

American Third Parties in 2024:

Why Third Parties Fail Even in the Best Circumstances

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Abstract:

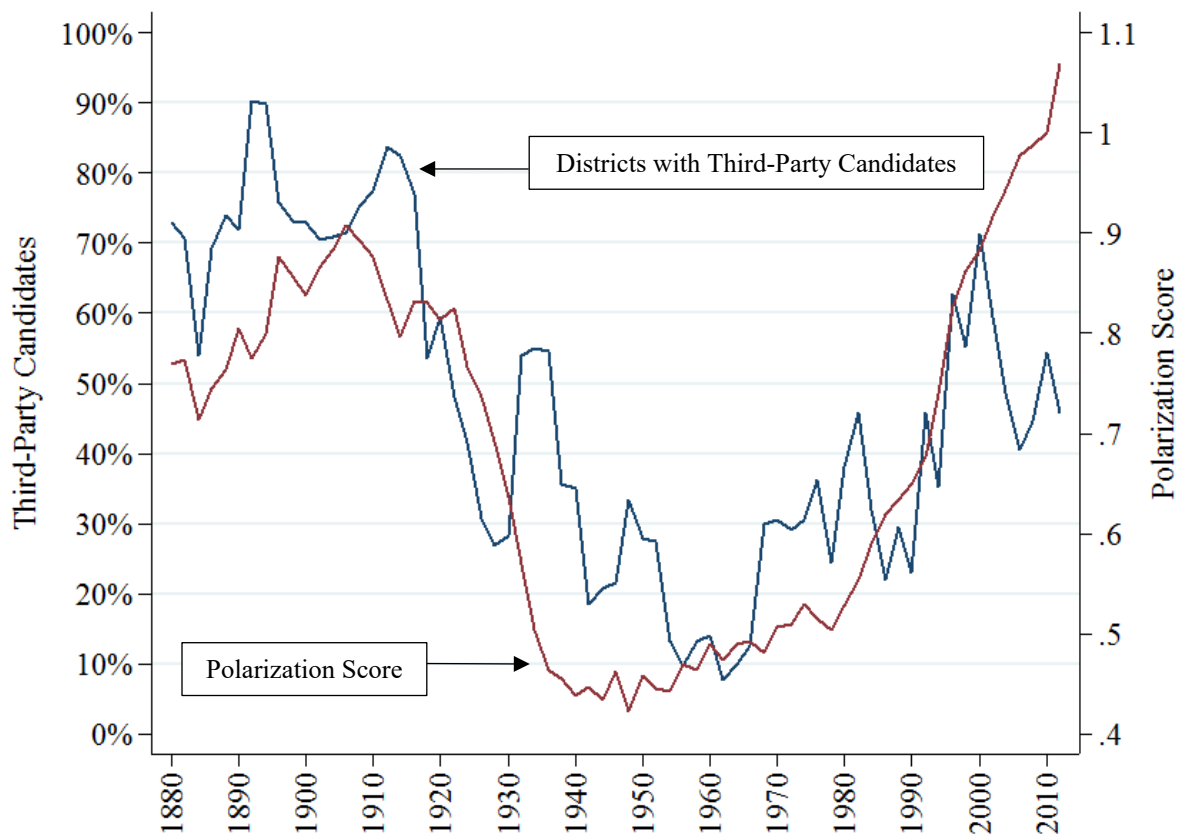
With two very unpopular Democratic and Republican party presidential candidates and widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of politics as well as the two major parties, 2024 was a uniquely good year for American third parties to challenge to the major parties. Instead, the Libertarian Party imploded, the Green Party shifted into insignificance (outside of Michigan), and newer third-party challengers like No Labels and the Forward Party simply disappeared. Focusing primarily on the Libertarian Party, this paper will explore the state of US third parties from a strategic perspective. It will show that since these parties are populated by activists and organized as coalitions of state organizations, they have little ability to pivot as political circumstances shift or ward off hostile takeovers by external groups.

Third parties are uniquely weak in the United States. Yet, there is widespread public dissatisfaction with current politics and both major parties. According to Gallup, Joe Biden and Donald Trump (during his first term) have the lowest average public support of any presidents since World War II.¹ There is widespread dissatisfaction with both major parties, including the Democratic Party, even though Republican Party controls all three branches of government at a time that there is widespread public dissatisfaction. At the same time, there exists widespread support in the US for having a larger number of parties in government. A recent Gallup poll has found that 63% of Americans believe that the Republican and Democratic parties do “such a poor job” of representing the American people that “a third major party is needed.”

So where are the third parties? Historically, third parties have played a critical role in American politics. While they rarely won more than a few seats in the US Congress, they acted as a disruptive force that pushed the major parties towards moderation during periods of high levels of partisan polarization, and responding to public demands that were being ignored. As is shown in Figure 1 below, their level of activity has been closely related partisan polarization. From just after the US Civil War until around 1920, when partisan polarization was very high, these parties were highly active and winning a significant percent of the vote. Then, in the middle of the twentieth century, at the same time that extreme partisan polarization was disappearing, third parties also almost completely disappeared from US politics. But by the late-1960s, as polarization began increasing again, so did third-party activity. Yet, despite the strain on the American party system, including the widespread the dissatisfaction with the major parties, third parties receive around 2% or 3% of the vote in US House elections.

