

The Party Really Isn't Over

by David W. Moore

In a recent article¹, David Broder makes the provocative prediction that history will judge the 1996 presidential election to be important not because of the outcome between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, whatever that might be, but because this presidential election witnessed the establishment of the Reform Party. This development could be “the launching pad for a third-party candidacy in the year 2000 that could remake our political system.” Broder bases this tentative prediction on the increasing “political turbulence” he sees in American politics, represented by the 19% vote received by Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential election (“a bigger share of the vote than any third party candidate in 80 years”), and the 1994 Republican victory in the US House of Representatives, the first time Republicans gained majority control in 40 years. In Broder’s view, this turbulence has been caused principally by economic,

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geopolitical and generational changes that have occurred not just in the United States but across the world, one of the most important of which was the end of the Cold War—“removing what had been the main prop to the entire structure of government and politics since 1946.” According to Broder, “under these circumstances, and with the psychological impulse of the dawning of a new millennium, it would hardly be surprising to see a new party configuration emerge—and a new party seriously compete for the presidency.”

Broder’s general thesis is not unique. Gordon and Benjamin Black², among others, have called for a new party to at least compete with the two major parties, if not replace one of them. And the recent legal actions by the Reform Party, as well as the Libertarian and Natural Law parties (all three of which have met ballot law requirements in 45 or more states), to force the debate commission to include their parties’ candidate in the presidential debates, all testify to a robust effort among activists to create a new party system that is more inclusive than the dominant two-party system that exists now.

A major assumption underlying many of these efforts and arguments is that Americans are “angry” with the political system and with the political parties. Broder is quite explicit about that point: While he still believes that the current two-party system is “a vital and irreplaceable bulwark to our system of government,” he feels that “public dissatisfaction with the performance of the Democrats and Republicans is simply too great to ignore.” That was the same point made by the Blacks in their manifesto calling for the formation of a new political party. And it is a theme frequently put forth by political pundits when discussing this year’s presidential election.

A review of polling data, however, suggests that support for third party movements may be overstated. Americans do seem *open* to the idea of a third party, a kind of “the-more-the-merrier” reaction, but they do not seem so strongly dissatisfied with the two major parties that they are actively seeking a third party to save them. On the other hand, their openness to the idea of third parties could provide an opportunity, however elusive, for a third party to organize those who are discontented into a coherent constituency.

In Fact, Americans Look Favorably on the Two Main Parties

Much scholarly research over the years has shown a decline in the public’s attachment to political parties, but that decline is not the same as dissatisfaction. Martin Wattenberg’s study of party decline showed that the net movement of people over the period from the 1950s to the 1980s was from the positive and negative ends of the scale to the neutral point.³ Recent Gallup polls reinforce the notion that most people are not actually upset with the two major parties, but hold favorable views of at least one of them.

A poll in September 1995, for example, shows that while 64% favor the formation of a new independent party, only 12% feel the new party should replace either one of the two major parties (6% feel it should replace the Republican Party, and a separate 6% feel it should replace the Democratic Party). Over half (52%) say a new independent party should exist along with the two major parties—and combined with the 26% who prefer the two-party system to remain exclusive, that makes almost eight in ten expressing some level of support for the major parties.

This positive attitude is found in numerous other surveys, where people are asked whether they have a favorable or unfavorable view of the two major parties. Typically, just over a majority say they feel favorable about the Republican Party, and a majority (not necessarily the same people) say they feel favorable about the Democratic Party. These results do not suggest, however, that a large number of people feel negative about *both* parties.

A national survey right after the Republican convention showed that by identical margins of 55% to 41%, registered voters felt favorable rather than unfavorable toward each party. After the Democratic convention, the numbers shifted somewhat, with ratings for

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both parties more favorable than unfavorable, but by a 60% to 36% margin for Democrats, and 50% to 45% for Republicans. In both surveys, despite the different ratings for each party individually, about nine in ten voters gave a favorable rating to at least one of the two parties: 92% in mid-August (post-Republican convention), 89% at the end of August (post-Democratic convention) (See Table 1).

These results belie the notion that Americans are so disgruntled—at least at this time—with the two major parties, that they can hardly wait for another party to bid for their support. In fact, only 5% in the post-Republican convention survey expressed unfavorable feelings about both parties, and 7% in the post-Democratic convention survey. Another 3-4% were neutral on one or both parties. Thus, there seems to be only a small number of already unhappy voters who would be readily attracted to a new party. To be viable, a new party would have to attract many additional voters who were relatively satisfied with the status quo—a daunting fight against inertia for any group.

Still, the Public Likes the Idea of More Choices

On the other hand, however positive people feel about the two major parties, they also seem quite willing to entertain the possibility of a three-party system. In August 1995, a Gallup poll showed Americans favoring “the formation of a third political party that would run candidates for President, Congress, and state offices against the Republican and Democratic candidates,” by a margin of 62% to 29%. Four months earlier, the sentiment had been about the same: 60% favored a third party, 34% opposed it. Previously, Yankelovich had asked the same question—twice in 1992 and once in both 1994 and

1995—all with similar results, averaging 59% in favor, 31% opposed. When Perot announced in September 1995 that he and his supporters actually intended to form a third national political party, the ratio of support to opposition was also high: 46% favored the formation of the party, just 29% opposed it (25% expressed no opinion).

