

For this literature review I gathered seven pieces of literature consisting of journal articles and book chapters. The focus of my research was the significance of third party voting in the US. Subtopics ranged from the early formation of third parties in the 19th century to current issues with third parties in the US. In this paper, I aim to present each topic chronologically, in doing so, I will provide a timeline of third parties within the US while also comparing and contrasting the views and research in each article. The paper will start with the formation of third parties in the 19th century, then move into the decline of third parties due to policy changes and societal context by examining two articles. Moving onto more theories about the influence of third parties in the mid to late 20th century, such as theories about party failure and anticipation of third parties on major party positioning. And the final two articles are studies of third parties in more recent decades, providing a current look into third parties and fully documenting the evolution of third parties in the US. Throughout all the literature there are many similar findings and conclusions. A common conclusion is that policy change and reform doesn't guarantee the success or failure of third parties. Also, third parties can be successful even if they are not winning elections. Third parties have a lot of influence over major party positioning and agenda. This shows that third parties are always working behind the scenes to influence policy and they are deeply tied into the social context and major party activity.

The discussion will begin in the mid 1800's with the help of *The Growth of Third-Party Voting: An Empirical Case Study of Vermont, 1840-55* by Adam Chamberlain. Within this, Chamberlain argues the reasons why third parties were able to gather large amounts of voters. The main argument is that in areas with less media and mobilization of voters, third parties succeeded by being regionally focused and then diffusing support through communication

channels such as newspapers. Spreading support from town to town, which is why the Populists had a lot of support throughout the West and not as much in the Northeast where there was more access to information and other political ideology. The focus of where Chamberlain draws arguments is the growth of the Liberty Party in Vermont. When focusing on the Liberty Party in Vermont, from 1843-45, support for the Liberty Party expanded outward from original communities of high support, what Chamberlain refers to as support bases. Chamberlain uses SaTScan™, computer program for designing a map of the 1843 and 1845 Liberty Party gubernatorial voting in Vermont. Showing the diffusion of Liberty party votes from support bases. This was possible by the isolation of towns, limited media, more frequent election cycles, and that the party only had to appeal to a white male electorate (Chamberlain, 345). Using the same spatial model Chamberlain also finds that areas with higher concentrations of Liberty Party voters also became areas with higher percentage of Republican votes, indicating that the Liberty Parties efforts to mobilize impacted the spread of the Republican Party after the Free Soil Party disintegrated (Chamberlain, 355).

This article is unique in that it expounds on the reasons why third parties in the mid 1800's were able to gain traction. Shifting the focus from political reforms and electoral structure to societal context. The isolation of towns and communication channels are not a commonly discussed topic in most other literature regarding third parties. The arguments Chamberlain presents are about the gathering of support for third parties rather than electoral success. This is important because when looking at the trends of third parties throughout US history, to get a complete understanding you have to take into account the changing social context and not just political changes. As society modernized, the landscape in which third parties operated also changed.

The next two articles within this review cover the decline of third party votes during the 19th and 20th centuries with a focus on political reforms and the system of voting. Starting off with *Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American "Third" Parties* by Howard A. Scarrow. This article deals with policy theories relating to fusion parties. Fusion candidacies were a way for a major party to gain more support while third parties could maintain some political influence. But things changed supposedly because of the Democrat-Populist party threat during the 1890's (Scharrow, 639). The ballot reform was when the Australian Ballot was adopted. There were also multiple anti-fusion laws that prevented any sort of fusion candidacies in primary elections. These laws included that contestants of primaries be members of the parties primary and prohibiting defeated candidates from contesting the general elections as a member of a different party, called the "Sore Loser" provision (Scharrow, 638). These laws and reforms caused a large decrease in the amount of third party fusion candidacies. Making third parties an unpopular choice, Scarrow turned to Duverger for the two reasons he theorized in 1963. The mechanical effect, which is if the number of votes is small enough than they are wasted votes, and the psychological effect, which is that people do not want to waste their vote (Scharrow, 642). Scarrow throughout the article doesn't blame the decline of third parties solely on the presence of anti-fusion laws, but rather uses the existence of third parties as a marker for the effectiveness of anti-fusion laws. Because anti-fusion laws were not a guaranteed way of reducing the amount of fusion candidacies and third party movements, and absence of anti-fusion laws did not guarantee there would be an increase in fusion candidacies. The main reason anti-fusion laws were created was to keep the power within a large and possibly corrupt party.