¹ Jeffery M. Jones. “Biden Job Approval Second Lowest Among Post-WWII Presidents.” *Gallup*, January 17, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/655298/biden-job-approval-second-lowest-among-post-wwii-presidents.aspx>. [Retrieved October 26, 2025]

Figure 1:
Polarization and Third-Party Activity, 1880-2014



This graph shows the relationship between polarization and third-party activity. Polarization is measured each term as the absolute value of the mean of DW-NOMINATE scores, first dimension, for Democratic members of the House of Representatives minus the same score for Republican representatives. Third-party activity is measured as the percent of House districts each election that have at least one third-party candidate. The graph demonstrates that, on the aggregate, polarization and third-party activity follow roughly the same pattern over the past century.

Indeed, during the 2024 election, the Libertarian Party was in a strong position to capitalize on the Republican shift towards MAGA extremism, including because of the widespread dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party. It didn't. Instead, at a moment of potential triumph, it collapsed into internal crises, including with its national convention declining into chaos and its campaign strategy paralyzed by indecision.

The current evidence shows a decline in American third parties since the 2016 election, despite circumstances that should have improved their positions. Historically, in moments like this, new third parties have emerged, rapidly risen in importance, made some form of impact on American politics, and then disappeared. Despite Andrew Yang's ill-fated attempt to build the Forward Party and Elon Musk's announcement that he had built a new "America Party", no new third party of any significance has emerged over the past decade. Instead, the most important third parties today are long-term parties—more like Prohibition Party, which lasted for decades but had little impact, than the Populist parties of the 1890s or Progressive Party of the 1910s.

In other words, to understand American third parties, it is not enough to examine the political environment that they exist in (e.g., the electoral system) or assume that these organizations will be rational actors attempting gain political advantages. These are organizations capable of self-destruction. As organizations that have lasted for decades, they institutionalize, which also means that they can become rigid and unable to respond to changing conditions. Since they rarely win election positions at the national level, they also tend to attract idealists instead of political strategists, and they gain little competence in running effective campaigns, (especially those within difficult settings.) Being poorly structured, they are also exposed to hostile takeovers. In other words, it is not just an inhospitable environment that damage US third

parties: they are generally ill-equipped to compete even in improved circumstances, including when there is a direct threat to US democracy.

The Role of Third Parties in US Politics:

From a strategic perspective, the role of third parties in the US is much different than the role of smaller parties in most democracies, including those with first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems. Within most democracies, including those using FPTP, the role of parties, including smaller parties, is primarily to win elected positions. The process is for the party to build public support via creating a campaign structure and ideology, using them to win seats and hopefully become part of the government, and then using that role in government to push for policies that can help the party retain or gain more political power.

The critical problem for American third parties is that they rarely win seats. Even during their heyday, at the national level, they rarely won more than a few seats in the US Congress. While these parties sometimes had more success at the state level, including gaining political power in states like Minnesota and Wisconsin, these cases were sporadic. In more recent decades, even this success was beyond the reach of these parties. For example, the Libertarian Party formed in 1971 and has been the most significant third party over the past half century. It has not won a single congressional seat during this period.

Since third parties cannot win seats, they have been forced into a different strategy: disruption. Richard Hofstadter called it the “sting like a bee” strategy. What it entailed was that when third parties were at their strongest, they would often emerge quickly, providing a platform for issues and voicing support for themes that the major parties were ignoring. While they wouldn’t win many elections, they would nevertheless siphon away many votes from one of the

two major parties, causing it to lose seats to the other party. This would constitute the third parties' "sting". After being hurt by this sting (and losing seats in the process), the major party would then react by altering the direction of its policies, usually by coopting that third party's issues and rhetoric. This would often result in that major party then steadily regaining its position among voters. This turn of events would cause the third party to lose its disruptive mandate, and thereby its public footing and support. Then, much like a bee's short lifecycle, that third party would die after having delivered its sting. But in that crucial process of stinging, the third party would be successful in having its policy goals being coopted by one of the major parties.

Maybe the best example of this was the Progressive Party around 1912. The Republican Party at the time was dominated by reactionaries like Speaker of the House of Representatives Joseph Cannon, who were very pro-business and anti-reform. Within the Republican Party, there was also a progressive wing that wanted significant political reform as well as economic reforms such as the enactment of child labor laws and business regulations. Frustrated by the party's reactionary wing, the progressive wing, led by former president Teddy Roosevelt, quit the Republican Party and formed the Progressive Party. It won very few elections. But, it's candidates did cause many Republican politicians to lose their elected positions to Democratic candidates. As a reaction to this threat, the Republican Party subsequently moderated itself by taking on a more centrist approach, thereby helping lead to a period of political reform and economic change.

Third parties often like to claim that they are not setting out to "spoil" elections. But in the US, spoiling elections very much is and has been their role. It is their only real form of influence in a rigidly two-party system. But, in order to have any substantial impact, the third party has to be spoiling the election with a clear purpose, and that purpose needs to be a defined

policy goal. They need to present a set of issues that galvanize disaffected voters, to make it clear to the major parties that they cannot afford to ignore addressing those issues.

