

Can the American Two-Party System Survive the 21st Century?

William G. Borges
INTI University College
Malaysia

Abstract

Controversy surrounding the 2008 election, the first which produced a black American president, largely ignored the importance of the role played by the nation's two major parties in determining the November outcome. American political scientists are accustomed to the lack of attention given these parties, as they realize the utter weakness of the parties. These parties exist, at the national level, in name only. Candidates hoping to win office, at the local, state and national levels, know that it is nearly impossible to do so without attaching a "D" or "R" after their names on their respective ballot-slots. But the parties do not run things; the candidates, and their organizations, do.

In most of the democratic world, political parties play a huge role in recruiting, nominating and electing party candidates to office, and in effectively overseeing the process of governing once the elections have produced winners. In the United States, the parties, at the national level, do not recruit candidates, though they help with funding. The candidates call the shots—defining their own positions on issues (with little or no regard for so-called "party positions" on those issues), choosing their own running mates, and running their campaigns as they see fit. This means, of course, that once the winners take office, they owe nothing to their nominal parties. (In Congress, the parties are strong, but only within the two chambers, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The parties do not determine who will run, or what positions the candidates should embrace.)

Whether weak, virtually non-existent national parties is good for America is an issue—a debate topic, in fact—for another article. Here I examine, within the context of America's feeble national parties,

the issue of two-partyism. America has never had a multi-party system, where more than two parties competed for the presidency and Congress, for any notable period of time. The two competitive parties have, from time to time, changed, but once in place they never have had to concern themselves with outside competition. When outsiders emerged, it invariably was due to the candidacy—the leadership—of a celebrity candidate, who managed to capture the attention of millions of people. But once the celebrity candidate left the scene, the “third party” movement always withered. With these minor intrusions noted, two dominant parties have held, throughout American history (or at least since President George Washington, a fierce opponent of political parties, left office) a monopoly on party-competitiveness.

The persistence of the two-party model in America can be explained by several factors: A basically classless society; a legislative structure which provides single-member districts and winner-take-all elections; and federalism, which works against the formation of new national parties. And today—after nearly one and one-half centuries of the same two national parties, another factor—familiarity—inhibits strong third-party challenges. That is, Americans have grown accustomed to the Democrats and Republicans, as they have grown accustomed to certain holidays, practices and ways of greeting one another.

In recent years, however, several serious challenges to the two-party dynasty have appeared, and although the challengers have not won national office, they have revealed the willingness of millions of Americans to reconsider their loyalty to the longstanding two-party monopoly. A key to the success of any third-party (or independent) movement is the ability of the movement leaders to convince voters that the challengers can actually win office. Typically, potent outsider challengers poll extremely well until election-time nears, when voters conclude that their preferred candidate, the outsider, cannot win, and instead choose to vote for the candidate of the two major parties whose views or positions most closely line up with those of their preferred outsider. But things may be changing.