

# POLITICAL CHANGE AND REFORM? YES, BUT HOW? THREE PERSPECTIVES:

## AMERICANS WANT AND NEED A NEW POLITICAL PARTY

*By Gordon S. Black and Benjamin D. Black*

With the lone exception of the Republicans, new political parties in the United States have achieved limited success. Anyone who approaches this topic must acknowledge that the historical evidence suggests that those who today believe a new major party is needed are likely to be disappointed in their quest. We should not forget, however, that history is best used to explain the past. It's rarely effective in predicting the future.

A successful new political party will almost certainly arise someday in American politics, just as the Republicans did in the 1850s. When that happens, the historical evidence will "seem" just as convincing as it does now, but the party will arise despite it. The conventional wisdom will prove decidedly wrong at that point, because someone or some group will have figured out why the ancient precedents don't apply. Yet another element needs to be considered. Many political parties have in fact been successful in electing people to local and state offices—although not for a century and a third has a new party won the presidency or gained control of Congress.

At issue, then, is not whether a new party can have some success—many

have—but the *extent* to which it can succeed. The latter is determined by whether or not certain basic conditions are present in the country.

**Condition 1: The presence of a "market."** The first condition for the

What percentage of the population is dissatisfied with the policies of the existing political parties?

Given substantial dissatisfaction with existing parties, what percentage of the population would be attracted by a new party with certain issue attributes?

How strongly are they attracted by this potential party? Conversely, how actively are they repelled by attributes of the existing parties?

The answers to these questions are empirical. If 90% of the population in a democracy dislikes an existing party, that party can't long persist as a major force. All over eastern Europe, for example, communist parties collapsed abruptly when the people were finally given a voice in their political affairs.

The first question was easy to answer. We conducted a feasibility study of 1,600 registered

and likely voters in late May 1992 and found that over half of all voters were angry with both major parties. Nearly half the voters concluded that neither party

emergence of a political party is that there must be a market for it. The size of this market is determined by the answers to a few key questions:

TABLE I  
BROAD BACKING FOR A NEW POLITICAL PARTY

	All Respondents	Those Inclined to Back Perot at Time of Survey	New Party Voters*
1. Agree, if Democrats and Republicans continue to run things, we'll never get reform.	46%	64%	76%
2. Agree, need a new political party to reform American politics.	47%	67%	100%
3. Yes, would like to see new national party run candidates.	57%	75%	100%
4. Agree, neither party can get things going; need new party.	50%	72%	100%
5. Agree, current incumbents will never reform political process.	69%	83%	87%
6. Yes, angry at both political parties and their candidates.	56%	79%	84%
7. Would switch and vote new party if positions match their own.	65%	81%	100%

\*New party voters are those answering "yes" to items 2, 3, 4, and 7.

#### Questions:

1. The following are some negative things people are saying about state and national politics these days. For each one, please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement...If the Democrats and Republicans continue to run things, we'll never get real reform.
2. (Same preface as 1)...We need a new political party to reform American politics.
3. Would you like to see a new national political party form, and run candidates for office?
4. Some people are saying that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are capable any longer of getting this country going in the right direction, and that we need a new national political party. Do you strongly agree, moderately agree, moderately disagree, or strongly disagree?
5. (Same preface as 1)...The current incumbents in office will never reform the political process.
6. Some people are angry at both political parties and their candidates. Would you say that describes how you feel right now?
7. Suppose that a new reform-oriented political party is created to run candidates for Congress, the Senate, and even your state legislature. Assuming for a moment that this new party was supporting YOUR positions on many of the issues you care about, would you be MOST likely to vote for the candidates of the new reform party or would you be MOST likely to continue to vote either for the Republican or the Democratic candidates?

Source: Survey by Gordon S. Black Corporation, May 1992.

was likely to provide them with the type of public policies they wanted. We asked four separate questions concerning the desire to have a new party. Thirty percent of the electorate answered all four questions in the affirmative. (The question wordings and the responses are shown in Table 1, items 1-4.) Other surveys have come up with similar findings. For example, a CBS News poll in June 1992 found 31% of the public agreeing that the “two political parties have become obsolete,” while 58% agreed that “the country needs a new political party to compete with the Democratic and Republican parties.”