The full impact of this strategy requires the major parties to be ignoring large groups of voters, normally during periods of high partisan polarization. If both parties are ideologically near the center, and assuming that public opinion is unimodal around the center, there is little room for third parties to gain larger voter support. This would force the third party to attack the major parties from the far-left or far-right. While this could force some policy concessions, this is unlikely to have a major impact on American politics. However, when the major parties are polarized, the third party can take the center position. But to make this effective, it also has to express the anger that Americans are feeling. It cannot follow the mushy moderate politics that characterized, for example, Andrew Yang's Forward Party, where the focus was on compromise and rhetoric was that the party was "not left, not right, but forward." The approach has to be closer to Ross Perot's populist rhetoric. He attacked both major party candidates on NAFTA, for example, and purposefully used a folksy rhetorical style that distinguished him from professional politicians.

While this approach helped Perot become arguably the most successful third-party presidential candidate since Teddy Roosevelt, his approach also had a critical limitation. It is not enough to simply run a presidential candidate. For the sting-like-a-bee strategy to be most effective, the third party has to run candidates at all levels of office, maybe especially for the US Congress. One has to begin with the assumption that members of Congress are primarily driven by the goal of reelection. The strategy of the third party has to be to strike fear across the entire party by undermining this goal. More specifically, the strategy is to force major party politicians

to change their calculus of how to stay in power by having to take the third party's complaints seriously through policy changes.

This logic can be applied to the current circumstances for Republican politicians, and one of the reasons why the US is currently sliding towards authoritarianism. The current dynamics create a strong incentive for Republican politicians to go along with their party leadership regardless of how far to the right and in the MAGA direction it leads them. Because of a combination of a partisan split by rural and urban areas, gerrymandering, and other factors, most members of Congress are in safe districts and have little reason to fear being beaten in the general election. Negative partisan reinforces that security. While many moderate or traditional Republicans as well as independents leaning Republican may dislike Trump and the MAGA movement, that dislike is weighed in comparison to their disdain for the Democratic Party. For these reasons, most Republican legislators currently have little reason to worry that a Democrat will take their seat.

The real threat is instead being primaried. Unlike the Democratic Party, where the far-left has no money to fund primary challenges, the Tea Party was capable of creating devastating primary challenges to any Republican politician deemed not far enough on the right, a strategy that has since been adopted by the MAGA movement. Even in the few marginal districts that still exist in Congress, the threat of being primaried often outweighs concerns about losing swing voters. The destruction of Adam Kinzinger and Liz Cheney's careers for standing up to the MAGA movement is also a clear message to Republican politicians of the dangers of not following the authoritarian shift of the party. The overwhelming strategic incentive for Republican politicians is therefore to follow the party as far to the right as it intends to go. These

circumstances have led to a self-reinforcing system that is pushing the Republican Party ever farther in a MAGA direction, including supporting Trump's authoritarian ambitions.

Of the existing third parties, these circumstances put the Libertarian Party in the best position to gain a strategic advantage in 2024. With the Republican Party shifting in a MAGA direction and away from traditional Republican small government ideals, the Libertarians could have claimed the mantle of Reagan as a line of attack against Trump's Republican Party. In the same way that Perot attacked Bush and Clinton on NAFTA in 1992, thereby distinguishing himself from these parties, the Libertarians could have attacked the Republican Party for its pro-tariff policies, for example, as well as for the authoritarian leanings of the party while still distinguishing itself from the Democratic Party on both economic and social issues. This approach would have likely not gained enough to win congressional seats. But the sting-like-a-bee strategy requires a far fewer votes to be effective. Instead, the goal would be to attract around 10% of the vote from traditional and moderate conservatives as well as right-leaning independents away from the Republican Party, to produce a counterpressure that threatened its politicians' political careers and maybe undermined some of their election ambitions.

This, however, was not the strategy that the Libertarian Party employed in 2024. Instead, the party descended into internal crisis, with warring factions struggling against each other to take power over the party. Instead of distinguishing itself from Donald Trump and the Republican Party, the party invited Trump to speak at their convention, and opportunity he took to argue that the Libertarian Party should simply endorse him for president.

Why Third Parties are Weak:

It is widely stated that third parties in the US have always been weak. This statement, however, requires significant qualification. In the decades after the Civil War, third parties emerged in their modern form. The largest and most celebrated (i.e., the Greenback Party, Populist Party, Socialist Party, and Progressive Party) also took on a socioeconomic characteristic, generally promoting the interests of poor farmers and/or the working class. Other than the Socialist Party, these third parties had a short but important lifespan. They would crash the American political system in waves. First, they would emerge quickly, often gaining around 10% of the vote at the congressional level. Once the threat to the major parties became clear, one of the major parties would coopt the third party by adopting its rhetoric and ideology, and the major party might also run fusion candidates with these third parties. At that point, the third party would disappear within a few years.

Around 1920, third parties entered a new period. While in the 1872 to 1918 period third parties would rise and fall quickly, starting around 1920 they began to disappear. Through the 1940s they would be very strong in a small number of states, notably the Wisconsin Progressives and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, but even those died out by the 1950s. By the time John Kennedy ran for president, there were very few third-party candidates running for Congress, and those that did won very few votes.

