10.6: Minor Parties

Learning Objectives

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What is a minor party, also known as a third party?
2. What are the types of minor parties in American politics?
3. What difficulties do minor parties face in winning elections?

A minor party, or third party, is an organization that is not affiliated with the two major American parties—the Democrats or Republicans. Minor parties run candidates in a limited number of elections and they do not receive large pluralities of votes. They arise when the two major parties fail to represent citizens’ demands or provide the opportunity to express opposition to existing policies. Citizens often form a minor party by uniting behind a leader who represents their interests.

Functions of Minor Parties

Minor parties raise issues that the Democrats and Republicans ignore because of their tendency to take middle-of-the-road positions. As a result, minor parties can be catalysts for change (Mazmanian, 1974). The Progressive Party backed the women’s suffrage movement in the early twentieth century, which led to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Child labor laws, the direct election of US senators, federal farm aid, and unemployment insurance are policies enacted as a result of third-party initiatives (Sifry, 2003).

More recently, the Tea Party has raised issues related to the national debate, government bailouts to failing industries,
The Tea Party is a conservative-leaning grassroots political movement that emerged in 2009 when the Young Americans for Liberty in the state of New York organized a protest against state government "tax and spend" policies. The Tea Party–themed protest recalled events in 1773, when colonists dumped tea into Boston Harbor to demonstrate their opposition to paying a mandatory tax on tea to the British government. Subsequent Tea Party protests took place in states across the country. Tea Party supporters participated in national protests in Washington, DC, which drew thousands of supporters.

### Video Clip

CNBC’s Rick Santelli’s Chicago Tea Party

[click to see video](https://www.cnbc.com/2010/02/19/video/rick-santelli-tea-party-protest.html)

The national protests were prompted by a video of a rant by CNBC editor Rick Santelli opposing government subsidies of mortgages that went viral after being posted on the Drudge Report.

Santelli called for a "Chicago Tea Party" protest, which ignited the movement. The Tea Party’s efforts were publicized through new media, including websites such as Tea Party Patriots, Facebook pages, blogs, and Twitter feeds.

Minor parties can invigorate voter interest by promoting a unique or flamboyant candidate and by focusing attention on a contentious issue (Mazmanian, 1974). Voter turnout increased in the 1992 presidential contest for the first time in over two decades in part because of minor-party candidate Ross Perot (Owen & Dennis, 1996). Perot, a wealthy businessman, was a candidate for president in 1992 for the minor party, United We Stand America, receiving nearly twenty million votes. He ran again in 1996 as a member of the Reform Party and earned nearly eight million votes (Green & Binning, 1997). Perot supporters were united in their distrust of professional politicians and opposition to government funding of social welfare programs.

Figure 10.7 Ross Perot and Ralph Nader Campaigning

Minor-party candidates Ross Perot and Ralph Nader did not come close to winning the presidency, but they did bring media attention to issues during the elections in which they ran.

[Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ross_Perot_and_Ralph_Nader_Campaigning.jpg) – CC BY-SA 3.0.
Minor party candidates can be **spoilers** in elections by taking away enough votes from a major party candidate to influence the outcome without winning. Minor parties collectively have captured over 5 percent of the popular vote in every presidential election since 1840, although individual minor parties may win only a small percentage of votes (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 2000). Green Party candidate Ralph Nader was considered by some analysts to be a spoiler in the 2000 presidential campaign by taking votes away from Democratic contender Al Gore in Florida. George W. Bush received 2,912,790 votes in Florida compared to Al Gore’s 2,912,253 votes (Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, 2011). If 540 of Nader’s 96,837 votes had gone to Gore, Gore might have ended up in the White House (Sifry, 2003).

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**Types of Minor Parties**

Minor parties can be classified as enduring, single-issue, candidate-centered, and fusion parties.

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**Enduring Minor Parties**

Some minor parties have existed for a long time and resemble major parties in that they run candidates for local, state, and national offices. They differ from major parties because they are less successful in getting their candidates elected (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 2000).

