Wallace’s days in presidential politics were over. His American Independent Party and its offshoot, the American Party, continued to nominate candidates for a while before fading into obscurity.

The Reform Party. Billionaire businessman Ross Perot’s two presidential bids illustrate the difference between independent candidacies and minor parties. In 1992, Perot ran for president as a free agent without fielding candidates for other offices or establishing party institutions. Using his hefty pocketbook to finance his campaign, Perot ran on a platform that emphasized the importance of a balanced budget during a time of economic difficulty and the need to enact campaign finance reform. His foremost strength was his charisma and can-do attitude.

After winning an impressive 19 percent of the vote, Perot organized a new political party centered on his signature issues of a balanced budget and campaign finance reform. Labeled the Reform Party, by 1996 it qualified to run slates of candidates in all fifty states. It had a national organization, developed formal rules, and held a convention to nominate its presidential candidate, who, not surprisingly, was Perot. This time, however, Perot accepted federal funds, thus saving him from once again having to finance his own campaign. But Perot received only 8 percent of the vote, a signal that the days of the Reform Party were numbered.

Because the party received $12.6 million from the federal government for the 2000 general election (based on Ross Perot’s 1996 showing), it became a target for would-be candidates looking for a vehicle for a presidential run. Some of these candidates held views that were far removed from the party’s original emphasis on eliminating deficit spending. Donald Trump became a member of the party and established an exploratory committee in 1999 before eventually dropping out. Republican speechwriter Patrick J. Buchanan, who unsuccessfully sought the Republican presidential nomination in 1992, competed for and won the 2000 Reform Party nomination by defeating physicist John Hagelin, who had been the 1996 Natural Law Party’s candidate for president.

The contest over the Reform Party nomination divided Perot supporters. In a convention marred by physical confrontations, both Buchanan and Hagelin
claimed to have enough support to clinch the nomination. Ultimately, the Federal Election Commission decided that Buchanan was the legitimate nominee and awarded him the $12.6 million. Disgusted at the turn of events, Perot refused to back Buchanan and endorsed Republican nominee George W. Bush. Meanwhile, professional wrestler Jesse Ventura, who had been the Reform Party’s greatest success story after winning the governorship of Minnesota as a Reform candidate, left the party—calling it “hopelessly dysfunctional.” Buchanan fared poorly in the 2000 election, winning fewer than one million votes out of more than one hundred million cast, and the Reform Party faded into obscurity.

The Green Party. During the Clinton administration, some Democrats became restive with the president’s abandonment of traditional New Deal liberalism. In 1996, the Green Party echoed this sentiment and selected Ralph Nader as its presidential candidate. Nader did not actively seek the presidency; rather, he let his name appear on the ballot and made no campaign appearances. Nader’s presence likely cost Clinton a victory in Colorado but had no effect on the overall outcome.

Things were different in 2000. With Republicans in control of Congress, Bill Clinton was compelled to strike deals with them, telling confidants, “Strategically, I want to remove all divisive issues for a conservative [Republican presidential] candidate, so all the issues are on progressive terrain.” But Nader and the Greens complained that far from being progressive, both Clinton and the Republicans sided with corporate interests. Nader decided to confront the Clinton-Gore administration, charging that its obsession with deficit reduction and not using the powers of government more forcefully when it came to protecting the environment and promoting campaign finance reform had transformed the Democrats into a “me-too” party that emulated the Republican’s embrace of corporate and Wall Street interests.

Nader won 2.73 percent of the total popular votes cast in 2000, making him a “spoiler” in the race. The 97,488 votes Nader received in Florida made a real difference, given that George W. Bush’s statewide margin was 537 votes out of nearly 6 million cast. Nader had a similar effect in New Hampshire, where his 22,198 votes far exceeded Bush’s winning margin of 7,211. Had Gore won either state he would have been elected president.

Democrats were aware of their missed opportunity to win the White House in 2000, and they made sure their supporters were not tempted to vote for Ralph Nader in 2004. That year, Nader did run again, but received less than 1 percent of the vote. By 2008, Nader abandoned the Green Party and ran as an independent, garnering 739,278 votes—the most of any of the third-party candidates,
but still just one-half of 1 percent of the total votes cast. It was his last foray into presidential politics.

In 2016, the Green Party enjoyed a resurgence, having been energized by the failed Democratic bid made by Vermont senator Bernie Sanders. With Sanders out of the running, some of his supporters gravitated to the Green Party nominee, Dr. Jill Stein, who cast herself as a Sanders ally, telling supporters that “the Bernie Sanders movement lives on outside the Democratic Party.” Like Sanders, Stein castigated the power exercised by Wall Street, supported measures to eliminate student debt, endorsed the Black Lives Matter movement, opposed Donald Trump’s plan to build a wall on the US-Mexican border, and called for clean, renewable energy sources. Both Clinton and Sanders made strong arguments to potential Green Party supporters not to waste their votes on a third-party candidate. Sanders explicitly told supporters that while the Green Party is “focusing on very, very important issues . . . you’re going to end up having a choice. Either Hillary Clinton is going to be president, or Donald Trump.”