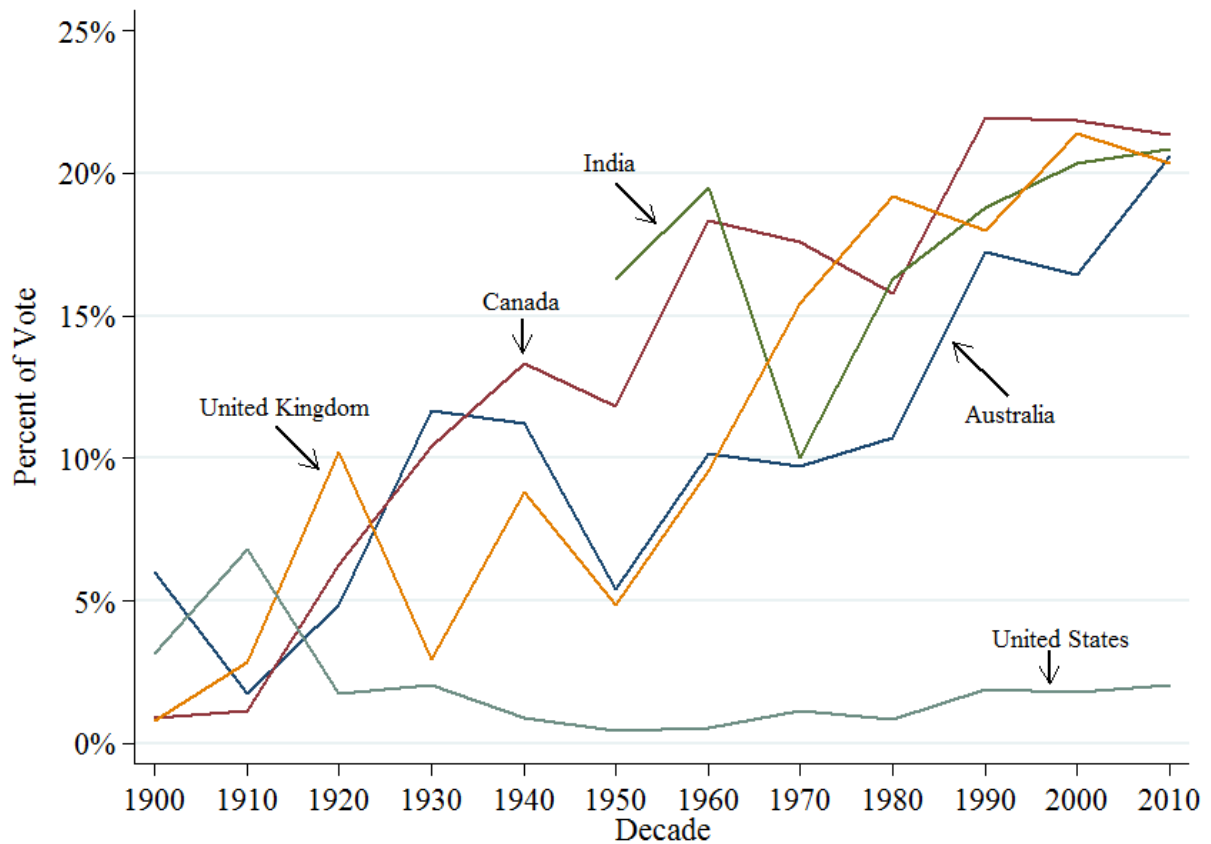
These circumstances changed again in the late-1960s. In 1968, there was a jump in the number of third-party candidates running and the percent of the vote that they received. By the 2000 election, there were third-party candidates running in 70% of US House districts, a number that was nearly as high as the third-party activity in the 1910s and higher than any election

since 1920. At the same time, the vote for third parties increased as well, though the percent vote for third-party candidates was not nearly as high as it was during the 1870 to 1918 period.

Why have third parties in the United States been so weak? Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1984) famously gave a large number of explanations as to why third parties have not been successful in the United States, and approach echoed by Bibby and Maisel (2002) and Gillespie (2012). One of the most common explanations derives directly from Duverger's Law (Duverger 1954), which states that FPTP electoral systems favor the two-party system while proportional representation electoral systems tend to lead to a larger number of parties winning government seats.

While there is surely a relationship between the type of electoral system and the number of parties that win seats in legislative bodies, this framework does not explain why third parties declined in the United States over the past century. As Figure 2 also shows, it does not explain why there is such a great variation in the strength of smaller parties across not only FPTP electoral systems but all countries with single-member district electoral systems. Figure 2 shows the average percent vote for all but the top two parties by district across the major democracies with single-member district electoral systems: Australia, Canada, India, the UK, and the US. (Examining the vote for smaller parties this way eliminates the impact of regional differences in party support, since the statistics are based on the top two parties within each district.) As the graph shows, the United States is the outlier in the role of smaller parties across these countries. While the percent vote for smaller parties rose steadily across the twentieth century in Australia, Canada, India, and the United Kingdom, in the United States that percent vote was consistently small, especially starting in 1920, though it increases somewhat in the past few decades.