The Libertarian Party, founded in 1971, is an **enduring minor party**, which is a type of minor party that has existed for a long time and regularly fields candidates for president and state legislatures. The Libertarians are unable to compete with the two major parties because they lack a strong organizational foundation and the financial resources to run effective campaigns. The party also holds an extreme ideological position, which can alienate voters. Libertarians take personal freedoms to the extreme and oppose government intervention in the lives of individuals, support the right to own and bear arms without restriction, and endorse a free and competitive economic market (Savage, 1997).

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**Single-Issue Minor Parties**

Sometimes called ideological parties, **single-issue minor parties** exist to promote a particular policy agenda. The Green Party is a product of the environmental movement of the 1980s. It advocates environmental issues, such as mandatory recycling and strong regulations on toxic waste (Jan, 1997).

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**Candidate-Centered Minor Parties**

**Candidate-centered minor parties** form around candidates who are able to rally support based on their own charisma or message. Former World Wrestling Federation star Jesse “The Body” Ventura was elected governor of Minnesota in 1998 under the Independence Party label, an offshoot of the Reform Party. The plainspoken, media savvy Ventura made the need for an alternative to two-party domination a core theme of his campaign: “It’s high time for a third party. Let’s look at Washington. I’m embarrassed. We’ve got a lot of problems that the government should be dealing with, but instead, for the next nine months, the focus of this nation will be on despicable behavior by career politicians. If this isn’t the right time for a third party, then when?” (Sifry, 2003)
Fusion Minor Parties

Fusion minor parties, also known as alliance parties, are enduring or single-issue minor parties that engage in the practice of cross endorsement, backing candidates who appear on a ballot under more than one party label. Fusion parties routinely endorse candidates who have been nominated by the two major parties and support their causes. Cross endorsement allows minor parties to contribute to the election of a major-party candidate and thus gain access to officeholders. In addition to giving a major-party candidate an additional ballot position, fusion parties provide funding and volunteers.

Only eight states permit the practice of cross endorsement. The most active fusion parties are in New York. The Liberal Party and the Democratic Party cross endorsed Mario Cuomo in the 1990 New York governor’s race, leading him to defeat his Republican Party and Conservative Party opponents handily. The Conservative Party and the Republican Party cross endorsed George Pataki in the 2000 governor’s race, leading him to victory (Gillespie, 1993). During the 2010 midterm elections, the Tea Party cross endorsed several successful candidates running in the primary under the Republican Party label, upsetting mainstream Republican candidates. Some of the Tea Party–endorsed candidates, such as US Senate candidate Rand Paul in Kentucky, went on to win the general election.

Comparing Content

The Tea Party

There has been almost as much discussion about media coverage of the Tea Party as there has been about the organization’s issue positions, candidate endorsements, and protest activities. Tea Party activists, such as former Alaska governor and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, have lambasted the traditional news media for being tied to special interests and irrelevant for average Americans. Instead, Tea Party leaders have embraced social media, preferring to communicate with their supporters through Facebook and Twitter.

Early Tea Party protests against government economic policies received little mainstream press attention. Media coverage increased as the Tea Party staged rowdy protests against government health care reform, and public interest in the movement grew. Stories by major news organizations focused on the evolution of the Tea Party, its positions on issues, its membership, and its most vocal spokespersons. Tea Party rallies garnered extensive attention from mainstream media as well as political bloggers. The Tea Party received the lion’s share of media coverage on election night in 2010, as the mainstream press framed the election results in terms of public dissatisfaction with the political status quo as evidenced by victories by Tea Party–backed candidates (Stelter, 2010).

