

6. The Future of Political Parties

A group of Americans is fed up with the government. The country is in a depression; they are suffering economically. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are addressing their issues. They join together with like minds to form a political party. That political party wins congressional seats, governorships, and the majority in several state legislatures. Emboldened by that win, they plan to run a candidate for the White House.

A fantasy? No. This was the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century. What they accomplished—and why they disappeared—shapes America's political landscape to this day.

Just as we have forgotten how recently many Americans didn't have the right to vote, we treat our two-party system as if it's the way things have always been and should always be. But in the late 1800s, third parties flourished. Then they were targeted for extinction. How and why is a fascinating tale of the way political parties grab and hold power. Or as political consultant Bill Hillsman puts it in his book *Run the Other Way: Fixing the Two-Party System, One Campaign at a Time*:

As much as I love Aaron Sorkin's televised portrayal of politics, *The West Wing*, it presents an unrealistic, idealized picture of our government. The reality is much closer to *The Sopranos*—escapades in raw ambition, with professional political hit men operating in the shadows and out of the public's view to maintain a vise-like grip on political power and to eliminate any threats to the two political parties' profitable business territories.¹

Hillsman should know. He advised campaigns for mavericks ranging from Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota to the politically independent wrestler-turned-governor Jesse Ventura, also of Minnesota, to Ralph Nader, Green Party candidate in 2000. Each of these candidates, including the late Wellstone, whose political positions were more progres-

sive than his party's leadership, faced uphill battles as a direct result of the consolidation of power by the Democrats and Republicans.

Of Hillsman's star candidates, only one lost his bid for office: Ralph Nader. Nader is one of the most reviled figures in current politics. Many people (including me) believe he let his ego trump common sense when he decided to run for the presidency again in 2004. In 2000, he ran on the ticket of an established third party, and many people voted for him in an effort to get federal matching funds for the Greens. (The Green Party would have had to win 5 percent of the vote to get federal funds; they only won 3 percent of the vote.) This time around, it's impossible to argue (as Nader did and does) that there's little difference between George W. Bush and his Democratic opponent. And Nader is running as an independent *sans* party, meaning that even on the implausible chance that he wins 5 percent, it will not further the third-party cause.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Candidacies like Nader's demonstrate that Americans want alternatives to the two major parties. A quarter of Americans say they have voted for an independent or third-party political candidate in at least one election.² In fact, in the past quarter of a century, a series of independent and third party presidential candidates have gotten a significant number of votes.

It's 1980. President Jimmy Carter is running against California governor Ronald Reagan. Reagan, a fiscal and social conservative, beats out ten-term congressman John Anderson of Illinois for the Republican nomination. So Anderson, a moderate with a trademark shock of white hair, decides to run as the nominee of the National Unity Movement. At one point, 20 percent of voters support Anderson, but he gets shut out of the debates. Reagan wins by a landslide over Carter, who's been buffeted by a bad economy and the Iran hostage crisis. Anderson ultimately wins 6.6 percent of the popular vote, but carries no states and wins no electoral votes.

In 1992, billionaire Ross Perot runs as an independent with the backing of his United We Stand America organization. His competitors: President George Bush and Arkansas governor Bill Clinton. Perot gets to speak at the debates. He doesn't win any electoral votes, but he gets a whopping 18.9 percent of the popular vote. (Perot also runs a less successful campaign in 1996 with the Reform Party, which later splinters into warring factions.) Clinton wins his first term in office.

Then, in 2000, consumer advocate Ralph Nader runs on the Green Party ticket. His opponents: Vice President Al Gore and Texas governor George W. Bush, plus Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan. Nader doesn't get into the debates. He receives 2.7 percent of the vote nationwide, not enough to qualify the Greens for federal matching funds. Gore wins the popular vote, and Bush takes the White House. Many analysts blame Nader for kiboshing Gore's chances.

Now, in 2004, President George W. Bush will face not only the Democratic nominee (at the time of this book's completion, Massachusetts senator John Kerry) but Ralph Nader again, this time running as an independent.

The question: will America's nonvoters care about any of these candidates?