Figure 2:
Percent Vote for Third-Party Candidates at District-Level Across SMD Systems:



This graph shows the percent vote for third-party candidates across the five largest democracies with single-member district electoral systems: Australia, Canada, India, United Kingdom, and United States. The graph shows the percent vote by decade of all candidates who at the district level was nominated by a political party and received less than the highest or second highest percent vote. The graph demonstrates that the United States is unique among major democracies with SMD systems for having very weak third parties.

One of the other common arguments is that this decline in third-party strength was caused by the change in state election laws during the twentieth century, especially the increased difficulty of ballot access laws and prohibition of fusion. Ballot access laws are the laws that each state use to determine what candidates are allowed onto the ballot in each election. They are usually based on a number of signatures by registered voters that the party or independent candidate can acquire or the percent vote that the party received during the previous election. While these laws have certainly gotten much harder from the early 1900s, when states began using the secret ballot, most recent research has shown that these laws have had little impact the percent of third-party candidates or the vote received by third-party candidates that do get onto the ballot (Collett and Wattenberg 1999; Stratmann 2005; Burden 2007; Schraufnagel and Milita 2010; Schraufnagel 2011). As Tamas (2018) showed, the difficulty of ballot access laws on had an infinitesimal impact on how many congressional districts had third-party candidates on the ballot. Collett and Wattenberg (1999, 230) seemed to summarize it best when they wrote “that ballot access laws explain very little of the variance in either the number of minor party candidacies or the vote for them,” and suggesting that both activists and scholars are “overstating the importance of ballot access as the key to minor party and independent candidate success.”

Fusion, or the co-nomination of a candidate by multiple parties, is also an argument made by third-party and legal scholars that has trouble withstanding empirical scrutiny. The argument is that when a third-party co-nominates a candidate with a major party, that third-party gains exposure and legitimacy that helps build its strength with voters. Proponents of this argument also argue that fusion was a widely used strategy in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, but that once states began instituting the use of the secret ballot, most also began prohibiting fusion. But as I demonstrated (Tamas 2017; Tamas 2018), the narrative behind the

fusion argument is inconsistent with its history. (1) The percent of congressional districts with fusion candidates did not decline over the past century. It has been largely consistent from the post-Civil War era until recent elections. (2) Instead of fusion leading to greater success for individual third parties, its use almost always came right before the third party's collapse. For example, the Populist Party had its strongest year in 1894, ran many fusion candidates with the Democratic Party in 1896, and then disappeared by 1900. Similarly, the Progressive Party had a blockbuster year in 1912. By 1916 it was running fusion candidates with the Republican Party, and by 1920 it had been absorbed by the Republican Party. Ultimately, the fusion argument violates a key to third-party strategy: third parties have to distinguish themselves from the major parties in order to build public support, and co-nominating major party candidates confuses this message.

Instead, the critical problem that third parties face in American politics is a severe resource disadvantage vis-à-vis the major parties. While major party candidates for US House seats regularly spend over a million dollars on their campaign, third-party candidates spend, on average, around \$14,000. Even this figure is an exaggeration, since only a small fraction of third-party candidates even submitted spending reports to the Federal Election Commission, suggesting that around 85% of these candidates spent less than \$5000 (Tamas 2018).

The resource argument can explain both the difference between the US and other democracies with single-member district electoral systems as well as the change in third-party strength over time. There is effectively no public campaign funding in the United States. In comparison, in Australia, any candidate or party that receives at least 4% of the first preferences in parliamentary elections is awarded public funding. In the UK, parties can raise unlimited amounts of money, but campaign spending is capped. Canada both provides public funding for

campaigns and caps spending. While the largest parties in these other countries clearly retain resource advantages over smaller parties, that difference in spending of small parties versus the major parties in the United States is staggering comparing to these other single-member district systems.

Moreover, the importance of money has shifted over the period in which third parties declined in the United States. Campaigning in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been largely based on pamphlets, newspapers and rallies. It was inexpensive. That changed with major advances in communication technology, which revolutionized political campaigns in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the US, television and radio are mainly owned by private corporations, which charge a great deal of money to air campaign commercials. They also have no obligation to give airtime to smaller political parties. To make matters worse, there is negligible public financing of US elections, which makes private donations the primary source for campaign funding. Few donors choose to fund third parties, since they assume that their candidates will lose. This produces a downward spiral whereby third-party candidates are virtually guaranteed to lose owing to vast monetary and resource disparities.

But these resource issues also lead to institutional problems for US third parties. The circumstances that third parties face should dictate a strategy that accepts those circumstances. This includes using the sting-like-a-bee strategy, running more like a social movement than copying the methods of the wealthier major parties, and highlighting party message over individual candidates, which is a far more expensive campaign approach. The problems that third parties face also leads to internal factors that hamper their ability to develop strategies that maximize their impact on American politics.

