

5.5 Third-Party Politics

Explain how structural barriers impact third party and independent candidate success.

Representative democracies can take on many different forms. Parliamentary governments, for instance, are often characterized by a multi-party system. With proportional elections minor parties have the ability to get their voices heard within the government. In these systems a political party that receives just a small number of votes may still earn seats in the legislative chamber. Election law helps to explain why American politics has but two major political parties. Although it can be argued that minor parties still play an important role in American politics.

We continue to have only two major parties for a couple of important reasons. There are structural barriers to third party success in American politics. The rules governing our elections reinforce our two-party system. We have single member districts. In each election there is only one winner. Elections outcomes here are usually determined by a plurality. This means the most votes win. You do not need a majority to win in most elections, just more votes than your opponent. With two parties, however, winners in plurality elections are guaranteed a mathematical majority. This is also reflected in the Electoral College's winner-take-all rule.

French sociologist Maurice Duverger, more than any other, has codified this "law" of two-party systems. Duverger's Law states,

In cases where there are three parties operating under [a single member district, plurality election system] the electors soon realize that their votes are wasted if they continue to give them to the third party: whence their natural tendency to transfer their vote to the less evil of its two adversaries in order to prevent the success of the greater evil. This 'polarization' effect works to the detriment of a new party so long as it is the weakest party but is turned against the less favored of its older rivals as soon as the new party outstrips it.

Put simply, the barrier to third party success can be explained in structural barriers. Where plurality elections exist alongside single member districts you should expect to find a two party political system.

More pragmatically, we have a two-party system because our political parties do not hold on to rigid platforms. Favored issues and positions on public policy shift over time. The parties want to attract voters. Holding on to dogmatic positions does not do this. Most issues in America have a binary characteristic; they are either/or and yes/no positions. American government is represented by a two-party system.

There are still minor parties who attempt to attract voters. Third parties are certainly allowed but they usually are not effective. Plurality elections make it almost impossible for third party candidates to win. Minor parties can play important roles. They often champion new issues in their platforms. If these new issues resonate with voters they generally do not propel a minor party but rather induce one of the two major parties to take it on as their own. For example, when a minor party in the 1990s championed fiscal responsibility, an issue that gained wide support, the Republican Party saw an opportunity and began to herald it in order to win elections more broadly. In this way third parties are often compared to bees. Once they sting they die. So, it is with minor parties. Once a minor party gets noticed one of the two major parties begins to proclaim its cause making the third party's existence mute.

Third parties along with independent candidate success is limited in American politics. This should not be explained simply by their lack of resonance. Structural barriers along with the malleability of dominant party platforms best explain why third parties have a difficult time getting their candidates elected. And without winning elections even weakened parties find their survival dubious.