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March 10th, 2010

12:22 PM ET

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How third-party candidates affect elections

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney is warning Tea Party candidates to stay out of the November elections.

Romney, a possible candidate for the 2010 Republican presidential nomination, suggested that "Tea Party" candidates could divide the GOP vote, allowing Democrats to win.

"If there is a conservative candidate that runs in the general election, then obviously, divide and fail is the result," Romney said.

In an interview with the conservative Newsmax Web site, Romney suggested that "most" Tea Party supporters would vote Republican in a two-party race

"Hopefully Tea Party candidates will run in respective primaries and they will either win or lose. And if they win they will go into the general," he said.

"If they lose, they won't, and they will get behind the more conservative of the two finalists."

Another possible Republican presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, made similar comments last month.

Fact Check: How much of an impact do third-party candidates have in general elections?

- No third-party candidate has ever won a U.S. presidential election. The strongest showing for a third-party candidate came in 1912, when former President Teddy Roosevelt left the Republican Party. He ended up coming in second, with 27.4 percent of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes.
- It's generally agreed that Roosevelt's 1912 candidacy took votes away from the Republican candidate, incumbent President William Howard Taft, allowing Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win with just 41.8 percent of the popular vote.

- Many say third-party candidate Ralph Nader played a "spoiler" role in the 2000 election. Running to the left of Democrat Al Gore, Nader received 97,488 popular votes in Florida, a state Republican George W. Bush won by just 537 votes. If most of the Nader supporters had voted for Gore instead,

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Lieberman of Connecticut and Bernard Sanders of Vermont. There are no independents in the House right now.

- As is the case in some presidential races, third-party candidacies sometimes split parties in congressional races. The most recent example took place last year, in New York's 23rd Congressional District. Many Republicans publicly deserted the party's official nominee, Dede Scozzafava, to support Conservative Douglas Hoffman. Democrat Bill Owens won with 73,137 votes. Hoffman came in second with 69,553 votes, and Scozzafava got 8,582 votes despite dropping out a few days before the election. If a large majority of Scozzafava's supporters had voted for Hoffman, Hoffman would have won instead of the Democrat.

Bottom Line:

Third-party candidates rarely win elections, but they can split parties. That can effect the outcome of an election when a third-party candidate is especially strong, or when the race between the two other candidates is especially close.

Got something that needs checking? E-mail us at factcheck@cnn.com

Post by: [CNN's Jim Dexter](#)

Filed under: [Fact Check](#)

soundoff (One Response)

Bill

can't dispute the facts in this article, but what happens when you are truly stuck with two evils? A third party is very much needed and it likely needs to start in state legislatures where the stakes described in this article aren't as high. If a third party can gain a substantive number of seats and show strong populist performance in a state legislature, perhaps the conversation will move from "splitting votes" on the national stage and towards voting for the best candidate.

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