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A Stronger Two-Party System May Negate Need for Third Party

JEFF BRINDLE | August 22, 2022, 12:31 pm | in [Edward Edwards](#)

The extreme divisiveness that burdens politics is apparent even to the most casual observer.

To say that there is much hand-wringing about today's politics is an understatement. Yet politics in America has always been rough and tumble.

Despite his previous experience as a diplomat, John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States from 1825-1829, viciously and personally, attacked Andrew Jackson, calling him a "gambling, brawling, murderer" whose wife is a "convicted adulteress."

No wallflower himself, Jackson attacked Adams as a "pimp and worse." His remarks were made during the presidential election of 1828.

Politics has not suddenly changed from quaint talk in a tea parlor to rough chatter in a bar room. There has always been political acrimony. But there is broader impact today as citizens use social media to greatly magnify their anger about politics and each other.

Social media's megaphone effect is like the impact television had on war.

At the start of the Korean War in 1950, there were fewer than 4 million televisions in America. By the mid-1960s, when the Vietnam war raged, there were more than 52 million.

This dramatic expansion of television coverage brought the immediacy and ferocity of the war into the homes of families in rural areas, inner cities, and suburbia. This, in turn, fed the flames of protest.

What television did for war more than five decades ago, social media is doing for politics today. It stirred a public reaction.

In addition to spurring public protests, similar to the 1960's, social media has enabled citizens to participate in politics more individually, and sometimes anonymously, through on-line protests.

The combination of mass demonstrations and social media engagement has served to intensify the polarization and division within today's politics.

In reaction to this disharmony, some have offered suggestions on how to remedy the divisiveness in politics, to make political debates more civil, and to bring about compromise in government.

Two well-known individuals, former New Jersey Republican Governor Christine Todd Whitman and former presidential and New York City mayoral candidate Democrat Andrew Yang, have joined to form a third party- the "[Forward Party](#)."

As noted in [a recent TAPinto.net column by James McQueeney](#), noted television host and former Star-Ledger Washington D.C. Bureau Chief, the plan for a "[Forward Party](#)" may gain momentum as evidenced by a recent Bloomberg Economic Study that "found a huge antipathy toward traditional parties."

While great respect is due the former Governor (in the interest of disclosure, I participated in her initial campaign for freeholder in the early 1980s), and Mr. Yang, of whom I am not acquainted, my thoughts go in another, perhaps less popular, direction.

For me, the answer lies in a more traditional approach- to strengthen, not weaken, the two-party system.

The difficulty in forging a successful third party that has success at the polls is twofold: the Constitution and state laws.

For example, the Constitution has established an electoral system that is a "winner-take-all system" that has provided voters with the incentive to vote for the candidate they believe can win. Historically, this has been the candidate of one of the two major parties.

A winner-take-all system simply means that the candidate with the most votes wins. It is not a proportional system whereby, as in European countries, voters vote for the party, which place representatives in their legislatures based on the percentage of votes accorded to the party.

Whether the Federalist party and the Republican/Democratic party, the Democratic party and the Whig party, or the Republican party and Democratic party, America, because of the electoral system, has always been a two-party system.

Since they are based on the existing Constitution, many state laws work to thwart third-party efforts. Third parties would be successful only if there are Constitutional amendments and revised state laws.

That the Bloomberg study found disdain toward political parties is not breaking news.

This has been the case from the beginning of the Republic as evidenced by Washington in his Farewell Address to the nation, in Madison's writings in Federalist Paper 10, and in comments by Thomas Jefferson.

Ironically, Madison and Jefferson had a role in forming one of the first parties, the anti-monarchy Republican/Democratic party.

While many may for various reasons disagree, it seems to me that the better approach toward moderation and civil discourse lies in recognizing constitutional realities and fortifying the existing party system.

Political parties represent a coalition of like-minded individuals, provide a training ground for leadership, encourage leaders on opposing sides to compromise, and by so doing bring about majorities to enact good policies.

Strong parties, with legislative discipline, can serve to ease the passage of legislation that brings about agreed upon public policies that would go far toward ameliorating the fragmentation and polarization that is destroying today's politics, and in turn, government.

A recent effort toward bipartisanship in New Jersey highlights the role party leadership can play. Broad bipartisan backing exists for the "Elections Transparency Act" (S-2866/A4372) pending in the New Jersey Legislature. Committee votes on the bill, which includes several ELEC recommendations, already has drawn support from 20 Democrats and 11 Republicans with one abstention.

Prime sponsors include Senate President Nicholas Scutari (D-Union) and Senate Minority Leader Steve Oroho (R-Sussex) along with Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald (D-Camden).

The bill, among other things, requires disclosure by independent, “Hidden Money” groups, bolsters political parties by making it easier for them to raise funds, and moves the state toward a single state pay-to-play law.

The point is to fix what already exists by strengthening political parties, who already are comprised of individuals of various political opinions, including many who hold moderate views.

A third party might draw away some of those moderates and make compromise by the two major parties harder.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

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