

A New Third Party in America? What It Would Take

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One of the most popular parlor games of American politics is discussing, anticipating or predicting the rise of a third party. These discussions can be fun, but the current American two party system has proven extraordinarily enduring. The Democratic and Republican parties, through a combination of decentralization, ideological flexibility and the quirks of the American electoral system and electoral laws have dominated politics in the U.S. for about 150 years, and will likely continue to do this for the foreseeable future.

The emergence of a third party in the current political environment is unlikely. The Tea Party is far too close both ideologically and politically to the Republican Party to form a third party. It is more likely that their future will continue to be closely tied to the Republican Party. The emergence of a centrist or center-right party is also unlikely given the ideological bent of the modern Democratic Party which already represents a broad range of political views from the center to, in the American context, the left.

In the U.S., however, third parties, even short lived ones, do not emerge by occupying a space on a left right political spectrum, but by rallying voters around a specific issue that is not being addressed satisfactorily by either of the major parties. Today, the issue which has the potential to do this, but has been largely overlooked is the question of whether the U.S. should pursue an isolationist or interventionist foreign policy.

The belief in having an active internationalist foreign policy is one of those issues, free trade is another, where the consensus grows stronger the further up one goes in the foreign policy leadership. Ironically, this bipartisan consensus regarding the extent, if not nature, of U.S. involvement in the rest of the world has only grown since the end of the Cold War. Although Democrats and Republicans may at times strongly disagree about what an internationalist foreign policy might look like, very few powerful members of either party seriously propose simply scaling back U.S. involvement in the world.

There is, however, at the grassroots level strong sympathy, albeit rooted in different worldviews, from both the left and the right for the notion that perhaps the U.S. does not need to be involved in every corner of the world. On the left this grows out anti-war sentiments and a belief that other countries should be left alone. From the right, isolationism grows out of a belief in smaller government and a sense that the government should not spend American tax dollars trying to solve other people's problems. Both sides, as well as many centrists would also add that our government should focus more attention at home and that in the current fiscal environment the U.S. cannot afford such a broad internationalist approach to the world. These views may have varying degrees of accuracy, but they represent substantial portions of the electorate.

It is still extremely unlikely that this will lead to a third party oriented around a more modest American foreign policy, but it is likely that one or both parties will have to respond to these voters. The case for a cheaper, less ambitious and more peaceful foreign policy has always been relatively easy to make for at least the last half century, but it has rarely trickled up to political elites.

Given the security issues which are relevant to the U.S., most significantly, of course, Jihadist terror, interconnectedness of the global economy an increasing awareness in some quarters of the need to address issues such as global climate change, disaster relief and conflict resolution in cooperation with other countries, it is not surprising that the elite consensus regarding a strong internationalist foreign policy remains strong. However, proponents of this foreign policy may find it increasingly imperative, and difficult, to convince ordinary Americans that it is necessary.