The US Two-Party System: Using Power to Prosper

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In the US political system, two—and only two—parties prosper. The Democratic and Republican Parties have been hegemonic since 1860. Other parties have attempted to dislodge one or both parties, and a few have even had significant impact on the outcomes of presidential and congressional elections. Still, the two major parties persist, and despite surveys (Collet 1996) of American voters demonstrating dissatisfaction with the status quo, no one believes any other political parties have a reasonable chance of success. Why is this the case? Why is the US case archetypical of two-party states? The short answer is that US parties are entirely Downsian, even though their form is more complicated than that posited by Anthony Downs (1957). US parties adopt policies to win elections. They do not win elections to enact policy. A number of institutional features of the US system encourage a single-minded focus on winning (mainly the winner-takes-all electoral system). But though Downs can explain the victory-focused US parties and the condition of a two-party system in his model, why do Americans have not just two parties, but these two parties? The answer is that the significant efforts of those parties themselves, mostly under the guise of sanitizing the electoral process so that no “unfair” influences delegitimize the US democracy, ensure the long-term survival of the two hegemons. The Democratic and Republican Parties have taken advantage of the institutional hurdles that hinder all parties—and encourage those with alternative views to run under their imprimatur. To do otherwise, as both the Reform and Green Parties demonstrated in the 1990s, means nearly certain defeat and ridicule.

Characteristics of the US Political System

The entrenched duality of US political parties owes much to the institutional features of the US political system. The two most important features are its separation of powers (as a presidential system) and its federalism. In the US
presidential system, the president is elected independently of the national legislature. Further, the national legislature is bicameral, and both houses are popularly elected, although not entirely simultaneously. The president of the United States has a four-year term. The lower house of the US Congress, the House of Representatives, has two-year terms for its 435 members. The upper house, the Senate, has six-year terms for each of its 100 members, but their expiration is staggered by constitutional mandate so that only one-third of the body is up for reelection every two years. To conduct this array of elections, the US Constitution requires that national elections be held at fixed two-year intervals, specifically the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years.

As a federal system, elections for subnational governments are often held in conjunction with elections for national office. Each of the 50 states has a chief executive (governor), and most have four-year terms. Thirty-six states hold gubernatorial elections in the off-year (the even-numbered year in between presidential elections). The remaining 14 states hold their elections during the presidential election year, or in an odd-numbered off-year (Virginia and New Jersey are in this category). The states also hold elections for their legislatures. A number of them also have independently elected executive positions (such as treasurer or secretary of state). This can make the combined national-state ballot extremely long and unfamiliar to many voters (as there can be a great number of low-salience races on them). In addition, separation of powers at the national and state levels virtually guarantees that while voters may go to the polls every two years, they will not be voting to fill the same set of offices each time. This is actually quite demanding and confusing. Alan Abramowitz argues that “voting fatigue”—the idea that voters are constantly at the polls—contributes to low voter turnout in the United States (2004, p. 10).

The US electoral system has several distinctive features. First, the president is not directly elected, but is instead selected by an electoral college. A candidate must win a simple majority of electoral votes to win. The number of electoral votes is 538, one for each of the 435 members of the House of Representatives, one for each member of the Senate, and three for the District of Columbia, which is not represented in Congress. The number of electoral votes needed for victory is 270. Each state casts electoral votes equal to the number of its representatives in the House and its two senators. Also, each state determines how it will select electors to the Electoral College. Most states use a winner-takes-all system, whereby the candidate who receives a plurality of votes in the state receives all the electoral votes. Two exceptions to this are the states of Maine and Nebraska, where two electors are chosen at large by statewide popular vote (reflecting the number of US senators) and the remaining electors are selected by the popular vote in each congressional district. It is possible for these states to choose a split slate of electors, but this has never happened.