Americans have also consistently indicated they would prefer more than just the two major party candidates in the presidential race. In September 1995, about a third (32%) said they would be satisfied if Clinton and Dole were the only two candidates on the 1996 presidential ballot, but almost twice

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that number—63%—said they would want to see a third-party candidate on the ballot as well. Earlier that year, two different Gallup polls asking the same question had already shown substantial support for having a third party candidate on the ballot: by 55% to 40% in August, and 56% to 41% in April. Along the same line, two polls this past September showed that a majority of Americans disagreed with the decision that excluded Perot from the presidential debates: A one-night poll right after the decision showed that 52% felt Perot should have been included in the debates, while just 37% felt he should have been excluded. And a subsequent poll two weeks later showed that support for Perot’s participation in the debates had increased to 60%. The one-night poll also showed a sizable number of people (45%) would support other third-party candidates besides Perot in the debate, with about the same number (44%) opposed.

A Gallup poll, in April 1995, showed that a clear majority of people (54%) were not only willing to have third party candidates on the ballot, but would vote for such a candidate if he or she “was the best person for the job” even if the candidate “had no chance of winning.” Forty percent said that under those circumstances they would choose between the two major party candidates.

Another indicator of public support for third-party candidates comes from a question in a September 1995 Gallup poll that asked whether respondents felt that Republicans and Democrats “could solve the problems facing the United States these days” or whether it would take “a new political party to solve them”: A plurality (46%) said a new party was necessary, while just 31% said the two major parties could do it, and another 16% said no party could solve America’s problems. A similar question in October 1994 also found sizable support for a third party: Only four in ten (40%) said the two parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, while a

Table 1
Favorability Ratings of Two Major Parties After the Republican and Democratic Conventions

	Mid-August	End of August
Favorable to both parties	18%	20%
Favorable only to Democratic Party	37	39
Favorable only to Republican Party	37	30
Subtotal (Favorable to at least one party)	92	89
Unfavorable to both parties	5	7
Unfavorable to one, neutral to other	1	1
Unsure about both	2	3
Subtotal (Not favorable to either party)	8	11

Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today, August 14-15 and August 28-29.

majority—53%—said they would like there to be a third party as well.

How Big Is the Potential Third Constituency?

Given the general positive feeling people have for the two parties, as well as their receptivity to third parties, it is difficult to assess how much support a new party might attract. Perot's initial efforts in 1992 suggested a great deal of support was available, but his dropping out of the race fatally damaged his credibility. After reentering the race, he did in fact regain his high favorability ratings, but never the credibility and thus the electoral support he first enjoyed. And in 1996, Perot's ratings are so low that it is not useful to judge the viability of the Reform Party by how well Perot himself is doing.

The Blacks argued that the core loyalists of a new party might be expected to be about 24% of the electorate, based on several questions they have asked in their polls.⁴ Gallup surveys based on favorability ratings described above suggest that the Blacks' estimate is high. Presumably, a "core" constituency would at least have to be neutral about the two major parties, if not outright negative toward them. Table 1 shows that only about one in ten voters meet that criterion.

However, other questions asked over the years point to perhaps a larger potential constituency. In October 1994, for example, voters were asked to evaluate how well each party represented "people like yourself." Overall, 32% gave high marks to both parties, 21% to the Republicans only and 22% to the

Democrats only—a total of 75% who gave at least one party a high rating. But that means that 25% of the voters did not give a good rating to either party: 23% gave both parties a low rating, 1% gave one party a negative rating and the other a neutral one, and the last 1% had nothing positive or negative to say about either party. Presumably, this quarter of the electorate represents the most fertile

Table 2
Ideological Leanings of Dissatisfied Voters
(As a Percent of All Voters)

Very Conservative	2%
Conservative	6
Moderate	11
Liberal	3
Very liberal	2
No opinion	1
Total	25%

ground for any third party, and it is about the same size of the "core" loyalists suggested by the Blacks. (Other questions asked how well each party represented the country as a whole, people's attitudes about the role of government, and "your values," with similar results: About a quarter of the respondents did not give a favorable response to either party.)

Table 2 shows the ideological distribution of the 25% who are discontented with the two parties. They tend to be disproportionately in the middle: 11% consider themselves moderates, and another 6% conservative (but not "very"). A new party just right of center, however that might be operationally defined, could in theory have a ready-made constituency.

Broder argues that the condition for the emergence of a viable and competitive third party would be the failure of both major parties in the next two years—what he calls a "brief window of opportunity"—to make the fundamental changes in Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security that are needed "to avert the fiscal calamity that the retirement of the baby boom generation poses for the early years of the next century and avoid the political upheaval of all-out generational war." This essay does not address the likelihood that the two major parties will deal with the entitlement issues in the way that Broder envisions, nor does it assess what reaction Americans might have to any perceived failure of the two parties on those issues. But this essay does suggest that Americans are already quite receptive to third parties, and that should they perceive a major failure of the two parties as Broder envisions, it is not inconceivable that a new competitive party could emerge. For the time being, however, such a development seems highly unlikely.

Note: Survey data that are not specifically attributed to a particular source are by The Gallup Organization.

Endnotes:

¹ David S. Broder, "Is the Party Over? By 2000, a Third Contender Could be Muscling Aside the Republicans or the Democrats," the National Weekly Edition of *The Washington Post* (August 19-25, 1996), pp. 21-22. Quotations attributed to David Broder herein come from *The Washington Post* article.

² Gordon S. Black and Benjamin D. Black, *The Politics of American Discontent: How a New Party Can Make Democracy Work Again* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994).

³ Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties: 1952-1992* (Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 50-72.

⁴ Black and Black, pp. 184-187.



David W. Moore is managing editor, The Gallup Poll

For further data on Americans' party ties and growing independence, see the 8-page review on pages 47-54.