David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies pointed to politicians' personalities as a huge factor in getting people to the polls. None of the 2004 candidates seems likely to make nonvoters watch the debates instead of reality TV. So, scratch that: what *else* will get nonvoters to the polls? Two factors stand out: whether parties and politicians actively court them, and whether voters have a long-term view of political participation. In order to get more from government, people have to vote just to prove they exist. Then politicians will court them, and finally—hopefully—they will be better served. This equation relies on voters advocating for themselves and not waiting around for the parties to take notice. Instead, citizens have to serve notice on political parties that are ignoring them, something that's beginning to happen.

Take one of the big political "givens": the loyalty of African-Americans to the Democratic Party. In an August 2003 front page story, the *New York Times* explored the rocky relationship between younger African-Americans and the Democrats. The article cited Sylvester Smith, a twenty-seven-year-old African-American. He's a registered Democrat and also a policy advisor to Arkansas's Republican governor. "I have a Frederick Douglass philosophy," said Smith. "I believe African-Americans have no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, only permanent interests."³ The Republican Party has largely chalked African-American voters up as a lost cause. (For example, when Jeb Bush first ran for governor of Florida, a reporter asked what he would do for African-Americans. He said, "Probably nothing.") Even politically independent African-Americans aren't voting Republican—

yet. But many are thinking about it. "This is a crossroads for African-Americans in the Democratic Party," says strategist Donna Brazile.

Advocates are trying to teach new voters to work the system. Take a groundbreaking 2000 outreach effort by a group called the Democracy Compact. Founder Matt Brown, now Rhode Island secretary of state, told young nonvoters that politicians would not represent them until they became a proven voting bloc. But the Democracy Compact didn't try to talk to nonvoters directly: they used peer-to-peer communication. The non-partisan organization recruited young "Democracy Captains" and trained them to explain why each vote counts. Each captain pledged to recruit twenty nonvoters and make sure they went to the polls. In the 2000 election, 55,000 new voters turned out in Rhode Island, and youth turnout rose by 41 percent.⁴ Now the Democracy Compact has become a national organization, Vote for America.

Even the best of these efforts can't overcome one factor: potential voters who loathe their choice of candidates. Many nonvoters, especially young ones, are looking for politicians that they don't have to compromise to support, people who speak their language and reflect their needs. Getting the two parties to fight over their vote is a start. Giving them a chance to vote for viable third parties as well could truly transform the political landscape.

More than a Two-Party Democracy?

America is one of the few democracies across the world with a winner-take-all two-party system. Most Western-style governments, including Germany, Spain, Japan, Israel, and Australia, use proportional representation. Instead of each race resulting in one winner from one party, major and minor parties get seats in the legislative body (like our House and Senate) in proportion to the number of votes they get. The chief executive is usually the leader of the party with the most votes, and in many nations, two parties can form a coalition government. Germany currently has a coalition government composed of the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (center-left) and the Greens.

The American system tends to make third-party votes seem like a waste of time or "spoilers." Author Micah Sifry describes America's democracy as a duopoly:

A duopoly is defined as a market with just two sellers. Picture a beach with just two ice cream stands selling essentially similar products. While the vendors may start out anywhere, eventually they will locate right next to each other in the middle of the beach where they will each be closest to half the bathers. In such a setting, as long as they can lock out any other competition, they can jointly act to raise their prices, lower the quality of their ice cream, even take a vacation at the same time. As long as this is the only beach to swim at, the bathers will be stuck. (If, however, more ice cream trucks break in, this produces a wide scattering of positions.)⁵

In other words, in cases where politicians have no serious opposition, they don't provide real alternatives. This erodes public trust and depresses voting.

Things weren't always this way. In the elections of 1876, 1888, and 1896, nearly 80 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. The Democrats and Republicans worked hard to reach voters, and series of third parties reached out to new constituencies. These third parties tended to focus on the needs of farmers, who were being squeezed by low crop prices and high transportation prices by the railroads. An increasing number went bankrupt and became sharecroppers. Spurred by outrage, these farmers formed a series of political clubs called Alliances. The Alliances then became the People's or Populist Party. They wanted to branch out from serving only farmers to dealing with the labor concerns of urban workers. In 1890, the Populists won Senate and Congressional seats, three governorships, and the majority of seven state legislatures.