The US Two-Party System

The Electoral College played a quiet role in supporting the two-party system (i.e., the winner-takes-all method of appointment promotes two parties) until the 2000 presidential election, which was noteworthy for the suspicious circumstances around its resolution. Republican George W. Bush was elected by 271 members of the Electoral College, one above the number required. However, Democrat Al Gore received more popular votes in the nation overall, and the question of who received the most popular votes cast in the state of Florida became disputed. Ultimately, the state’s officials certified that Bush had won the state (and hence its entire slate of electors) by 537 votes out of a total of 5.8 million cast. While the details of the postelection events are well described elsewhere (Calver and Busch 2001, pp. 171–212), we can say the process of resolving the recount issue as well as the ultimate outcome of the election hints at the potential for corrupt connections. One reason is that the Supreme Court ultimately decided to prevent a recount that might have led to increased vote totals for Gore. That the Supreme Court voted seven to two, appearing to reflect the fact that Republicans appointed seven of the nine justices, while Democrats counted only two in their ranks, is itself telling. Second, the executive branch in Florida (including top election administrators), as well as the leadership of the legislative branch, was closely influenced by the state’s Republican governor, Jeb Bush, who also happens to be the younger brother of George W. Bush. In addition, the close election in Florida revealed a number of troubling aspects of the administration of elections in the United States, including the appropriateness of specific ballot formats (are they understandable to voters? see Wand et al. 2001), the human error involved in handling ballots (what to do with ballots that are not machine-readable, for instance), the lack of consistent standards statewide for how to conduct a recount or how to handle partially voted ballots, and the reality that human workers at the polls interpret the policies for operating the polls differently. Between then and now, several states (including Florida) have made significant investments in new voting systems (Kimball and Kropf 2005). However, the newer, “easier” voting systems are largely computer-driven, leading many skeptics to wonder about the ability to monitor for mistakes, intentional or not (Sneiderman 2003).

Below the presidential level, the United States has a single-member plurality electoral system for the national legislature. Each state has two senators. Their terms are staggered intentionally so that both of a state’s senators almost never run for election in the same year. Members of the House of Representatives have a distinct geographic constituency that is determined by the legislature in their state. These district boundaries are reconfigured every ten years as a result of the constitutionally mandated population census. The 2000 census data determined whether a state’s representation would increase, decrease, or remain the same for the 2002–2012 elections. Currently, the average number of constituents per House district is 646,952 (US Census Bureau 2002). Eighteen states had changes in the number of representatives they would have
for the current decade. A total of twelve seats were reapportioned (moved from one state to another), with eight states gaining seats and ten states losing seats. The states that lost seats were Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Most of these states are in the Northeast, and the losses generally hurt the Democrats' electoral fortunes more than the Republicans'. Because when states lose seats, incumbent members have stiffer reelection challenges, usually because they would have to face another incumbent member in a district, each of them only partially represented previously. The Democrats stood to lose more incumbents this way. The states that gained seats were Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, and Texas. These states are in the "sunbelt," which includes the Republican-dominated southern and western regions, so the Republicans are believed to have an advantage in congressional and presidential elections in the decade from 2002–2012 (Lublin 2004).

The other major systemic change in recent years has been the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, which came into effect for the 2004 election cycle. The BCRA withstood a preelection test of its constitutionality and remained largely intact. Briefly, the BCRA's intent was to eliminate the role of "soft money" in elections. Soft money comprises large donations from individuals, corporations, or labor unions to political parties to engage in advertising campaigns known as "issue advocacy." Using a collection of legal loopholes, parties used these unlimited funds to help candidates get elected by running advertisements promoting them or their accomplishments, but not explicitly advocating their election or defeat (no "magic words" such as "vote for" or "vote against"). Quickly, observers noted the extensive similarity between issue ads and campaign ads (Herrnson and Dwyer 1999; Magleby 2000). Though the parties claimed that soft money helped them win elections, the bad press they received from it, combined with a number of corporate scandals by major companies that had been soft money contributors (e.g., Enron), led to successful reform legislation (a previous attempt had been made in 1998; see Dwyer and Farrar-Myers 2001). Whether the recent campaign finance law (discussed below) will end the influence of the wealthiest individuals on the outcome of the political process remains to be seen, but the intent of the legislators was to break the direct link between the political parties who nominate and elect candidates and the donors who desire particular policy outcomes. This was indeed achieved, but the less direct links may be even more harmful to the democratic process, especially because they are less visible.

Why These Two Parties?
The theme of this volume is the prosperity of parties. What makes the United States unique is not the prosperity of just one party, but of our two particular parties. Why don't new parties enter the system? Why doesn't voter dissatis-

faction result in the demise of losing parties? The answer is that the US context fits and in some ways supersedes the cartel party model (Katz and Mair 1993). The two US parties represent the state in significant ways. Any effort to dislodge the two-party system is met with the same sort of skepticism that Americans demonstrate when confronted with the suggestion of any alteration to the constitutional structure. How have the two parties been able to achieve this? The answers include: through the electoral system (first-past-the-post and primaries), through domination of ballot access and election procedures generally, through campaign finance, and through media predisposition toward reinforcing the "winning" aspect of elections.