As late as early October, polls showed Stein winning 3 percent of the national vote. But by Election Day, Stein’s vote share fell to a mere 1 percent. Still, her presence arguably made a difference in two states—Michigan and Wisconsin—where Stein’s total exceeded Trump’s margin of victory. Four years later, Democrats promised action on climate change, racial justice, and economic inequality, and Green Party candidate Howie Hawkins barely made a dent in the presidential race. Such appropriation of a third-party agenda is typical of how major parties have reacted throughout history to threats posed by minor parties.

**A Third-Party Revival?**

Could we be entering a period of third-party revival? A 2021 Gallup poll found 62 percent feel a third party is needed because the two major parties do a poor job of representing the American people —the highest percentage Gallup has ever recorded. The survey also found that favorable views of the Republican Party had declined to a mere 37 percent (Democrats were at a comparatively healthy 48 percent). Fully 50 percent of respondents described themselves as independents, also the highest percentage Gallup has recorded in a single poll.

Historically, third parties have won public support when voters found the major parties lacking in their responses to the major issues of the day. Abolitionist parties developed because of slavery, the Populists and Greenbacks because of economic issues, the Progressives because of corruption, and segregationist parties in response to civil rights legislation. Although the winner-take-all electoral
system, the Electoral College, barriers to ballot access, and a host of historical and cultural forces sustain the two-party model, minor parties have played a critical role at key moments before fading into the history books.

Several scholars have explored the idea that minor parties help shape the party system in ways major parties cannot. Theodore J. Lowi, a former president of the American Political Science Association, writes, “New ideas and issues develop or redevelop parties, but parties, particularly established ones, rarely develop ideas or present new issues on their own. . . . Once a system of parties is established, the range and scope of policy discussion is set, until and unless some disturbance arises from other quarters.” The “disturbance” Lowi speaks of is the development of aggressive third parties. Lowi notes there have been four historical eras where Democrats and Republicans have been especially innovative: 1856–1860; 1890–1900; 1912–1914; and 1933–1935. During these years, party leaders became more susceptible to mass opinion because of third-party competition. Once the policy innovations were achieved, however, third parties withered away.

How will third parties fare in an era when Americans say they are dissatisfied with the two major parties? Certainly, today’s social networking capability makes it easier for minor party leaders to connect with potential supporters at a minimal cost. Certain ballot reforms may also be a boon to third parties. Ranked-choice voting, first used in Maine and now adopted in other jurisdictions like Alaska and New York City, allows voters to select second and third choices. If no candidate receives 50 percent of the vote, the second and third preferences of voters who supported candidates at the bottom of the list are added to the tally of the candidates at the top, until a candidate crosses the 50 percent threshold. This system gives voters an incentive to select third-party candidates as their first choice, potentially overcoming the “wasted vote” syndrome that has bedeviled third parties who have succumbed to Duverger’s Law.

One tantalizing possibility is that former Republicans pushed out of their party by Donald Trump will feel motivated to start a third party with the intention of marginalizing post-Trump Republicans. During his four years in the White House, Trump recast the Republican Party in his image, making it more reactionary and beholden to a populist base. In this regard, today’s Republicans look more like third-party insurgencies of the past and less like the large, catch-all parties favored by the winner-take-all electoral system. More than one-hundred former Republican officials have discussed forming a “center-right” third party. Former GOP representative Charlie Dent explains that these disgruntled leaders “want a clean break from President Trump, and we are rallying around some core founding principles like truth and honesty, and democracy and rule of law.” For
his part, Trump has threatened to form a “Patriot Party,” leading a third-party movement that would threaten the ability of more establishment-minded Republicans to win elections. Whether either third party will come to pass is unclear, but the fracturing of the Republican Party creates the potential for a third party that could reshape American politics in the coming decade.

Whatever may happen, the obstacles that prevent the creation of a viable third party are daunting. Over the past three decades, the centralization and professionalization of electoral politics has accentuated a profound shift toward Hamiltonian nationalism. Major party candidates must amass huge war chests, with successful presidential campaigns having to raise extraordinary amounts of money just to be competitive. These efforts are beyond the reach of most third parties, despite the fervent backing of their most ardent supporters. Congressional failure to pass meaningful campaign finance reform legislation means that the torrent of cash flooding into the major party coffers will continue. In addition, the centralization of the two major party committees gives Democrats and Republicans a tremendous advantage. Third parties are often decentralized organizations that have very little power at the top. For these reasons, it is most likely that minor parties will continue to exert their greatest influence at the margins, even if such marginal influences are at times profound.