In 1896 the Populists joined with Democrats to support William Jennings Bryan. (The two parties actually ran two tickets with separate vice presidential candidates.) Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward write: "The Democratic-Populist challenge was alarming, even horrifying—and to wealthy Democrats as well as Republicans. Accordingly, corporate interests mobilized and poured unprecedented sums into Republican coffers for the McKinley campaign. . . ." ⁶ Bryan lost decisively to William McKinley and his big money donors, and the Populists were absorbed by the Democrats.

Before 1896, the two major parties battled each other in many states. After 1896, Democrats tended to control the South and Republicans the

North, making a two-party system into a virtual one-party system favoring incumbents. Voting reforms weakened the ability of parties to reach poor and working-class voters, and states instituted requirements like literacy tests. Both the Democrats and the Republicans became more conservative. As a result of all these factors, between 1896 and 1920 voter turnout declined from 79 to 49 percent.⁷

Why didn't another third party emerge to replace the Populists and make the two major parties work harder for votes? States felt so threatened by the Populists that they actually changed the laws to make third-party voting more politically risky.

The Populists were able to win so many seats in part because they used a strategy of "fusion." In fusion, two or more parties (usually a third party and a major party) nominate the same candidate for office. Voters then have the choice of voting for a major party candidate, but registering their overall support for the platform and goals of a third party. Politicians can track how many of their votes came from third-party voters, and they know these voters will hold them accountable for their positions. Or as Elizabeth A. Hodges writes in *Σ Magazine*, "If Candidate Johnson wins an election by ten percent, and ten percent of her votes came from people voting on the minor party's line, Candidate Johnson must be accountable to the minor party to win re-election."⁸ In some ways, fusion parties also act like a "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." Voters who trust their minor party's leadership will trust a major-party candidate who's endorsed.

Now the bad news. Between 1896 and the 1920s, all but ten states blocked the ability of parties to run candidates in conjunction with each other. This meant that more and more often, a third-party vote was just a protest vote. These protests have included strong conservative movements as well as liberal ones. During the civil rights era, two segregationist candidates carried a significant number of presidential votes. In 1948, Strom Thurmond ran on the States' Rights ticket and got 2.4 percent of the vote nationally, reaching double-digits in parts of the South. And in 1968, George Wallace ran as the candidate of the American Independent Party and got 13.5 percent of the vote.

Then, in 1996, a third party named the New Party filed an objection to Minnesota's anti-fusion law. (They wanted to run a Democratic candidate as one of their nominees.) The New Party won in state court. Minnesota's

election officials appealed to the Supreme Court. Well-known Harvard Law professor Lawrence Tribe was counsel for the New Party. But by a 6-3 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the state law blocking fusion parties could stand.⁹

In 1998, however, the New Party helped to found the Working Families Party (WFP) of New York, one of the states that permits fusion. Currently, the WFP is running a major campaign to raise the state's minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.10 per hour. A bill has already passed the State Assembly, and is awaiting passage from the State Senate.

The Working Families party attracts voters from liberal New York City neighborhoods like Park Slope, Brooklyn, as well as citizens from working-class upstate towns. The WFP's Bill Lipton describes their voter outreach as "sitting on a three-legged stool"

First, we have a really good track record of turning out occasional voter and nonvoters, especially in local elections. We do a lot of targeted voter registration.

Second, we go after working-class union voters—Reagan Democrat types. In Suffolk County, Congressman Tim Bishop [who ran as a Democrat/Working Families Party candidate], beat Felix Grucci [who ran on the Republican, Independence, Conservative, and Right to Life lines]. Grucci was the only Republican incumbent to lose in country. . . .

Third, [we attract] progressive [and normally Democratic] voters. We basically get forty percent of the vote in Park Slope and the Upper West Side.