The Electoral System
The large number of elections held at fixed times in the United States makes for a constant state of electioneering, and elections become forums for winning rather than arenas to evaluate the success or failure of particular policy initiatives. Worse still, in virtually every jurisdiction in the United States, electoral districts are single-member plurality, meaning there is only one winner in each race. That fact alone accounts for the dearth of serious party competition. If winning 24 percent of the vote in a four-party race yields nothing, what is the point in continuing the pursuit? Single-member plurality precedes the institutionalization of the two-party system in the United States; it has roots in the Constitution and later in reform of the congressional election system in the early part of the nineteenth century. However, the parties have had a hand in maintaining this electoral system, as well as in creating the other institutional barriers to competition.

Single-member plurality systems normally produce two parties, since there is a chance that the second-place finisher could end up on top if the first-place finisher were to fall out of favor. In the US case, Democrats and Republicans are less threatened by the prospect of losing to each other than to an independent: or a "third" party. The reason is clear—the current two-party system provides for an alternation of power at worst. The party losing a particular office is guaranteed to have strength elsewhere in the nation, and the loss of an office creates a self-sustaining goal of reclamation. Viable parties other than the Republicans and Democrats could displace one of the major parties and permanently change the power structure enjoyed by elected officials (this has happened in Canada several times in the past two decades).

The United States is also unusual for inviting the electorate to choose the parties' nominees. To solve a number of collective action and legal problems, the Democrats and Republicans have invited all voters who claim affiliation with their party through voter registration to choose the general election nominees. The United States is almost alone in this (though some countries such as Finland have parties that use primaries if the party organization is not able to resolve internal disagreement over candidates), and the electorate's control
in selecting nominees is a principal reason for the overall stagnation of the US party system. However, scholars of minor parties have long recognized that primaries are an important way for the two major parties to defuse dissent. By inviting all comers to participate in primaries, the Democrats and Republicans discourage serious pursuit of alternative party options. Because electoral laws in the states, through ballot access, create much higher barriers for new parties than for candidates seeking office as independents, aspirants for elective office pursue their ambitions by seeking a major-party nomination rather than blazing a new trail. This system virtually guarantees that realistic candidates will stay within the two-party system, further ensuring its hegemony.

**Locus of Power**

In their recent book *The Formation of National Party Systems*, Pradeep Chhibber and Kenneth Kollman (2004) argue that the explanation for the number of parties in a political system is not primarily the institutional factors mentioned above, but rather the location of power in the federal system. The more that voters perceive power at the national level, the fewer the number of parties. The more that voters perceive power at the local level, the more incentive there is for niche parties to emerge that will attract sufficient strength to be elected to office. This argument refutes many of the claims of scholars of parties and electoral systems worldwide, suggesting that institutional tinkering would not alter the performance of parties. However, the two arguments are obviously interrelated, especially in the US case, inasmuch as elected officials in the various states indeed cast themselves in the national political context as well as in their local context. Since helping to preserve the viability of their party can lead to political rewards, they tend to design local laws to protect the two national parties from successful regional interlopers. The US Constitution gives authority to the fifty states for determining the “time, place, and manner” of elections, which promotes the high degree of conformity found across states among electoral institutional features friendly to the two major parties. A number of important electoral rules are left to the states to decide, including:

- Ballot access (requirements for parties and independents to get on the ballot—signature requirements, timelines for submission).
- Voter registration requirements.
- Ballot design and administration (paper, punch-card, computer, absentee, mail-in, early voting, staffing of polls, hours of polling places, recount procedures, etc.).
- Campaign finance regulation in statewide (not national) elections.

It should be clear that having so many issues decided at the subnational level actually deters the emergence of new regional political parties. Political actors outside the two-party mainstream will have no experience dealing with the

technicalities of election administration, especially when dealing with administrators who are not so secretly partisan. Many challenges to electoral laws by minor parties end up in the judicial system. While sometimes justice is achieved there, it almost always arrives long after the election at hand has been held and the winners installed.