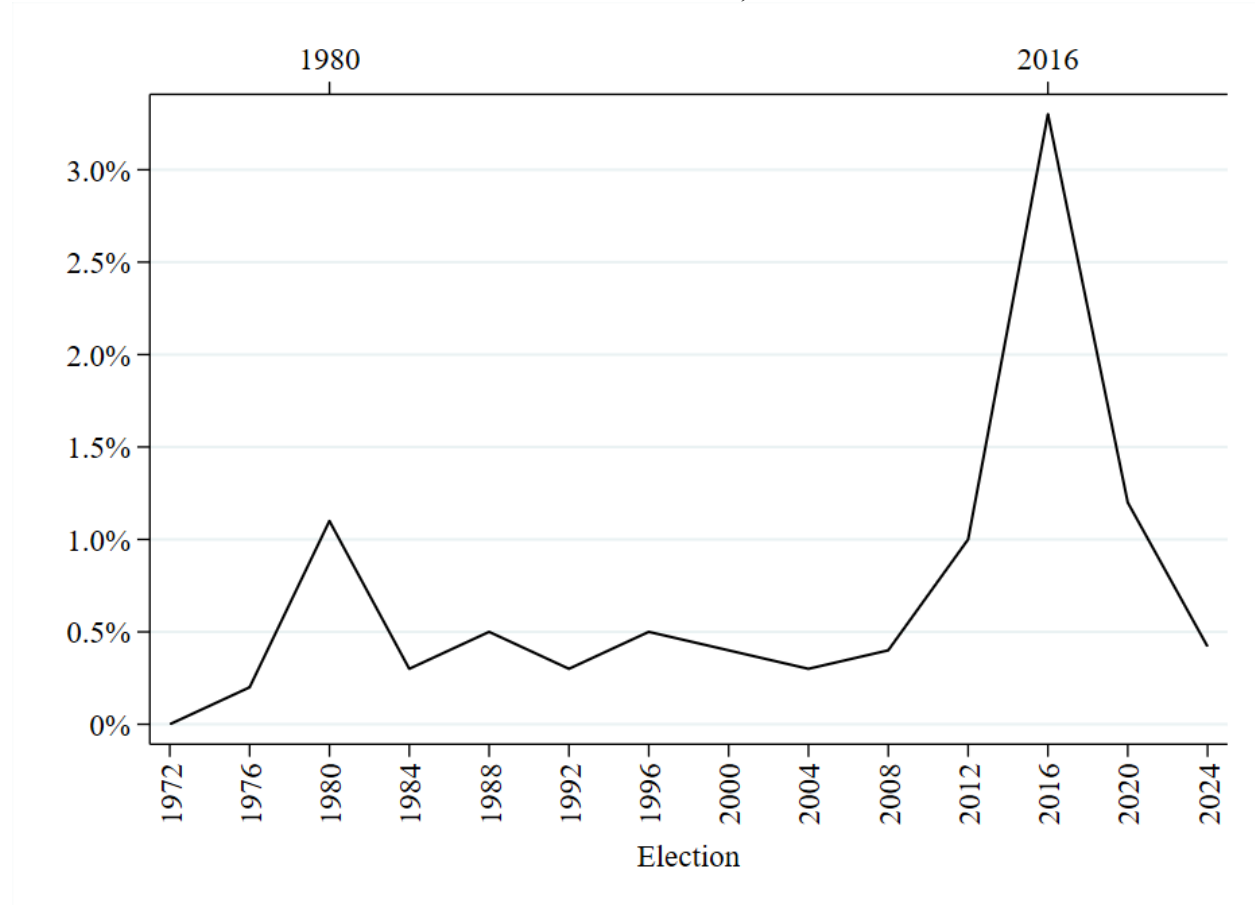
Collapse of the Libertarian Party?

For the Libertarian Party, 2024 was likely the most promising election year that they had since forming over half a century ago. There is widespread frustration and anger towards current politics and the two major parties. The presidential candidates for both major parties were wildly unpopular outside their party base. The economy continued to struggle following the COVID-19 pandemic, including with inflation remaining higher than voters were accustomed to. Maybe most promising of all, the Republican Party had shifted so far in the MAGA direction that it left a significant portion of moderate and traditional small government conservatives unhappy with the GOP and potentially open to voting Libertarian. While this was certainly not enough for the Libertarians to win seats in Congress, it opened room for impacting the political system.

Yet, 2024 was arguably one of the most unsuccessful elections years the Libertarian Party ever had. As Figure 3 shows, starting in 2012, the Libertarian presidential candidate received at least 1% of the vote, a figure that jumped to 3.3% during the 2016 election. In, 2024, the party's presidential candidate, Chase Oliver, dropped to only 0.4% of the vote. In US House races, the Libertarians received only 0.47%, by far the lowest percent vote since 1986.

The problem for the Libertarian Party wasn't the external circumstances. It was an organizational issue that is not uncommon for US third parties. (1) Since third parties win few elected positions, they don't attract professional politicians. Instead, the membership and most of the leadership are activists who lack political experience and are often ideologues. This can make it difficult for the third party to make strategic maneuvers, partially because of lack of training, and partially because the membership can be opposed to shifting away from the "core ideals" of the organization. This can lead to extended conflict between a pragmatic and an idealistic wing for control over the party and its direction.

Figure 3:
Percent Vote for Libertarian Presidential Candidates, 1972-2024



Indeed, as Christopher Devine (2020) demonstrated, this conflict between idealists and pragmatists has been a key characteristic of the Libertarian Party through much of its history. The increased electoral success of the Libertarians from 2012 to 2020 may have been partially because of the (temporary) increase in power of the pragmatic wing, led by Gary Johnson, who was the party's presidential nominee in 2012 and 2016. But that pragmatism may have helped set off a backlash within the party.

