



## ***The Free Congress Commentary***

### ***The Next Conservatism #26: The Next Conservatism and the Role of Third Parties***

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When visitors come from abroad to study our political system they are most often told “the United States has a two-party system.” Well, that is true to some extent. But there have been times when third parties have achieved a course correction for one or the other of the major parties which was absolutely necessary.

We could almost go back to the beginning of our political system to examine the role of third parties. The Republicans, now in power in Washington, were a third party when they were formed in Ripon, Wisconsin. They ended up replacing the Whig party which disintegrated in a very short time. Just a few years after they formed their party, Republicans ended up electing their Presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, in 1860.

But let us look at third parties during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Twice, third parties were ego-driven and achieved little lasting effect on the major parties. But twice they were ideologically-driven and did have an impact on the two major parties.

One of the ego-driven efforts was that of Teddy Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Progressives. Roosevelt had been William McKinley’s running mate in the 1900 election and when McKinley was assassinated in 1901 Roosevelt assumed the Presidency at age 42. He was re-elected in 1904 and in 1908 decided not to run again.

The Republicans chose rotund William Howard Taft as their Presidential nominee. By 1912, when Taft was running for re-election, Roosevelt was dissatisfied with Taft’s policies. He was too conservative, Roosevelt said. But mostly, Roosevelt wanted to be President again. So he founded the Bull Moose Progressives who promptly nominated Roosevelt as their standard bearer. The result of Roosevelt’s candidacy was to defeat Taft and elect Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt did not change the Republican party much at all and few historians argue that he had much of an effect on the Democrat party.

Then came the “back to normalcy” era of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge. Elected in large part as a reaction to Wilson’s leading the United States into the First World War, these two candidates were very conservative. Harding died in 1923 and Coolidge became President. He ran for another term in 1924. The Democrats nominated John W. Davis. Davis, if you can imagine, was regarded as more conservative than Coolidge.

Meanwhile, since both parties were in the hands of the conservatives, the Progressive party, which had been successful in electing a number of Governor and Senators, nominated one of its founders, Governor Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin, for President. Burton K. Wheeler of Montana (long a Senator from that state) was his running mate. In the end, Coolidge crushed Davis, receiving nearly 16 million some votes to Davis’s eight million. Coolidge won the electoral college 382 to 138.

LaFollette did win his home state’s 13 electoral votes and received almost 5 million votes nationwide. LaFollette had run on a program of reform, promising to do for the nation what he had done for Wisconsin, which was then and is now regarded as one of the more honest states politically. That shocked the Democrats, and they made a concerted effort to recruit Progressives into the Democrat party. They wound up with a number of elected officials who did join.

The Progressives were not really a factor in 1928. Many of them supported Herbert Hoover since he supposedly was more liberal than Coolidge. But by 1932 it is fair to say that the Progressives of Bob LaFollette were comfortable with FDR’s reform agenda and they helped Franklin D. Roosevelt win a landslide victory. The Progressives greatly influenced the Democrat party, except in Wisconsin where the Progressive party lasted into the 1940s. The son of the LaFollette Presidential candidate, Robert Junior, was also elected Governor but then ran for the US Senate as a Republican. He was defeated for re-election in a GOP Primary by one Joseph R. McCarthy, who complained, by the way, that LaFollette wasn’t liberal enough.

In any case, in Wisconsin the Progressives, when they broke up, went into both major parties and there was a sort of Progressive wing of either party at least into the 1970s. LaFollette was effective because of his platform and agenda and that agenda in turn was a major influence on one of our national parties.

The other third party of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century which had an agenda was the American Independent party of George Wallace. Wallace was Governor of Alabama. He shocked folks by entering the Democrat primary in supposedly progressive Wisconsin and getting a third of the vote. When Sen. Barry Goldwater won the GOP nomination in 1964 and was popular in the South, Wallace was persuaded to drop his plans to run as a third party candidate. But when Goldwater got trounced in 1964 by incumbent Lyndon Johnson, and more liberal Republicans

again came to the fore, Wallace repeated his pitch that “there isn’t a dime’s worth of difference between either party.”

While some of Wallace’s support was segregationist, not all of it was. Many populist

lower middle class conservatives saw Wallace as a way to protest the liberalism which

had infected both of the major parties. Wallace ran in 1968 under the banner of the American Independent party. He carried a number of Southern states and received a respectable showing nationwide. For a time it appeared that he would deprive Richard M. Nixon of the Presidency. Enough conservatives, fearful of Hubert H. Humphrey, switched back to Nixon at the last moment that Nixon was barely elected.

Wallace did achieve his objective, however, as his candidacy inspired Kevin Phillips to write his famous book on the Southern strategy. Nixon followed Phillips’ advice and the Wallace vote was folded into the GOP by the end of Nixon’s first term. That vote would have stayed with the Republicans but for Watergate. But it eventually returned. Most Senators and a majority of Congressmen from the South are now Republicans. So while Wallace did not have the kind of platform LaFollette had, he did represent an ideological course correction for one of the two major parties which saw the advantage of going after the Wallace vote.

The final third party effort was ego driven and that was the 1992 effort of H. Ross Perot. When Perot first entered the Presidential race, he almost immediately began polling in first place. But after a series of bizarre happenings he withdrew from the race. By the time he got back in, his credibility had been eroded. He did achieve his objective, however, of bringing down the Presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush, whom he intensely disliked. The Bill Clinton people and the Perot people were openly working together in some states at the end. Perot did not carry a single state but he received close to 20 million votes. Beginning in 1993, Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole began claiming that he was representing not only the Republicans but also the independents who voted for Perot. The Republican adjustment to the Perot vote as well as Clinton’s overreach resulted in landslide victories for the Republicans in 1994.

Perot was a multi-millionaire who largely financed his own campaign, at least at first. The problem today is, absent a multi-millionaire who already has strong national name recognition, it is next to impossible for a third party to do what the LaFollette Progressives did or even what George Wallace accomplished. The two parties have conspired both at the national level and in many states to make it next to impossible for a third party to get on the ballot. But even if a third party

does that, the two major parties now run the national debates and exclude third party candidates, even those who are well known. Ralph Nader ran twice and could not be included in the national debates because the bar has been set so high by the two main parties that not even a well known candidate like Nader could meet it. The major parties have also given themselves special mail privileges which a third party can't have unless it gets in power.

So today, for a third party candidate to have an impact, one would have to find a multi-billionaire with unlimited resources who already had name recognition of the kind that Lance Armstrong or some other athletic figure has, and even then there would be all sorts of barriers to his being on the ballot in all 50 states. This is a pity, as third parties have provided a valuable service to the American electorate. In our Republic, there

should not be the kind of barriers to third party success which the Democrats and Republicans together have enacted.

The Next Conservatism should strongly advocate repeal of all unfair advantages the two major parties have given themselves. Then, if one or the other of the major parties does not make room for real conservatism, that party should either be replaced by a new party or shaken up enough by a third party showing that it will correct its course.

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