**Ballot access.** The fact that candidates for the presidency have to master fifty separate ballot access procedures in itself discourages minor-party candidacies. In addition, virtually every state makes it easier for candidates to join the ballot as an Independent candidate, rather than as a candidate of any new or minor party. For example, Ross Perot ran as an Independent in 1992 and as the nominee of the Reform Party in 1996, after a much longer process to secure ballot access. In 2000, Ralph Nader ran predominantly as the Green Party’s candidate and as an Independent in the few states that would not grant the Green Party ballot position. He appeared on forty-three ballots altogether. Democrat Al Gore’s narrow defeat in the 2000 election was credited, by some, to Nader’s presidential candidacy as a nominee of the Green Party, especially in the state of Florida, which reinforced, to Democrats at least, the idea that minor parties are “spoilers” and seek to inhibit the election of the viable candidate closest to the minor party’s position. For a variety of reasons, Nader did not receive the Green Party’s nomination in 2004, and instead sought to gain ballot access by standing either as the nominee of the Reform Party (the party of Ross Perot, which still had automatic ballot access in a few states) or as an Independent. However, from 1996 to 2004, the Reform Party lost ballot position in all but seven states. Despite considerable legal and political hurdles (including a well-orchestrated effort by prominent Democrats to derail his ballot access efforts in several key states and less prominent efforts by Republicans to help him; see Seelye 2004), Nader managed to gain access to ballots in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia. However, Nader attracted less than one-sixth the number of voters he did in 2000, managing to marginalize himself and his issues (Shane 2004).

**Voter registration.** Many political scientists have studied whether varying registration requirements in the states suppress voter turnout. With the adoption of the “Motor Voter” law, easing and forcing some minimal conformity among the states, registration rates have risen, but not voter turnout. For the purposes of party prosperity, voter registration is extremely important in promoting two-party hegemony in states holding closed primaries. Closed primaries mean that only individuals registered with a particular party may vote in the primary election. In virtually every instance, this means voters must declare a major-party affiliation early on, and then vote in only that party’s state primary. According to Richard Winger of Ballot Access News, only seventeen states fund primaries for political parties (personal e-mail communication). Some states have
tried to open participation in primaries to nonaffiliated (Independent) voters, and to allow voters who are registered in one party to vote in the primary of the other party. These states have either open or blanket primaries. However, the Democrats and Republicans object strongly to efforts to open the primaries and even filed a brief together in the Supreme Court case *California Democratic Party v. Jones* (2000) challenging California’s voter-initiated blanket primary. Indeed, the Democrats and Republicans prevailed, adding constitutional blessings to their hegemony. The Supreme Court found that the interests of the political parties in restricting access to their own members (i.e., registered voters) to choose nominees through their right to freedom of association, and the stabilizing effect this had on the political system, outweighed the interests of the state in promoting higher levels of voter participation.

**Ballot design.** Problems with citizen use of voting equipment have been extensively discussed since the 2000 elections. Recently, every state has had to examine its administration of elections under the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which deals with both voter registration disputes and upgrades to voting equipment. First, HAVA mandates offering provisional ballots at precinct places for people whose voting registration cannot be verified on election day. If the voter’s registration can be verified, his or her provisional ballot is counted after the polls close. Second, HAVA also requires either that voters are able to check for errors before they cast a vote or that voter education programs exist to minimize voter confusion (Kimball and Kropf 2005). David Kimball and Martha Kropf find that since 2000, 691 counties have upgraded their voting equipment, though very few states have required uniform voting technologies among all counties. Their analysis also shows that the switch to new technologies seems to have resolved many of the problems of improperly counted votes. The drop in residual vote rates from 2000 to 2004 was much higher among counties that switched from old to new equipment (2.4 percent to 1.0 percent) than among those that used the same equipment (1.5 percent to 1.1 percent) (Kimball and Kropf 2005, p. 15). Thus, national, state, and local officials have been responsive to critiques of the 2000 election, and their actions have taken a major issue away from a potential “reform” party.

**Campaign finance.** The regulation of campaign finance in the United States was designed by the Democrats and Republicans (who hold virtually every legislative seat at the state and national levels, and whose candidates have held almost every chief executive post at both levels for more than 140 years) to monitor their own campaign behavior. The system is primarily privately financed, with a few provisions for public funding. Some states have departed significantly from the national model, adopting a “clean election” option, allowing candidates to decline raising money privately, receiving instead a set amount of public money and free or reduced television advertising time. Three states (Maine, Arizona, and Vermont) have had this system since 2000, Massachusetts has had it since 2002, and New Mexico and North Carolina recently adopted these provisions in 2002 and 2003, respectively; Connecticut has adopted clean-election laws for the 2008 elections. It is unlikely that any system of this sort will be adopted at the national level. Currently, limited public money goes to “qualified” candidates at the national level for presidential nomination and general election campaigns run by major political parties. In the 2004 election, neither major party’s presidential nominee used the early pot of public money, which may further marginalize any non-major party’s chances of entering the electoral scene.