If one computes the impact of our potential new party on the two old parties, it appears that they might be left with about equal shares of the electorate—25% or so each. The new party, by contrast, might attract 30% of voters.

The second question has to do with the issue attributes of the new party. Voters will not join a new party just for the sake of joining. We examined a whole range of issues where we had reason to believe that the voters, particularly those disaffected, would be prepared to support positions in overwhelming numbers. We found the base for a political party involved a commitment to fundamental electoral, governmental, and policy reform. (See Tables 2 and 3)

The final question is whether voters will actually defect to the candidates of a new political party. Those whom we

surveyed indicated by a margin of 65% to 22% that they would jump ship to a new, “reform-oriented” party—assuming the new party supports most of their positions on the major issues (Table 1, item 7). The reasons for so high a willingness to switch are simple. Party loyalty continues to erode, due in part to shortcomings of both the Republicans and Democrats. They have engaged in a whole range of behavior that has turned off many voters.

were asked in a smaller sample of 600 in August. The only statistically significant difference was that the percentage of people angry with the Democratic party had dropped from 59% to 50%.

Is there a “potential market” for a new, reform-oriented, centrist political party? The research produced an affirmative answer about as unequivocally as any study could possibly produce. A majority of the public is fed up with two established political parties, with Congress, the president, and state office holders. They see the parties having collaborated to produce many of the problems of the past two decades. The Democrats and Republicans, of course, blame each other with great vehemence, and the public thinks it’s about the only thing they can get right.

In 1990, 72% of the seats in the House of Representatives were considered locked up by one or the other of the major parties. As a result, there was no significant challenge to the party in power in those districts. However, in the remaining districts (28%)

where there was a significant challenge to the incumbent in power, the 1990 exit polls showed that 63% of voters went against the incumbent. If voters are given a real choice, rather than a sacrificial lamb, they are more than willing to reject their congressman. A third party mounting such challenges is likely to have broad success.

**Condition 2: Creating the new party organizationally.** The existence of a “market” is a necessary but not a

TABLE 2  
SUPPORT FOR REFORM OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

	All Respondents	Those Inclined to Back Perot at Time of Survey	New Party Voters
1. Limit terms of members of Congress, senators, governors, state legislators to 12 years.	77%	82%	86%
2. House elections run every four years instead of every two years.	58%	62%	58%
3. Prohibit campaign contributions from PACS.	66%	72%	77%
4. Prohibit campaign contributions from foreign gov'ts, corps., or individuals.	78%	80%	82%
5. Favor public funding—if it would encourage better candidates against incumbents.	79%	81%	84%
6. Favor public funding—if tied to elimination of PAC contributions.	76%	79%	80%

Note: Percentages shown are those approving of the proposal.

**Questions:**

1. The following are proposed changes in election laws. For each one, please tell me whether you approve or disapprove of the proposal... Limit the terms of office of members of Congress, senators, governors, and state legislators to 12 years.
2. (Same preface as 1)...Have members of the House of Representatives run every four years, instead of every two years as the constitution currently requires.
3. (Same preface as 1)...Prohibit campaign contributions from the Political Action Committees.
4. (Same preface as 1)...Prohibit campaign contributions from foreign governments, foreign corporations, or foreign individuals.
5. If public funding of campaigns would encourage more good people to run against incumbents, would you favor or oppose public funding of congressional and senatorial candidates?
6. If public funding were tied to the elimination of all special interest campaign contributions, would you favor or oppose public funding?

Source: Survey by Gordon S. Black Corporation, May 1992.

Voters, as political consumers, are little different from the car-buying public, which defected by the millions to the Japanese when the American car manufacturers failed to give them the quality product they wanted. The support for Perot at his peak proves that people are more than willing to look outside the old two-party system.

