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Advanced Placement United States of America Government and Politics
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Reflection on "Why Americans should support third parties"

Why Americans should support third parties, by constitutional law professor Mark R. Brown, is a short article arguing that, even though they have no chance of victory, Americans should vote for minor (non-Democrat, non-Republican) parties. Brown's thesis is in their title, that "Americans should support third parties"(Brown 1). Brown bases this claim on their assertions that the major parties, Democrats and Republicans, do not best represent the majority of Americans, and that third-party candidates are not the "spoilers" that the major parties have made them out to be. Their thesis is largely correct: the major parties need improvement, neither major party is perfect; however, third-party candidates are spoilers, though that isn't necessarily a bad thing. This can be clearly shown by the relatively high number of independent-identifying Americans; and the American presidential elections of 1884, 1916, and 2000.

A disconcertingly high number of Americans identify as "independent", and not in the freedom-loving way "independent" is usually meant in American parlance. According to the Pew Research Center, currently 39% of Americans identify as independent. Compared to nearly-nil, approx 0.3%, independent-identifying voters in European countries, the number of American independents is staggering. This absurdly high number shouldn't be attributed to Americans having such nuanced opinions that they cannot possibly align with a party; Americans, the author very much included, are idiots. Instead, the high number of independents should be attributed to massive dissatisfaction with the major political parties. In Germany, the German voter has a choice of over twenty-five parties; such a diverse selection ensures that virtually every voter has a party to rally

around. In Spain, with a similarly low independent block, there are over ten parties to choose from. In America, where there are virtually only two parties, it's no wonder so few Americans can fully identify with one party or another.

Brown states: "Neither of the major party candidates, President Bush and Sen. John Kerry, argued against the constitutionality of the Controlled Substances Act"(Brown 1). Brown pushes the idea that, because two opposing parties agreed on an issue, the interests of the American populace are being ignored, eliminating the purpose of representative democracy. While, according to such political analysts as Howard Fineman, American society is built upon argument, not all laws deserve huge controversy. Examples of such might include murder being illegal, or slavery being banned. This is not to say that, just because two parties agree on an issue, that issue is settled. Brown themselves points out that, during the 2004 election, both major parties agreed not to protect gay marriage. The Republicans, by "condemning same-sex marriage . . . Democrats contented themselves by arguing that marriage should remain a local concern"(Brown 1). This is despite the fact that, according a 2004 CBS News poll, one-third of all Americans supported civil unions for gay couples. In essence, assuming CBS's poll was representative of popular opinion, both major parties ignored one hundred-million American voters.

Brown also states that "the modern Republican and Democratic platforms are not that different"(Brown 1). *Why Americans* was written before the 2016 Presidential Election, and may have been correct at the time, Brown's assertion is currently incorrect. The contrast between then candidates Trump's and Clinton's platforms were as clear as night and day. Then-candidate Trump campaigned on a platform of reversing Obama-era policy, then-candidate Clinton campaigned on a platform of continuing then-President Obama's policy. Since the election, which left all three branches of government in the hands of the Republican party, very little policy has been produced due to strong opposition

from Democrats. According to the Pew Research Center, the 155th Congress has only passed thirty-two laws not either for ceremonial purposes or for scrapping Obama-era laws.

Brown, on behalf of third parties everywhere, rejects the label of “spoiler”. They say that major parties say that “Minor candidates, they claim, are egotistical ‘spoilers.’ But that is what the status quo always says about those who threaten change”(1). Brown’s statement implies that being a “spoiler” is an inherently bad thing, despite the fact that “spoiling” elections is the means by which third parties push their political agenda. Third parties, despite having no realistic path to victory, are able to force a major party to take-up their issues by “stealing” a potentially critical voting block. Either the major party will absorb the ideals, and therefore votes, of the minor party; or the minor party will take a portion of the major party’s votes. Brown mentions this mechanism in the passage: “these players changes outcomes, as Ralph Nader proved to Democrats in 2000. (Republicans James Blaine and Charles Evans Hughes discovered this in 1884 and 1916, respectively. Both would likely have won but for the presence of Prohibition Party candidate.)”(1). In all three cases Brown mentioned, an election was decided by a third party, “spoiled”, essentially. Spoiling elections is not a bad thing, spoiling elections is the very power of third parties, and should not be treated as derogatory.

Brown states, further on the topic of spoiling elections, that “[third parties ruin elections,] But that is what the status quo will always say about those who threaten change”(1). In that statement, Brown begins to make an excellent point: that third parties are a change to the status quo and that this is not a bad thing. Third parties can act as a way of directing anger at a party without directly voting against one’s own principles, and serve as a means of “blackmailing” political parties. If a major party will not bend to the will of the voters, the voters have the option of voting third-party.

In my opinion, *Why Americans should support third parties* is an excellent piece of writing with some salient talking points. While some parts of it are simply no longer true, such as the assertion that the Democratic party is too similar to the Republican party, the rest remains true.