

Third-party and Independent Candidates

The United States is often thought of as functioning under a two-party system. In practical effect this is true: Either a Democrat or a Republican has occupied the White House every year since 1852. At the same time, however, the country has produced a plethora of third and minor parties over the years. For example, 58 parties were represented on at least one state ballot during the 1992 presidential elections. Among these were obscure parties such as the Apathy, the Looking Back, the New Mexico Prohibition, the Tish Independent Citizens, and the Vermont Taxpayers.

Third parties organize around a single issue or set of issues. They tend to fare best when they have a charismatic leader. With the presidency out of reach, most seek a platform to publicize their political and social concerns.

Theodore Roosevelt. The most successful third-party candidate of the 20th century was a Republican, Theodore Roosevelt, the former president. His Progressive or Bull Moose Party won 27.4 percent of the vote in the 1912 election. The progressive wing of the Republican Party,

having grown disenchanted with President William Howard Taft, whom Roosevelt had hand-picked as his successor, urged Roosevelt to seek the party nomination in 1912. This he did, defeating Taft in a number of primaries. Taft controlled the party machinery, however, and secured the nomination.

Roosevelt's supporters then broke away and formed the Progressive Party. Declaring himself as fit as a bull moose (hence the party's popular name), Roosevelt campaigned on a platform of regulating "big business," women's suffrage, a graduated income tax, the Panama Canal, and conservation. His effort was sufficient to defeat Taft. By splitting the Republican vote, however, he helped ensure the election of the Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

Socialists. The Socialist Party also reached its high point in 1912, attaining 6 percent of the popular vote. Perennial candidate Eugene Debs won nearly 900,000 votes that year, advocating collective ownership of the transportation and communication industries, shorter working hours, and public

works projects to spur employment. Convicted of sedition during World War I, Debs campaigned from his cell in 1920.

Robert LaFollette. Another Progressive was Senator Robert La Follette, who won more than 16 percent of the vote in the 1924 election. Long a champion of farmers and industrial workers, and an ardent foe of big business, La Follette was a prime mover in the recreation of the Progressive movement following World War I. Backed by the farm and labor vote, as well as by Socialists and remnants of Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party, La Follette ran on a platform of nationalizing railroads and the country's natural resources. He also strongly supported increased taxation on the wealthy and the right of collective bargaining. He carried only his home state of Wisconsin.

Henry Wallace. The Progressive Party reinvented itself in 1948 with the nomination of Henry Wallace, a former secretary of agriculture and vice president under Franklin Roosevelt. Wallace's 1948 platform opposed the Cold War, the Marshall Plan, and big business. He also campaigned to end discrimination against African Americans and women, backed a minimum wage, and called for the elimination of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. His failure to repudiate the U.S. Communist Party, which

had endorsed him, undermined his popularity and he wound up with just over 2.4 percent of the popular vote.

Dixiecrats. Like the Progressives, the States Rights or Dixiecrat Party, led by South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond, emerged in 1948 as a spinoff from the Democratic Party. Its opposition stemmed from Truman's civil rights platform. Although defined in terms of "states' rights," the party's goal was continuing racial segregation and the "Jim Crow" laws that sustained it.

George Wallace. The racial and social upheavals of the 1960s helped bring George Wallace, another segregationist Southern governor, to national attention. Wallace built a following through his colorful attacks against civil rights, liberals, and the federal government. Founding the American Independent Party in 1968, he ran his campaign from the statehouse in Montgomery, Alabama, winning 13.5 percent of the overall presidential vote.

H. Ross Perot. Every third party seeks to capitalize on popular dissatisfaction with the major parties and the federal government. At few times in recent history, however, has this sentiment been as strong as it was during the 1992 election. A hugely wealthy Texas businessman, Perot possessed a knack for

getting his message of economic common sense and fiscal responsibility across to a wide spectrum of the people. Lampooning the nation's leaders and reducing his economic message to easily understood formulas, Perot found little difficulty gaining media attention. His campaign organization, United We Stand, was staffed primarily by volunteers and backed by his personal fortune. Far from resenting his wealth, many admired Perot's business success and the freedom it brought him from soliciting campaign funds from special interests. Perot withdrew from the race in July. Re-entering it a month before the election, he won over 19 million votes as the Reform Party standard-bearer, nearly 19 percent of the total cast. This was by far the largest number ever tallied by a third-party candidate and second only to Theodore Roosevelt's 1912 showing as a percentage of the total.

1. Around what do third parties organize?

2. Describe the political party formed by Theodore Roosevelt.

3. Who ran for president as a Socialist in the early 1900s?

4. Describe Robert LaFollette.

5. What was Henry Wallace's political platform?

6. What were the goals of the Dixiecrats?

7. Who founded the American Independent Party in 1968?

8. Would you consider voting for a third-party candidate? Why or why not?