(2) Because the US is a federalist system, third parties are required to organize at the state level, and then these various state organizations form together as a national organization. This produces a fundamental weakness for third parties. Factions can gain control over the state organizations and then use that to force change across the entire party. Moreover, it makes hostile takeovers much easier. For example, in 2000, Pat Buchanan's campaign took over (and destroyed) the Reform Party by packing its members into the party's state organizations, voting its own people into leadership positions, and then using those positions to hand Buchanan control over the party.

In the Libertarian Party's case, the problem was a hostile takeover by a pro-MAGA group that called itself the Mises Caucus. Identified as a racist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, it has roots in the Libertarian Party of New Hampshire and spread to other state organizations around the country. While the traditional view of the Libertarian Party had been a combination of economic and social libertarianism, the Mises Caucus promoted a fusion of economic libertarianism and MAGA views on social issues, including immigration. The caucus gained control over the national organization before the 2024 election. Using that control, instead of trying to distinguish the Libertarian Party from the Republican Party, the Mises Caucus invited Trump as a speaker at the Libertarian National Party Convention. (Trump spent much of

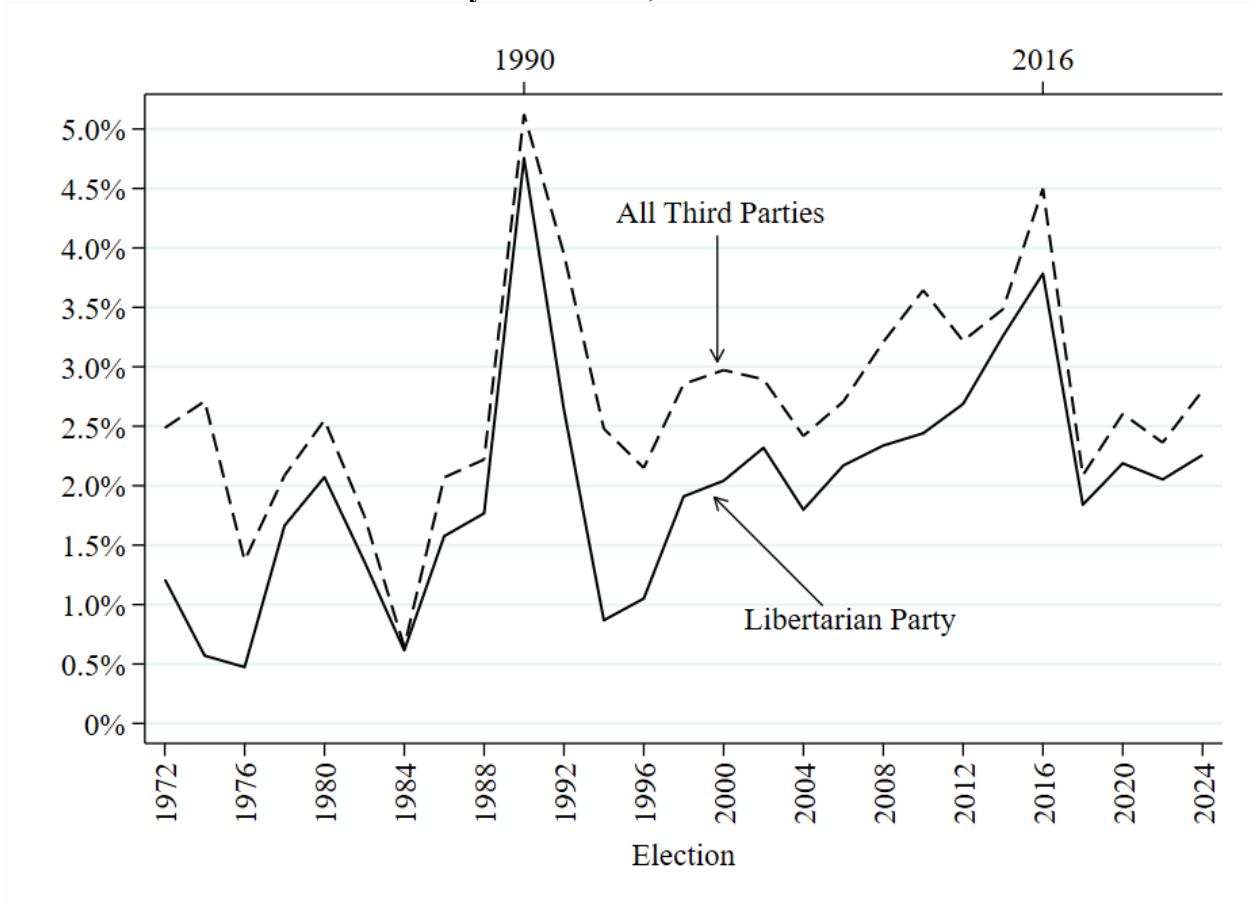
the speech telling the audience that the Libertarian Party should nominate him, which led to booing from many attendees.) In the end, a pragmatist candidate, Chase Oliver, won the party's nomination for president, but the struggle for control over the party's direction continued throughout the campaign.