Campaign money raised and spent for campaigns for federal office (including the presidency and all seats in the Senate and House of Representatives) is regulated through the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, the Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1974, and the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002. These laws are administered by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which comprises a board of six governors appointed by the president, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate; no more than three members of the FEC may be affiliated with the same political party. Since 1974, the president and the majority and minority parties in the Senate have been either Democrats or Republicans. Thus the FEC has had three Democrats and three Republicans since that time. Hence the commission is bipartisan. The investors in the two major parties have a great interest in perpetuating the duopoly of the system.

**Presidential campaign finance: Mix of public and private funds.** The Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1974 provided for public money to pay campaign costs for qualifying parties’ nomination and general election campaigns. The law allows candidates seeking those parties’ nominations to receive public money matching funds. Qualifying parties are also entitled to public money grants to hold their nominating conventions. Finally, the general election nominees of qualifying parties receive identical amounts of public money to finance their postnomination campaign activities.

Only parties qualifying as “major” receive the full subvention. Major parties are those whose nominee received 25 percent or more of the popular vote nationwide in the previous presidential election. Since the public finance system went into effect in 1974, only the Democrats and Republicans have qualified as major parties. Therefore, only the Democrats and Republicans have received public money on the day of their nomination (i.e., in advance of the conduct of the general election campaign). While other parties have at times had candidates receive matching funds (Nader received matching funds in 2004, for example), almost all the matching funds have gone to the Democrats and Republicans.
Minor parties are entitled to reimbursement for general election expenses only after the election is concluded and the party has garnered from 5 to 25 percent of the popular vote nationwide. The search for the 5 percent threshold was one motivating factor behind Ralph Nader’s Green Party candidacy in 2000, and explained why Ross Perot sought ballot position as the Reform Party nominee in 1996. Perot garnered 9 percent of the national vote that year, which allowed the Reform Party to qualify for $12.6 million in federal money in advance of the general election (Jelen 2001, p. xii; FEC 2000). New minor parties receive a subvention partially covering convention costs in the election cycle after their initial 5 percent success under the law. This means that a viable national candidacy almost must be waged by someone of independent wealth such as Ross Perot. It is too difficult to compete with the major parties’ public money advantage otherwise. But Perot’s gains in the two-party system were temporary. As Ted Jelen explains, Patrick Buchanan’s “paltry showing of just under 1 percent in 2000 ensures that the Reform Party will not qualify for federal campaign funds in 2004” (2001, p. xii).

Congressional campaign finance. Unlike the presidential campaigns, congressional campaigns do not receive any public monies. They are entirely privately financed within the regulations imposed by the law. However, the major parties have such a significant fundraising presence that minor-party candidates cannot hope to compete on a level playing field. With only market forces at play, minor parties have even less of a chance to fund visible candidates than they do at the presidential level. In the 2004 elections, 2,219 candidates for the House of Representatives raised a total of $1.2 billion to wage their campaigns. Of this 2,219, only 27 were not Democrats or Republicans. These candidates were listed as Independents, Libertarians, or Green Party candidates, and together raised $14.4 million, just over 1 percent of the total. One of these candidates, Independent Bernice Sanders of Vermont, is an incumbent member of Congress who, while emphatically rejecting the label of “Democrat,” receives Democratic committee assignments and party communications in the House of Representatives. Given that he functions as a Democrat, and that his receipts of $836,000 were typical for a Democratic incumbent, we see that the remaining 26 candidates raised $623,354 among them. This amount is 0.0005 percent of the total raised by all other major party candidates. Thus it seems clear that to succeed in raising funds as a congressional candidate, one should pick a major party as a nominator.

Political parties and the financing of politics. The FEC also determines whether organizations count as national party committees, entitling them to higher contribution limits. The bipartisan commission makes the determination based on whether the parties field presidential candidates, run candidates for congressional office, and have statewide nominating conventions. In recent years, the FEC has demoted the Green Party from national committee status to that of a multicandidate committee, and may yet do the same with the Reform Party. That the decision is up to representatives of the two major parties using criteria that prohibit any other creative strategy (such as a regional campaign, pursued by many previously successful minor parties in US history) from being employed.