Interestingly the following paper *The Decline of Third-Party Voting in the United States* by Shigero Hirano, and James M. Snyder Jr. piggybacks from Scarrow's article by claiming the

decline in third party voting is more so a cause of shifting Democratic left wing agendas rather than institutional reform and the US electoral system, which would translate to anti-fusion laws and ballot reform. Empirical evidence shows that there was no statistically significant correlation between the system (direct primary and ballot reforms) and the amount of third party vote shares in the twenty years before and after the introduction of the direct primary and Australian Ballot (Hirano & Snyder, 5). A similar conclusion to what Scarrow arrived at accept Snyder and Hirano defended the finding with empirical evidence. In fact, the authors mention Scarrow's data, in summary Snyder and Hirano claim the evidence on previous research is mixed and does not provide grounds to make any claims about the effect of anti fusion laws on third party activity. The bulk of significant evidence that Hirano and Snyder turn to is the effect of the New Deal legislation in the 1930's on the position of the Democratic party. A majority of the third parties before the New Deal were left leaning, the two major parties tended to be more centrally positioned as a consequence of appealing to more people. When the Democratic party adopted left wing positioning during the New Deal, many far left leaning third party supporters became Democratic, essentially being absorbed by the leftward shift in the Democratic party, contributing to a decline in left wing third parties.

After reading both papers the trends in third party support in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be examined. Scarrow's claim about anti-fusion laws and ballot reforms is supported by mixed evidence, so the decline in third party voting in the late 1800s could be dependent on a separate mechanism. Both papers did mention the first past the post and winner take all systems, therefore simply the architecture of the electoral system, are both deterrents of third party activity. After this point the formation of parties would be mainly subject to Duverger's law regardless of any later reforms. This would make sense because from Snyder and

Hirano's paper, it was the shift in the democratic party that decreased third party activity which can also be explained by Duverger's theories of the mechanical and psychological effects. Both articles merge on this idea that Duverger's laws are a significant reason for the trends of third party votes and support in a sea of mixed evidence. When adding in the theories from Chamberlain's paper about third party expansion, it could be that the increasing organization and nationalization of political parties such as Grover Cleveland and the democratic party, played a role in the declining third party activity along with Duverger's law.

Not explicitly stated but implied through the paper by Hirano and Snyder, political parties can position themselves along the left to right wing scale to best absorb parties or appeal to the median voter. This is the subject of the following paper.

Anticipating Entry: Major Party Positioning and Third Party Threat by Daniel J. Lee argues for the idea that third party influence is powerful despite a lack of electoral wins or voter percentage. That the threat of third party entry can shift major party positioning. Similarly to how the Democratic party shifted to absorb left wing third party votes after the New Deal as outlined by Hirano and Snyder, in areas with higher likelihood of third party entry, major parties will often diverge from the center to pick up the votes of more extreme parties. Picking up third party votes could change the outcome of an election so party positioning is a big point of consideration. What is found in the article is that when there are higher barriers to entry, such as the barriers in Chamberlain's article; Competing with more organized and nationalized parties. Or the Australian ballot or minimum signature counts, the less likely that third parties will enter into a race, but those that do will be much more equipped to battle and steal votes. Whereas in areas with lower barriers to entry, the third parties are likely less organized and are usually more focused on influencing agendas and supporting a bigger party (Lee, 140). The major parties will

take into account the quality of the third party that is running and will likely diverge if there is a high likelihood of that happening. When looking at the other side of the coin, political parties can also lose members to third parties in the wake of perceived failure to represent. This is similar to what happened in the New Deal, Hirano and Snyder found a leftward shift in the democratic party in the presence of new legislation. New legislation is a way for separate movements to form, when looking at the New Deal from Lee's perspective, the Democratic party shifted to the left to contain the more extreme votes in the possibility of a new left party forming.

The subject of the next article is party failure. The article *Major-Party Failure and Third-Party Voting in Presidential Elections, 1976-1988* by George A. Chressanthis and Stephen D. Shaffer explores the factors that can cause the perception of party failure. The empirical evidence shows the biggest contributors were change in income and the presence of a strong third party, in this case the third party threat was the John Anderson candidacy in 1980. The existence of a strong third party makes it more likely that members of a major party will switch parties if there is a perceived failure to represent. On the other hand a party that was perceived as successful, such as an overall increase in voter income, would likely decrease the amount of third party votes if other variables such as crime rate and alienation are controlled (Chressanthis and Shaffer, 268). Adding this to Lee's article provides a more complete picture of the difficulties a third party can present to major parties. So not only does the major party have to anticipate left to right positioning, but it must maintain the current population of voters and not lose them to a different party. The risk is most likely the periphery votes being lost to another party. The major party has to appeal to a wider coalition of people while also maintaining a popular agenda to not be perceived as failing to represent.

