

## APGoPo Unit 4

# MINOR (THIRD) PARTIES

Although the Republican and Democratic parties have dominated the political scene, there have been minor, or third, parties throughout U.S. history. Minor parties usually have great difficulty in getting candidates elected to office, although they have been more successful at the state and local levels. A few minor party candidates have been elected to Congress, but no minor party candidate has ever been elected president. Minor parties have been instrumental in providing important reforms that have been adopted by the major parties. Success rather than failure often brings an end to minor parties, as the major parties often adopt popular reforms or ideas, especially if they appeal to the voters.

Probably the most influential third party in American history was the Populist Party of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that first represented the interests of farmers, but was responsible for wide-ranging democratic reforms. The fate of the Populists was the same as for most other third parties: their goals adopted by a major party, deferring to the "winner-take-all, or pluralist system, that supports a two party system.

In 1992 Ross Perot, a billionaire Texas businessman, tried to defy the two party system by running for president as an independent without the support of a political party. In the election, he gained 19% of the vote, but did not capture a single electoral vote. In 1996, he again entered the race, but also announced the birth of a third party that fizzled when he received less than half as many votes as he did in 1992. In 2000 Ralph Nader ran for the Green Party, but he won only about 3% of the vote. In 2004 Nader ran as an independent, and the Green Party fielded their own candidates for office, but neither managed to garner many votes.

Third parties have almost certainly affected election outcomes, most obviously in 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt ran for the Progressive Party, splitting the Republican vote and throwing the election to Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Many Democrats believe that Al Gore would have won the election of 2000 had Ralph Nader not run. Likewise, some Republicans claim that Ross Perot was responsible for George H. Bush's loss of the election of 1992.

<b>Types</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideological - those based on a particular set of social, political, or economic beliefs               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Communist Party, Libertarian Party</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Single issue - parties that concentrate on a single public policy matter               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Free Soil opposed the spread of slavery</li> <li>◦ Right to Life opposes abortion</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Candidate-centered party - those usually formed around a strong personality; may disappear when that leader steps aside               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party</li> <li>◦ George Wallace's American Independent Party</li> <li>◦ Ross Perot's Reform Party</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Contributions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise issues that other parties must address, and often incorporate into their own party platforms. "Champions not of lost causes, but of causes yet to be won" (e.g., Populist Party: direct election of senators, income tax, etc.).</li> <li>• Voice for the fringe elements in society</li> <li>• Safety valve for discontent in society</li> </ul>
<b>Effects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely win elections</li> <li>• Influence the outcome of presidential elections (e.g., 1968, 1992, 2000) - "spoiler role"</li> </ul>
<b>Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two-party tradition (because of single-member legislative districts)</li> <li>• Single-member, winner-take-all, plurality district system for <i>congressional</i> seats, as opposed to the multi-member, proportional system that is common in other countries</li> <li>• Electoral College's winner-take-all system: Perot won 19% of the vote in 1992, but had zero electoral votes.</li> <li>• Getting candidates on the ballot               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Democrat and Republican candidates are automatically placed on state ballots</li> <li>◦ Minor party candidates must persuade registered voters to sign petitions in order to have their names placed on the ballot.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Money; media coverage; exclusion from TV debates</li> </ul>