In all, about 15 percent of the votes cast in New York are on the Working Families' line. In general, the party endorses major-party candidates, usually but not always Democrats. But this year, a Working Families' candidate, Letitia James, won a city council seat against a Democrat.

Fusion does not guarantee high voter turnout. Of the ten states that still permit fusion, half have above-average voter turnout; half have below-average turnout, including New York. But fusion does seem to provide the leverage needed to push through ground-breaking legislation. In New

York, for example, several Republicans are sponsoring the move to raise the minimum wage.

Even in states that don't have fusion, third parties are finding ways to reach new voters. In San Francisco's 2003 mayoral runoff, for example, a Green Party candidate, Matt Gonzales, narrowly lost to Democrat Gavin Newsom. Third parties have made their biggest strides in local races and small community positions. In the 2000 elections, writes Sifry,

Greens won thirty-two races, swelling their presence in local politics to eighty officeholders spread over twenty-one states. Several Progressive Party state legislators were returned to office in Vermont, while their gubernatorial candidate drew a respectable 10 percent of the vote and participated in all the statewide debates. In Minnesota, Jesse Ventura's Independence Party showed that it had legs, with nearly two dozen candidates for the state legislature getting respectable chunks of the vote, and one congressional contender reaching 20 percent in a three-way race. The New Party continued to rack up its victories in a half-dozen cities, while a newly created effort based on its model, the Working Families Party of New York, emerged as a fresh force in state politics.¹⁰

The WFP is hoping to expand to more states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. In some cases, the party hopes to change anti-fusion laws through ballot initiatives or in the legislature. Either process will require time, money, and energy.

Third parties have generally failed to attract large numbers of voters of color, including the emerging hip hop generation political movement. The broad cohort of hip hop generation voters is looking for real representation. The third party movement is looking for new constituents and fresh ideas. Will these two movements connect?

Yes, say urban third party advocates, who are beginning to reach out to new constituencies like working-class African-Americans. In April 2004, a group of African-Americans hosted a forum called "Why We Joined the Green Party" in an Oakland church hall. The room was filled not just with

African-Americans but local citizens of all races, some of them party members and activists, others distinctly skeptical.

Three party advocates, Donna Warren, Henry Clark, and Wilson Riles, told listeners why they'd joined the Greens. "I'm talking to my Black brothers and sisters. Go back to your communities and tell them the infrastructure is already in place if we want to have a voice," said Warren, a former Green Party candidate for California's Lieutenant Governor. "Join the Green Party. They will not do what the Democrats do to Black people. They [Democrats] want our votes but not our voice."

The other two speakers echoed similar themes: a sense of frustration with the major parties and a sense that they could make real changes through a third party. Henry Clark, long-time environmental activist with the West County Toxics Coalition in Richmond, California, tries to hold local oil refineries accountable for pollution. Appearing in a pinstriped suit with a red tie and matching pocket square, he looked like a mainstream politician himself—but spoke passionately about winning a spot on North Richmond's governing party as a Green. The Republicans and Democrats didn't hold the refineries accountable, he claimed. Third party activists did.

Clark also didn't hesitate to criticize the Bush administration. "Bush talks about building schools and hospitals in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "Well, [the local hospital] is scheduled to close on July 31. Schools are being cut back. And I'm supposed to be happy about them building schools in Iraq and Afghanistan? Charity begins at home."

The third speaker, Wilson Riles, had a long track record of working with the Democrats, first as an aide to Congressman Ron Dellums and the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and then as an Oakland City Council member. As a mayoral candidate, he even challenged Oakland mayor Jerry Brown in a runoff. But recently, Riles joined the Green Party. "One of the hallmarks of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome," he told the crowd. "Hopefully I'm not insane any more. I've joined the Green Party," he said to laughs and claps. He spoke forcefully about the times African-American voices have been muted by the Democratic Party, as when Rev. Jesse Jackson brought new voters of all races to the fold with his presidential race but wasn't given a voice in the party.