On the topic of party failure, according to Rachel Kleinfeld, Richard Youngs and Jonah Belser in *The Failure of U.S. Political Parties to Represent*, parties are doing just that. This is the first of the two current articles within this literature review. This article claims that parties are failing to represent voter preference and aggregate those preferences into government policy as of 2018. Gallup's polling in 2018 shows that 44 percent of Americans identify as independents, with just 22 percent identifying as Republicans and 32 percent as Democrats (Kleinfeld, Youngs, and Belser, 4). Within each major party there is a trend referred to by the authors as affective polarization, party members have intense negative views about the other party and hold their own party as a part of their identity. The authors not only mention horizontal polarization such as in the article by Lee and claims by Hirano and Snyder, but the idea of vertical polarization. Vertical polarization is the socioeconomic advantages that some parties might have manufactured to gain the upper hand, what some people would call a "rigged system" (Kleinfeld, Youngs, and Belser, 10). In this situation the rise of a third party might not be the best. A majority of independent Americans feel that a third party would be beneficial to democracy in the US. The authors believe this assumption to be unwise. This is because if a centrist third party were to manifest the Republican and Democratic parties would flank the left and right wings, having only the most passionate partisan supporters, increasing party polarization, a similar concept to what was discussed before in Lee's article. The situation would be that the Republican and Democratic parties would focus on attracting the popular centrist views to claim more voters. Returning to a situation where the ability of the party to represent and influence government policy is precarious given the variation of sentiment within the party.

The Tea party movement is an example of a modern movement that posed a threat to the duopoly. *Looking Back, Looking Ahead The Third-Party Legacy and the Future* by David

Gillespie explores this movement. The Tea Party movement was a conservative social movement that contributed to returning the power to the Republican party in the House during the 2010 congressional elections. In terms of the movements, this could be viewed as a positive and negative. For the Republican party, co-opting the Tea Party movement did present the risk of splitting the party. If the Tea Party was able to institutionalize the Republican party could have been divided and given the Democratic Party the advantage. For the Tea Party, among the many other obstacles third parties face as already discussed, being absorbed by the Republican party. The influence on the 2010 midterms showed that the Tea party was able to influence electoral outcomes, but the cost was being absorbed by the Republican party. As discussed in Lee's paper and a similar concept to what happened with the Democratic party in Hirano and Snyder's paper, the Republican party can shift politically to cover the flanks of the right wing and the centrist groups. This chapter uses the Tea Party movement as a callout to Americans that the future is unpredictable but as members of a democracy we can steer its course. Throughout history third parties have influenced a great deal of policies such as women's suffrage, antitrust laws, and many others (Gillispie, 224). Even though the Tea Party movement eventually disintegrated and was engulfed by the Republican party, it still shows that movements can arise from hyperpartisanship and a gridlock of policy making.

The study of third parties throughout US history presents a lot of interesting challenges. It is clear from the wide range of mixed evidence that third parties are extremely dependent on the social context and state of the two major parties. Even though the ability to mobilize and gain support for third parties is a strongly debated subject among scholars, there is still a consistent evolution as can be seen from the works in the literature review. From the Liberty party in Vermont to the Tea Party movement starting in 2009, no one denies that third parties have always

influenced politics. Third parties are interesting because a successful third party might be one that integrates with a major party, so the actual effects of third party influence can become hazy. Even if there is no third party, the mere threat of a third party can change the course of American politics. Even though the US electoral system lends itself to duopoly, it seems the third party will always be an integral part of the system. Looking back at the history of third parties can provide insights into how politics will be in the future. It seems especially important now with hyperpolarization, it is comforting to know that change is possible and third parties have been the reason for some of the greatest political changes in history.

Bibliography

- Chamberlain, Adam. "The Growth of Third-Party Voting: An Empirical Case Study of Vermont, 1840–55." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2012, pp. 343–61. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24710889>. Accessed 17 Feb. 2025.
- CHRESSANTHIS, George A., and Stephen D. SHAFFER. "Major-Party Failure and Third-Party Voting in Presidential Elections, 1976-1988." *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 2, 1993, pp. 264–73. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42863626>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
- Gillespie, J. David. "Looking Back, Looking Ahead: The Third-Party Legacy and the Future." *Challengers to Duopoly: Why Third Parties Matter in American Two-Party Politics*, University of South Carolina Press, 2012, pp. 223–28. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgjrr.18>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.
- Hirano, Shigeo, and James M. Snyder. "The Decline of Third-Party Voting in the United States." *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–16. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00490.x>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
- Kleinfeld, Rachel, et al. "The Failure of U.S. Political Parties to Represent." *RENEWING U.S. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: Lessons From Europe and U.S. History*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, pp. 4–11. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16980.6>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.
- Lee, Daniel J. "Anticipating Entry: Major Party Positioning and Third Party Threat." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2012, pp. 138–50. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23209565>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2025.
- Scarrow, Howard A. "Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American 'Third' Parties." *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1986, pp. 634–47. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/448267>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.