Figure 4 shows the median vote for Libertarian candidates since the party formed in the early 1970s until the 2024 election, when there was a Libertarian candidate running in the district. (It also shows the median vote for third-party candidates if there was at least one third-party candidate running in the district.) The graph shows that the Libertarian vote and the total third-party vote largely moved together during this period, which largely reflects that the Libertarians had been the strongest third party for most of this period. The vote for Libertarian candidates also peaked during two elections: 1990 (the midterm election right before Ross Perot's presidential run) and 2016, or the first Trump election. From 1994 until the 2016 election, the Libertarian vote rose gradually from around 1% of the vote to over 3.5% of the vote.

In terms of the strength of its presidential candidates, the number of candidates it ran across the country, and the percent vote it received within individual district-level elections, the Libertarians had clearly established themselves as the strongest third party in the US. With the Republicans shifting in the MAGA direction, they were also in the best position to take advantage of the developing political environment.

But then, as the conflict within the party raged, and as the Libertarian Party began embracing this shift in the Republican Party instead of distinguishing itself from it, the Libertarian Party position weakened instead of getting stronger. The number of candidates it was able to nominate across the country dropped considerably. While in 2016 it was able to field candidates in 27% of House districts, by 2024 it was down to only 16% of districts. As Figure 4

Figure 4:
Median Vote for Libertarian Party Candidates, US House Elections 1972-2024



This graph shows the median percent vote for Libertarian Party candidates when there was at least one Libertarian Party candidate on the ballot in the district. The graph also shows the median percent vote for third-party candidates when there was at least one third-party candidate running in the district. The graph shows that after the 2016 election, the percent vote for Libertarian candidates dropped significantly.

also shows, in the remaining House districts that had Libertarian candidates after 2016, their average vote share dropped from over 3.5% to around 2%.

Conclusion:

Historically, US third parties played a critical role in challenging the Democratic and Republican parties when they become highly polarized. At critical moments, by voicing the concerns and anger of a large percent of Americans, they often gained enough votes to undermine the electoral prospects of one of the parties, forcing that party to shift ideologically and moderate itself in order to regain the support of voters it needs. In terms of the larger political setting, especially the steadily increasing polarization of the two major parties and the widespread dissatisfaction with them, today's politics is very similar to earlier moments of third-party rebellions. However, these circumstances have not translated into the current third parties taking advantage of these opportunities.

Fundamentally, what the findings presented in this paper suggest is that the distinction between short lived third parties and long-term third parties is real. An explanation for the long lives of parties like the Prohibition Party was that they were never successful enough for the major parties to bother coopting them. But there might be another explanation as well. Organizations that last a long time tend to institutionalize. This can create a situation in which the party leaders become hesitant to pivot as political circumstances change. These activists can be highly invested in the "original", founding ideals of the party and adverse to strategic maneuvers that do not adhere strictly to those ideals.

This suggests that a successful challenge to the major parties might require a new third party. The problem is that it is difficult to build a new political party in the United States. While

ballot access laws are hardly the overwhelming problem that third-party scholars had once argued, gathering the necessary signatures in many states can be time consuming and expensive. There are also likely two other issues. The first is a collective action problem. Building a third-party requires concerted effort without obvious gain for those organizing it. The second is the particular American version of federalism. To become a fully national party, the third party would have to build fifty separate party organizations, one for each state. While running legislative candidates doesn't require that the third party be organized in every state, this does suggest that building such a party is a substantial task without immediate benefit to those who perform the work.

Third parties therefore face a range of hurdles, not least of which is the lack of critical resources like money and professional political consultants. It also suggests a number of strategic goals that third parties should try to achieve to be more competitive within American politics. (1) Third parties should be designed more like social movements than copying the structures and methods of the major parties. The latter are resource intensive operations that cannot possibly be mimicked by third-party activists. Therefore, the third party must be more grassroots – not in terms of decentralization, but in the sense that activism, not money, will be the critical resource. (2) The party needs a clear, distinct message that it can use to bludgeon one or both political parties. That message has to express the deep anger that many Americans feel—it cannot be a “can't we all get along” moderate message used by the failed No Labels and Forward Party founders. (3) Since the third party will have few financial resources, that message has to be communicated entirely using free media, including social media. (4) The third party should not attempt to run local, candidate-centered campaigns. This approach is far too resource and labor intensive, and it would only get in the way of the unified message. Instead, once ballot access is gained in a state, the party should simply find people willing to have their names placed on the ballot. (5) Under no circumstances

should the party run fusion candidates. It would only muddy the distinction the party needs from its opponents.

The threat to US democracy did not begin with Donald Trump, and it likely won't end if the Democrats win control over Congress in 2026 and the presidency in 2028. Even in the best-case scenario, it is only a matter of time before the Republican Party regains power. Currently, the incentive structure for its politicians has set off a system that is driving it ever further to the political right (and away from democratic norms like compromise). It is also unlikely that the Democratic Party can force the Republican Party to shift back towards moderation. A third-party challenge from the center-right that threaten the careers of Republican politicians—especially Republicans in moderate districts who have nonetheless gone full MAGA—would be one method to change the incentives for GOP politicians to moderate and embrace democratic norms.

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