Why American Voters Decide to Vote for Third Parties in Presidential Elections

by Harmen Rockler

Third party voters in presidential elections tend to be:

- More independent voters who have not committed to one political party.
- Younger voters who are often supporters of third parties. Because they have not voted in as many elections as older voters, there is less of a pattern of votes for one particular party.
- Third-party voters also tend to dislike government, in general. They are more likely to feel disenfranchised by the political process.
- The two main parties, they feel, do not accurately represent their views.
- They vote for third party candidates because they genuinely like the candidate and his views, and partly to cast a vote against the two main parties.
- These reasons for voting for third parties describe many, not all, third-party voters. These patterns are evident in both a long-term study of American presidential elections and short-term case studies of individual presidential campaigns.

Background information

The factors involved and an overview of the U.S. electoral system

Here is a look at what major components of elections affect third party candidates and their voters:

- Duverger’s Law + Institutional Factors
  The United States electoral system awards the office of president to whoever wins a majority of the vote. This severely limits choice by creating a system where two major parties try and absorb different viewpoints. This is what is known as Duverger’s Law. While I introduce the concept of institutional factors like Duverger’s law, I hold these institutional factors constant as institutional. The United States system favors the creation of two major parties throughout the nation’s history. It does not change in a major way throughout. Because the system stays generally the same, I do not run any particular analysis on the system itself.
  If it was possible, I would examine factors like access to the ballot or whether a candidate can debate opponents from the major parties. The institutional factors are the existing framework; I look at other variables, beyond just institutional:
  - Personal Factors
    Age was one of the major significant characteristics which affected likelihood of voting for a third party candidate. Other factors like among others like gender, race, religion, geography, income, education, and interest in public affairs were insignificant.
    Beliefs mattered a great deal. Third party voters are more likely to think the government is not relating to them.
  - The Candidates
    Candidates who are better known, get media attention, and more support from individuals who typically vote for major parties will do better.

Case Study: Ralph Nader Campaigns 2000, 2004

Ralph Nader’s support dropped 15 percent in the span of just two elections. While other third party candidates have been studied extensively, Nader’s candidacy has not been deeply analyzed until now. Nader is unique because he has run for president multiple times. We can track how his support changes from year to year and develop a clearer understanding of the kinds of supporters third parties attract. There have been 44 presidents, with none being from third parties. Perhaps, in the future America may elect a third party president, but it will take an exceptional candidate.

Further Research

- Voting vs. Partisanship
  Because of the small sample size of third party voters, data on third party voters is not as plentiful as that for major party voters. Therefore, variables related to party affiliation and interest in public affairs were insignificant.
- Further Research
  There are also no direct questions asked to respondents about why they are voting for a third party. A comprehensive look at the data: 1948-2004

Sources:

- American National Election Studies (ANES) time series cumulative data file in this analysis. The survey has been run since 1948, meaning that multiple election years will be taken into account. In all the instances when variables are compared in crosstabs, I used VCF0705 (Codebook, p. 615-6), which separates the party of a respondent’s vote for president into either: Democrat, Republican, or Other. “Other” includes third party candidates, minor party candidates, and write-ins. This was coded to avoid group votes for Democrats and Republicans together — meaning there were two valid voting options. Major parties or “other” I counted these “other” votes and refer to them as third parties, throughout the rest of the data analysis.

- The American National Election Studies (ANES) time series cumulative data file in this analysis.