All three of the candidates tried to convince the audience that the Green Party's platform jibed with African-American interests. The Greens are the

only party to support reparations for slavery, they said. The Greens favor education, not incarceration. And Riles spoke about changing California laws that have undermined public financing for schools and services, like Proposition 13. He favors reforming the law so that corporations, whose share of the tax burden has shrunk, pay their share.

You'd think that reform of the criminal justice system would be an easy win for the Green Party with African-Americans. But this produced the biggest controversy of the night. During the question and answer period, a coiffed and poised woman raised her hand. LaDonna Williams said that she and her six children had "been through it, homelessness, you name it." She believed in instilling in her children a strong sense of discipline—and disagreed with the idea of eliminating California's "three strikes" law, which gives long sentences to anyone who commits three felonies. Oakland's seen more than its share of addiction and drug-related crime, especially related to crack cocaine. Even though Williams agreed that the sentences are unfair, she was afraid that reducing the "three strikes" penalties would remove a deterrent to drug use and crime. "I tell my kids they are accountable for their actions," she emphasized.

The Green Party's Warren replied that she understood drugs: her thirty-one-year-old son, a crack addict, had been murdered. "I want people to be accountable," Warren said, "but accountable to the truth. What keeps people away from drugs? Good schools, jobs, having an opportunity to succeed in this society. There's no options in our community," she said. Then she added, "I held my child accountable, but he got addicted to crack cocaine, and he's dead."

Riles emphasized that even if "three strikes" were eliminated or reformed, people would still go to jail for their crimes. Then Warren pointed out some of the excess of the system. For example, over four thousand Californians got sentences as high as twenty-five-to-life for petty theft or, in another case, taking a motor vehicle test for someone else. "The state pays \$30,000 per year per prisoner. That's coming out of your schools." But LaDonna Williams wasn't convinced. "I have to go with that tough love," she said, shaking her head. "Something has to be in that place to deter them, whether it's an ass-whupping" or the three-strikes law.

Finally another person in the audience stepped in. The tall young man had a tousled afro and a quiet but authoritative voice. "There isn't going to

be a strategy for sentencing youth that prevents crime," he said. "We're focused on jail and that has never worked in America. If you look at the rest of the world, you see they know that." Instead, the government should focus on preventing crime by providing educational and job opportunities.

His name was Andrew Williams, and he told me he'd joined the Green Party right before the 2000 election, as he turned eighteen years old. "Bush was, well, Bush, and I wasn't feeling Gore," he said. Williams wanted to join a party he believed in, and he chose the Greens. Voting third-party doesn't run in his family. He laughed when I asked if his parents had prompted his choice. "No," he said, "I fight with my family about politics all the time."

I followed up with LaDonna Williams and Andrew Williams (no relation) after the meeting. They're both black. They're both savvy and politically aware. And they each have very different takes on what American politics means to them.

For LaDonna Williams, deciding to vote in the 2004 election was not an easy choice. As a Jehovah's Witness, LaDonna's faith advocates against voting. "The answer to our problems lies with God," she says. And when God decides, "we're going to see world peace." "But until then, you have to live life." For LaDonna, given the current political situation, that means choosing to vote. She is particularly troubled by America under the Bush administration. "I think President Bush is doing such a horrendous job," she says. "He just outright lies and the people support it. And going to war. . . . You want to protect our freedom of speech and the rights we have, but does that mean we violate everyone else's rights?"

"We talk about the weapons of mass destruction," LaDonna continues. "If you look over in Livermore [a nuclear weapons research facility in California], they've stored this radioactive stuff and they're trying to expand it more so they can build more bombs. We're the ones having the weapons of mass destruction here. It's so hypocritical."

LaDonna's politics are socially conservative and fiscally liberal. She wants a politics that reflects "family values," secures the finances of working Americans, has a strong and fair criminal justice program, and delivers educational opportunity. She's hammered the importance of education home to her children, who range in age from twenty-five to just four. When her twenty-two-year-old was recruited to play baseball out of high school, she

urged him to go to college. He's still hoping to play pro ball, but he's also finishing up a degree in environmental engineering.