Coverage of the Tea Party differs widely by media outlet. CNN reports of a Tea Party protest in Chicago featured on-site reporters aggressively interviewing average citizens who were participating in the event, challenging them to defend the Tea Party’s positions on issues. CNN and network news outlets reported that members of Congress had accused Tea Party protestors of anti-Obama racism based on racially charged statements and signs held by some protestors. Fox News, on the other hand, assumed the role of Tea Party cheerleader. Fox analyst Tobin Smith took the stage at a Tea Party rally in Washington, DC, and encouraged the protestors. Reporting live from a Boston Tea Party protest, Fox Business anchor Cody Willard encouraged people to join the movement, stating, “Guys, when are we going to wake up and start fighting the fascism that seems to be permeating this country?” (Rogers, 2011)
Tea Party signs at a rally. Media coverage of Tea Party rallies focused on racially charged signs prompting the movement’s leaders to decry the mainstream press.

Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.
Signs oppose the press. The majority of Tea Party signs at rallies state issue positions without racially charged messages.

Rally Signs Depict Issue Positions


Studies of mainstream press coverage of the Tea Party also vary markedly depending on the source. A 2010 report by the conservative Media Research Center found that the press first ignored and then disparaged the Tea Party. The report alleged that ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN framed the Tea Party as a fringe or extreme racist movement (Noyes, 2011). Conversely, a 2010 survey conducted by the mainstream newspaper the Washington Post found that 67 percent of local Tea Party organizers felt that traditional news media coverage of their groups was fair, compared to 23 percent who considered it to be unfair. Local organizers also believed that news coverage improved over time as reporters interviewed Tea Party activists and supporters and gained firsthand knowledge of the group and its goals (Gardner, 2011). Both reports were debated widely in the press.

Challenges Facing Minor Parties

A minor-party candidate has never been elected president. In the past five decades, minor parties have held few seats in Congress or high-level state offices. Few minor party candidates have won against major-party candidates for governor, state representative, or county commissioner in the past two decades. Minor-party candidates have better luck in the approximately 65,000 nonpartisan contests for city and town offices and school boards in which no party labels appear on the ballot. Hundreds of these positions have been filled by minor-party representatives (Sifry, 2003).

A majority of the public favors having viable minor-party alternatives in elections (Sifry, 2003). Why, then, are minor parties unable to be a more formidable presence in American politics?

Winner-Take-All Elections

One major reason for two-party dominance in the United States is the prominence of the single-member district plurality system of elections (Duverger, 1972), also known as winner-take-all elections. Only the highest vote getter in a district in federal and most state legislative elections gains a seat in office. Candidates who have a realistic chance of winning under such a system are almost always associated with the Democratic and Republican parties, which have a strong following among voters and necessary resources, such as funding and volunteers to work in campaigns.

In contrast, proportional representation (PR) systems, such as those used in most European democracies, allow multiple parties to flourish. PR systems employ larger, multimember districts where five or more members of a legislature may be selected in a single election district. Seats are distributed according to the proportion of the vote won by particular political parties. For example, in a district comprising ten seats, if the Democratic Party got 50 percent of the vote, it would be awarded five seats; if the Republican Party earned 30 percent of the vote, it would gain three seats; and if the Green Party earned 20 percent of the vote, it would be granted two seats (Amy, 1993). PR was used for a short time in New York City council elections in the 1940s but was abandoned after several communists and other minor-party candidates threatened the Democratic Party’s stronghold (Rossiter, 1960).
Legal Obstacles

Minor parties are hindered by laws that limit their ability to compete with major parties. Democrats and Republicans in office have created procedures and requirements that make it difficult for minor parties to be listed on ballots in many states. In Montana, Oklahoma, and several other states, a candidate must obtain the signatures of at least 5 percent of registered voters to appear on the ballot. A presidential candidate must collect over one million signatures to be listed on the ballot in every state. This is an insurmountable barrier for most minor parties that lack established organizations in many states (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 2000).