Donors: The financiers of US politics. Most of the resources used to finance elections in the United States are private. Individuals, political action committees, and political parties are the major contributors to campaigns. In the election years from 1996 to 2002, corporations and labor unions made sizable contributions to funds that were created to advocate for issues, but that were found to be primarily aimed at “electioneering” in their form and content. Nonetheless, the current flow of money to the major parties contributes to their prosperity. The largest proportion of donations comes from individuals. Many of these individuals make sizable contributions and, as a group, individual donors to political campaigns make up a small fraction of the US population (for the 1996 cycle, only 12.5 percent of the population reported making a donation to a political organization, but only 0.2 percent of the population reported contributions to federal candidates of $200 or more; see Francia et al. 2003). There are two immediate concerns here. The first and most popular is that donors expect a certain return on their investment from lawmakers—such as a tangible favor or a beneficial amendment. Second, and perhaps more insidious along the lines of Elmer Schattschneider’s concerns, is the idea that elected officials spend more time with donors than they do with “average” citizens, and that over time, they begin to believe that the concerns of their donors represent the concerns of all citizens, when in fact they do not. An even more cynical interpretation of this problem comes from Thomas Ferguson (1995), who argues that historically, profit-seeking firms have invested heavily in both Democrats and Republicans to ensure not just that specific favors are received but that destabilizing proposals do not come onto the agenda. In essence, the investors find that the two-party system protects them from any significant anticapitalistic regimes coming to power. The key is to keep minor parties out of competition, as either of the two major parties will preserve business’s privileged position. Indeed, this facet of the “cartel” has particularly incensed some Republicans, who have tried hard to force the business community to choose sides, but to little avail. Since enactment of the BCRA, in fact, corporations have declined to contribute as much as they had under soft money rules, choosing to rely on their structural power rather than their direct contributions.

Media Bias Toward Covering Likely “Winners”

The importance of media coverage in US electoral politics cannot be understated. Especially since the presidential election of 1960, candidates for public
office must get on television and must do what they can to get voters to remember them. Having a "brand" name that is recognizable goes a long way toward achieving that recognition, and voters and journalists alike respond to "Republican" and "Democrat" as labels attached to likely winners of elections. The media respond accordingly, seeing their role to report newsworthy events and individuals, and in the process to weed out irrelevant information. This explains the lack of meaningful coverage of minor parties and their candidates. According to Doris Graber, these minor candidates "have no chance to win the fight; therefore they simply are not 'big news' to the mass audience. Lack of coverage, in turn, makes it extremely difficult for them to become well known and increase their chances of winning elections. This is an example of unintentional bias built into media coverage in favor of established political forces" (1980, p. 164). Thomas Patterson has a less benign view of media bias. In an article about the overreliance on and misinterpretation of public opinion polls by journalists, Patterson argues that reporters tend to find what they want to see in these documents. Media coverage is governed by poll position, causing the media coverage of each major-party presidential candidate to be "clothed in an imagery consistent with his position in the race" (2005, p. 7). Of course, lack of solid poll standings is one of the biggest problems that minor parties face, and the lack of serious media coverage makes the problem a circular one indeed, as Graber explains.

Who Does Not Prosper Under the Current US System?

If Democrats and Republicans prosper under the current system, then who does not? The answer is obvious: those who do not currently vote, those who do not contribute to or invest in the political system, and those who believe that the two major parties do not represent their views.

Nonvoters

While voter participation increased in the 2004 presidential election over the 2000 election (to 64 percent of the eligible adult population, up from 60 percent, according to the US Census Bureau, but other scholars calculate the rate as being somewhat lower and not quite a historic high), it is still far lower than in most other established democracies. The lack of full participation has been continually lamented by most observers of US politics as an artifact of an uneducated mass base, but others, such as Murray Edelman (1988), attribute lack of participation to quiescence, the idea that the political system seems trapped in a quagmire of limited choices, where the consequences of a change in partisan control (or even officeholders) make a marginal difference in outcomes. The 2004 election was especially noteworthy for extensive efforts by both parties' supporters to increase voter registration, and hence participation. The new

Democratic-leaning "527" organizations, such as America Coming Together and Moveon.org, plus special efforts like MTV's Rock the Vote and Music for America, tried hard to target the normally apathetic youth vote, stressing, perhaps a bit too much, the significant differences among the presidential candidates. While more Americans participated in the process than in recent history, it is clear that a significant proportion of the American electorate will not grant the political system legitimacy through voting. And while it cannot be proven, the hypothesis that the two-party system is responsible for this state of affairs is certainly enticing.

