

Problem of the Two Party System:

Problem: The United States has had two major political parties for most of its existence. Usually, this has worked well. Many times, and certainly in the period I remember immediately after WWII, elected politicians within a party varied widely in their beliefs. As examples, in the middle 1900's some southern democrats held views that overlapped with those of many republicans, and many northern republicans had views that overlapped with many democrats. Often, proposed legislation had both opposition and support within the same party, and politicians often voted for legislation that they felt was best for the country.

However, there has been a growing tendency for the parties to realign so that there is much less diversity within a party. Currently, there appears to be little overlap between the parties as evidenced by congressional votes frequently following party lines. One consequence of this has been increasing pressure on individual politicians to vote what their party feels would be in its best interest, i.e., most likely to help them win the next election, rather than what the elected politicians feel would be in the best interests of the country. This creates difficulty in achieving even clearly worthwhile objectives, such as passing an appropriations bill that would keep the Federal government operating. In short, there is increasingly an unwillingness to accept reasonable compromises, even when it would serve the best interests of the country. Political posturing and sometimes extreme positions that benefit political parties become more important than the well-being of the country. No politician will admit this, of course, but I can draw no other conclusion given the sometimes fanatical polarization that has evolved in the U.S.

This rigidity is partly the result of our reliance on a two party system, which is itself a consequence of the “winner take all” approach to elections. This has worked well for the two major parties, since both parties end up with a significant number of members of congress, and presidential candidates from both parties have a reasonable chance of being elected. In fact, one party rarely wins the presidency for more than 2 or 3 consecutive terms.

However, third (or fourth) party candidates have little chance of winning an election at any level, and there is little incentive for people to vote for third party candidates except as a protest vote. On occasion, a third party can affect the outcome of an election. One consequence is that neither of the two major parties have an incentive to consider or seek the support of a third party during meetings of congress or state legislatures, or county equivalents. One wonders, if there were one or two additional parties represented in these legislative bodies, would this compel one of the major parties to adjust its positions in order to seek their support in close votes in legislative proceedings.

Speculative Proposal:

In order to encourage the creation of additional parties, and to encourage citizens to vote for them (without feeling that they are wasting their vote), the constitution could be amended so that if a third party attained a certain percentage of the votes, the presidential candidate of these parties could be sworn in as a senator for four years, and the vice presidential candidate as a member of the house of representatives for four years. After all, almost 4.5 million persons

voted for the libertarian candidates in 2016. This is a significant segment of the voting population, to end up with no voice in legislation. The Green party attracted only 1% of the votes. Both parties might well have attracted more votes if voters believed they would end up with some representation in congress.

The question arises as to how large a percentage of the vote would be needed to attain this representation. If set at 2.5%, this would have required about 3.4 million votes in 2016, which the libertarian party easily met. This is an arbitrary percentage. It should be noted however, that this is far more votes than received by many senators and representatives. The question is bound to arise as to the amount of representation that a third party should be awarded if they doubled this percentage. One could argue the point, but my opinion is that no additional representation should be awarded. Follow the KISS principle - keep it simple stupid.

In this regard, one might also consider awarding the same seats in congress to the losing candidates for president and vice president of a major party. They were, after all, put forth as exceptional candidates for these offices, and they inevitably received the votes of millions of citizens. It would be unfortunate if, after all their achievements and sacrifices, they are no longer involved in the affairs of the nation. Think of it this way. They represented a large second party, as compared to a significant, but much smaller third party.