Campaign finance laws work against minor parties. The 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act and its amendments provide for public financing of presidential campaigns. Rarely has a minor-party candidate been able to qualify for federal campaign funds as the party’s candidates must receive 5 percent or more of the popular vote in the general election. Similar barriers hinder state-level minor-party candidates from receiving public funding for taxpayer-financed campaigns, although some states, such as Connecticut, are debating plans to rectify this situation.

Lack of Resources

The financial disadvantage of minor parties impedes their ability to amass resources that are vital to mounting a serious challenge to the two major parties. They lack funds to establish and equip permanent headquarters. They cannot hire staff and experienced consultants to conduct polls, gather political intelligence, court the press, generate new media outreach, or manage campaigns (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 2000).

Lack of Media Coverage

Minor parties rarely receive significant media coverage except when they field a dynamic or outlandish candidate, such as Jesse Ventura, or when they are associated with a movement that taps into public concerns, such as the Tea Party. The dominant horserace frame employed by the media focuses on who is ahead and behind in an election and usually tags minor-party candidates as losers early in the process. Media treat minor parties as distractions and their candidates as novelty acts that divert attention from the main two-party attractions.

Minor parties often are unable to air televised campaign ads because they lack funds. Even in the digital era, television advertising is an essential part of campaigns because it allows candidates to control their own message and reach large numbers of voters. Minor-party candidates have difficulty gaining publicity and gaining recognition among voters when they cannot advertise.

Minor-party candidates routinely are excluded from televised debates in which major-party candidates participate (Rosenstone, Behr, & Lazarus, 2000). By being allowed to participate in the 1992 presidential debates, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot achieved national visibility and symbolic equality with incumbent president George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Bill Clinton.

Video Clip

Giant Sucking Sound: Ross Perot 1992 Presidential Debate

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Political_Science_and_Civics/Book%3A_American_Government_and_Politics_in_t…
Perot received significant press coverage from his debate performance.

Figure 10.8 Ross Perot Participating in the 1992 Presidential Debate

Minor-party candidates rarely have the opportunity to participate in televised presidential debates. An exception was Reform Party candidate Ross Perot, whose campaign was bolstered by his inclusion in the 1992 presidential debate with Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Bill Clinton.

These benefits were denied Ralph Nader when he was excluded from the presidential debates in 2000 because the Commission on Presidential Debates ruled that Nader did not have enough voter support to warrant inclusion.

Absorption by Major Parties

When a minor-party movement gains momentum, the Republican and Democratic parties move quickly to absorb the minor party by offering enticements to their members, such as support for policies that are favored by the minor party. Major-party candidates appeal to minor-party supporters by arguing that votes for minor-party candidates are wasted (Rossiter, 1960). Major parties are often successful in attracting minor-party voters because major parties are permeable and ambiguous ideologically (Gillespie, 1993).

After the Democrats in Congress were instrumental in passing the Voting Rights Act in 1964, the Republican Party absorbed the southern Dixiecrats, a Democratic Party faction opposed to the legislation. The two major parties tried to attract Ross Perot’s Reform Party supporters after his 1992 presidential bid, with the Republican Party succeeding in attracting the lion’s share of votes. The Republican Party’s position against big government appealed to Perot supporters (Rapoport & Stone, 2003). Even though the Tea Party gravitates toward the Republican Party, Republicans
have not universally accepted it.

Key Takeaways

Minor parties offer an alternative to the dominant Republican and Democratic parties, but they have difficulty surviving. They arise to challenge the two major parties when people feel that their interests are not being met. There are four major types of minor parties: enduring, single-issue, candidate-centered, and fusion parties. Minor parties have difficulty winning high-level office but are able to fill seats at the county and local level. There are numerous challenges faced by minor parties in American politics, including winner-take-all elections, legal obstacles, lack of resources, and limited media coverage.

Exercises

1. When do minor parties tend to arise? How can minor parties have an impact on national politics if they cannot usually compete in national elections?
2. What minor parties are you familiar with? How are minor parties generally portrayed in the media?
3. What makes it difficult for minor parties to win state and local elections?

References


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