Noncontributors

If a large minority of Americans don't vote, the vast majority do not contribute to politics. There are two ways for Americans to underwrite the costs of politics: through the checkoff on federal income tax returns (for the presidential financing system), and through direct contributions to political parties and candidates. In 2004, about 10 percent of American taxpayers chose to have $3 of the tax they owed to the federal government diverted to the Presidential Election Campaign Fund. This does not increase a citizen's tax liability. It allows him or her to indicate that financing elections is a personal priority. The 10 percent participation rate is down from 20 percent in the early 1980s. However, the Campaign Finance Institute (2005) does not believe that this decline is due to frustration with the system, but rather to lack of information about the checkoff, and the fact that various tax credit programs have resulted in many citizens not filing tax returns. Mostly, though, people who do not invest in politics are likely not to have much disposable income, and are likely to value contributions to charitable rather than political causes in any event. Some have suggested voucher systems (Adamanthey and Agree 1976) to limit each person's contribution to $50, but then to force candidates to appeal to all potential voters (especially those who don't normally participate in politics) to finance their campaigns. While the ideas are laudable, the current party system finds contributors neatly divided between the two major contenders, with only a bit of overlap through the business interests that Ferguson explores.

Those Who Have Alternative Views

Obviously, if the two major parties dominate the electoral landscape at the national and subnational levels, then alternative views are not heard. Indeed, given the paltry but pivotal support for Ralph Nader and the Green Party in 2000, even liberal critics blamed Nader for Democrat Al Gore's loss in Florida, and thus the presidential election. The attitude toward alternative party candidates in 2004 was extraordinarily sour for this reason, even from the left's most ardent adherents. Numerous websites emerged from 2002 to 2004 imploiting Ralph Nader not to run for the presidency. The editors of The Nation, perhaps the most visible leftist magazine in the United States, begged
him not to run in an “open letter.” But Barry Grey (2004), writing for the World Socialist Website, explains the left’s reaction to Nader best:

More fundamentally, Nader’s intervention and the extreme reaction it has provoked from within the political establishment reflect the fragile and crisis-ridden state of the American two-party system. The political monopoly of two parties beholden to the property elite has served to defend the basic interests of the American ruling class for more than a century. But this system has grown so sclerotic, insulated and alienated from the population at large that it can no longer tolerate the raising of any serious social or democratic issues or any criticisms that go beyond the most banal and superficial.

Further, Paul Frymer argues in Uneasy Alliances (1999) that certain groups, specifically African Americans, have been purposefully neglected by both major parties, even by the Democratic Party, which receives the great bulk of their votes. They are effectively captured by the Democrats because the Republicans do not want their votes (appealing to them would alienate their base), and African Americans have nowhere else to go but the Democratic Party. Because so much of the American public reacts negatively to racial issues, Frymer argues that national parties will fail to become vehicles for racial progress (1999, p. 180). In addition, Frymer argues that two other groups, gays and lesbians and Christian conservatives, have tense relations with the two parties. Gays and lesbians may also be “captured” by the Democrats, but as with blacks, their agenda has been ignored by their “parent” party and their numbers and current position in society prevent them from starting viable third parties. Christian conservatives, on the other hand, a bloc that two decades ago was divided between the two major parties, are now a critical component of the Republican Party’s ability to form electoral majorities. Far from having been captured by Republicans, they seem to have captured the stewardship of the Republican Party. The Christian Right seems to have the potential to break off and realize electoral success on its own, particularly in a few key states, an exit threat that undoubtedly influences current Republican politics. As long as this strategy produces electoral majorities, the Christian Right will stay with the party and the Republicans will modify their agenda in that direction. But the two major parties do have to contend with a tenuous situation—having to monitor the threat significant constituent blocs pose to their longevity.

Conclusion

Hence we come full circle. Barry Grey correctly explains that the most ideologically wistful will put their policy preferences behind the hope of being part of a winning coalition. The prosperity of the two major parties in the United States is the result of more than the factors discussed in this chapter. It is also based on limiting choice at the polls, ridiculing ideas that are not at the main-