As a test of the validity of the spring 1992 survey, many of the same questions

sufficient condition for the creation of a new party. Organizationally, a political party is "people with resources and motivation." Without the right kind of active participants it's impossible to create a successful party. But what kinds of people? The organizing leadership must be people with:

High and sustainable motivation.

Access to resources, including money; access to others; organizational skills; substantive knowledge with regard to public policy.

Income that can sustain their independent activities; or a willingness to forgo income for a time.

Broad agreement on political interests and values.

A political party that can tap such leadership can succeed for the long haul. One doesn't need many people with these skills and resources to make things happen in most metropolitan areas. Collect 10 to 15 of them in a metropolitan area of one million people, coupled with a market like the one described above, and a political party can be created rapidly. The question of whether a new party can attract 2,500 to 3,000 such persons nationally is again an empirical question, and one for which we do not yet have a complete answer. The organizers of the Independence Party have a well-developed list of more than 20,000 such activists. They performed a randomized market test from this list with a sample of 400. Their "success rate" in terms of preliminary recruitment exceeded 15%, which clearly would produce more than

enough leaders from a list of 20,000. The final answer will only come, of course, when they approach the full list.

**Condition 3: Getting on the ballot.** Getting on the ballot is nothing more than a matter of resources. With money, a party can get on the ballot everywhere. Ross Perot has shown that he could gain access to the ballot, albeit at a cost of 18 million dollars. But even minor party efforts have proved successful. The courts have been lowering the barriers to ballot access, and the legal suits are one of the best ways to show publicly how the established parties have rigged the system.

control them. The Gordon S. Black Corporation has performed surveys of national convention delegates for NBC News and USA Today, and we were ourselves surprised at how skewed these activists' views are toward certain special interests. Two statistics capture this unrepresentativeness: Of the Republican delegates in Houston, 46% said they were "born again" Christians; over two-thirds of the delegates were conservative to very conservative. Of the Democratic delegates in New York City this year, 45% said they were employed by government in some form or capacity.

In other words, we have one political party—the Republicans—dominated by a moral minority who would impose their views of morality on the rest of us. We have a second party—the Democrats—dominated by those who are in the direct employ of most of the programs the public would reform. The Democratic wolves are running the government chicken factories. The only way to convince voters that the system can be changed is to challenge it from outside.

Will the major parties reform themselves? Is that a gamble the public is willing to take with its time, money, and energy? We know that two out of every three voters believe that the

current incumbents are never going to reform the system, and nearly half believe that the political parties are incapable of reforming anything.

**Apologists for the Two Party System**

As Theodore Lowi of Cornell University has pointed out (New York Times Magazine, August 23, 1992), many ob-

TABLE 3  
SUPPORT FOR DIRECT DEMOCRACY

	All Respondents	Those Inclined to Back Perot at Time of Survey	New Party Voters
1. Give citizens in your state the right of "initiative."	92%	96%	96%
2. Establish the right of initiative for federal legislation.	85%	90%	90%
3. Provide for a referendum on annual state budget.	80%	82%	85%
4. Provide for constitutional amendment requiring national referendum on federal tax increases.	72%	77%	80%
5. Provide for recall elections of public officials.	84%	89%	91%
6. Provide for constitutional amendment requiring balanced budget every year.	84%	89%	91%

Note: Percentages shown are those approving of the proposal.

**Questions:**

1. There are several other rights that some states give their citizens to provide them with a way of influencing their government. The right of citizens to sign a petition to have a law placed on the ballot for a vote by everyone is called the "initiative." In general, do you favor or oppose giving citizens the initiative in your state?
2. Would you favor or oppose giving citizens the right to petition the federal government to have a law placed on the ballot for national elections?
3. In some states certain proposals must be on the ballot so that everyone has an opportunity to vote on them. This is called a "referendum." In general, do you favor or oppose requiring a referendum on the annual budget of your state?
4. Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment to require that any federal tax increase be voted on in a national referendum by the general public?
5. Some states permit citizens to sign petitions asking for a recall election for an elected public official. When enough signatures are obtained, a special election is held where the voters can vote a public official out of office. Would you favor or oppose giving citizens the right to have a recall election where they can vote an elected state or local official out of office?
6. Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would require Congress and the President to provide a balanced budget every year?

