



Visionaries or Spoilers--Third Parties and the 2016 Election

Barring wholly improbable developments, like an attack by aliens, either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton will be America's president. For all that voters mistrust both, they're too far ahead in the polls for another candidate to win. If you're dissatisfied with that choice, and considering voting Third Party, here's some historical context on the tradeoffs:

If you're considering voting Libertarian or Green you'll likely do so for several reasons:

- You dislike Clinton and Trump, candidates with historically low approval levels.
- You admire the Libertarian or Green platforms and candidates.
- You want to challenge the two-party system by building alternatives.

But in this particularly close and volatile election, your Third Party vote and the Third Party votes of others could draw away just enough votes from either Trump or Clinton, particularly in close states, to give their opponent the presidency. Those candidates could become what political observers call "spoilers," determining the race by the votes they shift.

As our [Nonpartisan Presidential Candidate guide](#) outlines, Green Party candidate Jill Stein's positions are far closer to Clinton's, especially on domestic issues, than either of them are to Trump. So if you prefer Clinton's positions to Trump's but want to cast a protest vote against her personally and/or against our political system, you might end up voting for Stein. The result would be to reduce Clinton's chances of winning against Trump.

Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson [holds more divergent positions](#) and therefore will have a more unpredictable impact on the election results. His positions tend to be closer to Trump's than to Clinton's on most issues, like cutting taxes and cutting or eliminating environmental and consumer protection laws. And Libertarians generally draw votes from Republicans. But Johnson's positions on issues like marijuana legalization and his anti-interventionist policies also draw Democrats. So if you cast a protest vote against either Trump or Clinton personally, you might vote for Johnson. The candidate who would suffer a loss of votes would depend on your political leanings.

Here's the dilemma:

- Johnson has been polling 6%-8%. Voters of his in close states could defeat either Clinton or Trump. By voting Third Party, they leave this decision to others, risking the election of the candidate they most vehemently oppose.
- 2%-4% of voters favor Stein in recent polls. Given the closeness of this race, by voting for Stein they could make it more likely for Trump to become President.
- All elections matter, but contexts like the vacancy on a deadlocked Supreme Court--and more vacancies likely--make this one matter more than most. Voters for Johnson or Stein surrender their voice on everything from [Supreme Court appointments](#) to global climate change treaties, war and peace decisions, Environmental Protection Administration staffing (and existence), and the status of America's 11 million illegal immigrants.

Third Party voters face this dilemma due to strengths and weaknesses of our political system. Although often described as a "two-party system," America has always had other parties. Most have remained on the margins, in contrast with other democratic countries where four, five, or more parties compete for votes and gain voices in "multi-party" political systems. But those are mostly "proportional representation" systems where parties win national representation based on how many votes each receives. So if your candidate's party gets 10% of the total vote, they'll get 10% of the parliamentary seats, and can join with other parties to select the Prime Minister. The U.S., in contrast, has a "winner-take-all" system. To make things even less democratic, the Electoral College means a dozen key states decide the presidency.

As a result, no Third Party candidate has won a single electoral vote since George Wallace in 1968, and no Third Party has supplanted an existing major party since the Republicans replaced the Whigs in the 1860s. Even if Johnson or Stein got 25% nationally, they still wouldn't win the White House. But they may already be drawing off enough votes from the major-party candidates to determine who becomes President. For instance, in the 2000 Presidential election:

- Democrat Al Gore received 540,000 more popular votes than Republican George W. Bush.
- But Bush won Florida's 25 electoral votes by 537 votes, handing him the presidency by five electoral votes.

- Green Party candidate Ralph Nader got 97,421 Florida votes and other Third Party candidates got 40,579. Supporters of any of these candidates could have tipped the balance.
- Nader voters also exceeded Bush's New Hampshire margin. They too could have elected Gore President.

The last non-major party Presidential candidate to make a strong showing was businessman Ross Perot in 1992. Although Perot got 19% of the vote, he didn't carry a single state. Who he drew most from is contested, but with Bill Clinton defeating Republican George H.W. Bush by 43% to 37%, his supporters could have tipped the election.

So why vote Third Party? Voters do it to make a symbolic statement, express their values, and voice discontent with the existing system. Some want more fundamental change than existing parties will support. They want to build a movement for change, and believe Third Party candidacies are the best vehicle.

Third Party movements have helped shift public sentiment and influence the direction of the two major parties. In the late 1800s, the Populist movement forced the Democrats to support stronger regulations on big corporations like the railroad and steel companies (Populists ran their own candidates, but also ran as Democrats and Republicans). In the early 1900s, the Prohibition Party pushed both Democrats and Republicans to vote for the Eighteenth Amendment banning alcohol. Wallace's American Independent Party set the stage for southern states to shift from Democratic to Republican. Perot's independent candidacy helped move Bill Clinton toward a focus on deficit reduction.

One might argue that the Third Party arguments grow stronger the more local you get, because the chances of winning are greater. And Third Party and independent candidates have been more successful at the state and local level:

- In the early 20th century, more than a thousand Socialist Party members won election to Congress, state legislatures, and local city councils, school boards, and mayoral offices.
- In the current U.S. Senate, Bernie Sanders in Vermont and Maine's Angus King were elected as independents, although Sanders chose to run for president as a Democrat.
- Third Party candidates can also build visibility for future campaigns, as when Sanders won his first Burlington VT mayoral race by 10 votes as an independent.
- Cities like Minneapolis and San Francisco have adopted [instant runoff voting](#), which lets votes default to your second choice candidate if your first doesn't win, negating the spoiler effect.

But the Third Party spoiler effect can happen in state and local races as well:

- In Washington State's 2004 gubernatorial election, Democrat Christine Gregoire defeated Republican Dino Rossi by 134 votes. Libertarian Ruth Bennett drew over 63,000 votes, a fraction of which could have elected Rossi.
- Current Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell won his first Senate seat by a margin smaller than the votes that went to the leftist Socialist Workers Party.
- Democrat Al Franken defeated incumbent Republican Norm Coleman by 312 votes in Minnesota's 2008 Senate race. Independence Party's Dean Barkley got over 400,000 votes.
- Maine's controversial Republican governor Paul LePage owes his election to Independent Eliot Cutler, who in both 2010 and 2014 siphoned just enough votes from Democratic candidates to gain narrow victories.

Third Party campaigns also aren't the sole way movements can shift major parties. Think of the impact of the Tea Party. Organizing within the Republican Party at the grassroots level, its supporters ran candidates for everything from local school board seats to Congressional and Senate seats. They defeated senior Republican Senators (through primary challenges), and Democratic incumbents. Influenced by their growing power, Republicans substantially shut down the government in a confrontation over Obamacare. Earlier, the Christian Coalition put issues like abortion on the Republican agenda. On the Democratic side, the labor movement powerfully influenced Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the civil rights movement inspired Lyndon Johnson, and citizen movements shifted President Obama on gay marriage, protection for children of illegal immigrants, and climate change issues like the Keystone Pipeline. That doesn't even count Bernie Sanders influencing Hillary Clinton on areas like college affordability. So other ways exist to fight for significant change.

As this necessarily incomplete history reveals, one might categorize the choice to support a Third Party Presidential candidate as choosing a protest or symbolic vote that you hope will influence America's broader political culture. While meanwhile accepting the tradeoff of having no impact on who will actually be elected: in this case, Clinton or Trump. America's particular political structure created this dilemma. But all of us vote within the constraints it creates.

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