So why did she show up at a Green Party meeting? "I'm not pleased with the Democratic Party," LaDonna says. "They really went out of their way to hush up Al Sharpton. With the debates, they really attempted to hush him up and Carol Moseley Braun. I think that was very disrespectful. If the Democratic Party is going to take it to the next level, they need to put a black person on a presidential or vice presidential position." But she doesn't believe just anyone should get the slot. She's holding out for a black leader with strong morals and good ideas. In the meantime, she likes Kerry, "more than [she liked] Dean, and definitely more than Bush." She still hasn't decided who she'll vote for in 2004, but it probably won't be a Green Party candidate; she wasn't impressed with the answers she got on criminal justice at the community forum.

Andrew Williams, on the other hand, is committed to the Green Party as a vehicle for political change. It's just one part of his larger view of how to make change happen. When I reached him by telephone, he was in the middle of a "Stop Clear Channel" hip hop tour with musicians from an organization he founded, the Collectiv (www.collectiv.com). The Oakland-based organization aims to connect like-minded musicians and activists, empowering the hip hop community through education and entrepreneurship. Their campaign against the entertainment industry giant, which owns over twelve hundred radio stations plus music venues and television stations, centers on the way they've cut out local radio programming, blocked independent music promoters, and even retaliated against top-selling bands by not playing their songs when the bands did promotions with other stations.¹¹ Clear Channel has made news as part of the ongoing debate over the Federal Communications Commission and media ownership rules. And for organizations like Andrew's, focusing on the politics of music is a great way to get young voters engaged.

At the age of twenty-two, Andrew already has a finely tuned political sensibility and a willingness to commit his own time and energy for social change. The urban politics major at San Francisco State can expound on everything from pacifism versus revolution to Latin American politics. Being well-read and -reasoned, Andrew is struck by contradictions not only in national politics, but his own politics. He believes in voting but doesn't

(given the 2000 election) believe that every vote counts. He is going to conduct a voter registration drive, but he admits he may not be that successful at convincing people to vote. "I have a hard time arguing with my friends when they say, dude, [voting's] a joke."

Yet Andrew is committed to voting as a way to "say your piece" and get a piece of the political action. He compares the way politicians target voters to the way advertisers and corporations target consumers. Companies spend a lot of money convincing people who already buy products to switch their brand loyalty. Politicians spend a lot of money convincing people who already vote to vote for them. As Andrew says bluntly, "If you didn't vote last time, [politicians] don't give a fuck what you want."

Andrew votes Green because he sees both major parties as beholden to the same corporate interests. "There will always be a minority that have a vested interest and try to protect that interest," he says, "And there's always going to be a majority that fight against that interest." The problem is that that majority is fragmented, including many of the Americans who don't vote. For the record, Andrew is convinced that "most Democrats are Greens waiting for the Green Party to get to the point where they can make that decision [i.e., vote Green] and not make it feel reckless." He believes that by voting for a third party now, he paves the way for more Americans to take them seriously. "God willing," he says, "I'm going to be living through a lot of elections. I don't want to make a decision [with my vote] that won't make long-term change." Still, he understands the position of older members of his family, who see a critical need to vote Democratic now, to, for example, ensure a more progressive Supreme Court. The most important thing is to make a choice on election day. "If nobody voted, it would be terrible," he says. "The cats who are doing what they're doing would be able to say, see, you wanted it that way. I need to say my piece. I need to be able to say fuck that: that's not what I wanted."

LaDonna Williams and Andrew Williams reflect both the opportunities and hurdles for third parties wanting to reach new constituencies. LaDonna Williams is reflective of the social conservatism of many working-class African-Americans, which doesn't mesh easily with some more liberal third-party politics. That she showed up to a community forum like this one is a heartening reminder that Americans are still looking for new ways to participate in our democracy. Andrew Williams highlights the changing face of

politics and the possibility that the growing hip hop generation activist movement and the third-party movement could join forces. All across America, individuals like LaDonna Williams and Andrew Williams are exercising raw will, transforming the nation's calcified political system into something that serves them and their communities better. If more people took a similar hands-on attitude towards politics, the question would not be whether our system will change for the better, but how soon.