Source: Survey by Gordon S. Black Corporation, May 1992.

**Condition 4: Avoiding a situation where the new party's positions are pre-empted.** Our political parties have had years to deal with many of the problems that outrage the electorate, but they haven't done much at all about them. Some of the main problems with both parties stem from the constituencies that

servers who argue against the potential for a new national party are in fact advocates of the virtues of two-party democracy. They naturally would want any new party effort to fail.

Our two-party system, as we have practiced it since 1965, is about as big a failure as any system can be. In the process of failing, the parties have managed to antagonize and alienate two out of every three voters. The party system has become one gigantic payoff system, with candidates accepting large electoral bribes

in exchange for delivering the public policy sought by the PACs and other interest groups. The much ballyhooed turnover this year in Congress is substantially (over half) a product of Congress's "bribing" members to retire by allowing them to retain huge campaign war chests for their personal use.

The analogy between former Soviet communism and the American two-party system, though absurd on the surface, is frighteningly pertinent. Both systems have conspired to artificially maintain the status quo. Communism survived by threat

of force; the two-party system by eliminating voter choice through gerrymandering, by attracting huge amounts of PAC money, and through incumbent perks. In addition, both systems have existed through eliminating (or in the US, greatly curbing) the ability of challengers to gain access to the ballot. A New York voter, for example, does not have a choice when 147 of the 190 incumbents for the state senate are unopposed. But now there is reason to take heart: Ten years ago the collapse of communism seemed far more unlikely than the creation of a third political party in the United States does today.

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## AMERICANS NEED (BUT DON'T WANT) A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

*By Burns W. Roper*

The American public is not happy with the country's present political situation; in fact, it's very upset. A number of things make this clear—not the least, the rise of Ross Perot last spring and early summer to the point that he actually led the Republican and Democratic standard bearers in several polls. But while it's clear that the public is unhappy with the way the political system is now working, it's not that clear just what the public is dissatisfied with and what changes it would make to correct the situation.

The two most frequently talked about ideas for changing and improving our political system are term limits on the Congress (we already have term limits on the presidency) and creating a strong, viable third party. My judgment is that neither of these changes would advance the reform the US needs. I'll explain why I think so, and then discuss the sweeping institutional change I believe is necessary.

### Limit Members' Tenure?

Both term limits and the concept of a third party have fared well—both in the polls and in the election. A review of the polls indicates that in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s about half of the public favored term limits for senators and representatives; in most cases, the limits asked about represented a total of twelve years. Recently, sentiment for term limits has risen: 60% to 80% now favor them for members of Congress. Again, the limit most frequently asked about is twelve years for both senators and congressmen. However, a CBS News/New York Times poll, which asked a more open-ended question, suggests that many Americans prefer an eight year limit.

In his new book, *The Wedge: A Case For Term Limits For Congress* (NY: The Free Press, 1992), George Will makes the most compelling case I have seen for term limitation. One of his main arguments is that with a term limitation people could not make a career of serving as a representative or senator. He argues that there are

many politicians who know how to gain and hold office but who have no real interest in governance—only in self-perpetuation. Term limitations would eliminate such "careerists." He acknowledges that many good people would be forced out of office before they should be, but argues that the gain would exceed the loss.

One potential additional drawback to term limitations has been little discussed. If there were an eight or twelve year limit, and hence no long-term career path to serving as an elected official, then time in Congress might well become a stepping stone to a person's ultimate career as a lobbyist or influence-peddler. Learn the ropes, get to know the key people, and then sell your know-how and contacts to industry, foreign governments, whoever has an axe to grind. Changing the office from a career to a stepping stone might thus attract less dedicated candidates.

Would we have better medicine if doctors were limited to twelve year ca-