Time for Multi-Party Democracy in the USA?

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| By: [Nat Parry](http://my.firedoglake.com/members/natparry/) Tuesday November 19, 2013 2:52 pm |  |

The local and state elections earlier this month generated a flurry of commentary suggesting that the results show that Americans are turning their backs on the Tea Party and the GOP agenda as a whole, opting instead for progressive alternatives offered by new stars of the Democratic Party. The big story of election 2013, [wrote](http://www.thenation.com/article/177153/progressive-electoral-wave-2013" \t "_blank)*The Nation*’s John Nichols, “was a cross-country rejection of austerity and an endorsement of the progressive populism that Democrats must embrace if they hope to prevail in 2014.”

He pointed to Democrat Bill de Blasio’s 73 percent landslide in the New York mayoral race, the progressive mayoral candidate Betsy Hodges’ victory in Minneapolis, and the labor-backed mayoral candidate Marty Walsh’s victory in Boston as evidence of a progressive wave in America that should make the Republicans worry. Brentin Mock, writing for ColorLines, [noted](http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/11/winners_and_voter_turnout_for_election_day_2013.html) that Terry McAuliffe’s victory in Virginia’s governor’s race “signals that this might be the beginning of the end of Tea Party season.”

But perhaps the Tea Party Republicans aren’t the only ones who should be worried. The Democratic Party could also be in trouble, and indeed the two-party system itself, if certain public opinion trends are any indication. Indeed, it increasingly looks like the time is ripe for third party or independent candidacies, and with new alternatives emerging, the familiar red-blue national political landscape might be evolving into something a little less predictable, not to mention more representative.

Besides the Democratic triumphs on Nov. 5, another important victory was Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant’s election to the Seattle City Council, the first time that Seattle voters had elected a socialist to the City Council in modern history. A former community college economics professor and Occupy activist, Sawant adopted an unequivocally socialist platform that apparently resonated with Seattle voters.

“The machines are here, the workers are here,” said Sawant in her victory speech. “Let us take this entire productive activity into democratic public ownership and retool the machines to produce mass transit.”

Although Seattle might be a bit of an outlier in public opinion, being a decidedly liberal bastion of the generally progressive Pacific Northwest, even there, Sawant’s win surprised many observers. Her opponent Richard Conlin “was backed by the city’s political establishment,” [noted](http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2013/11/15/seattle-elects-socialist-to-city-council) the Associated Press, while Sawant “wasn’t a veteran politician, having only run in one previous campaign.”

Of course, the socialist’s victory in Seattle could very well be an anomaly, but regardless of whether it signifies a turning of the tide to the left or just a minor footnote to an off-year election, the fact is growing numbers of Americans appear to be bucking the two-party system, in a trend that has the potential to open up opportunities for more third party and independent candidacies.

[A 2011 Gallup poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll/151943/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx) found an all-time high of 40 percent of Americans identifying as independents and in Gallup’s [most recent tracking poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx), as of September 2013, 45 percent of respondents identified as independents. That means that more Americans identify as independents than as either Democrats or as Republicans. Further, the congressional approval rating is at a dismal 9 percent, and 54 percent of Americans [disapprove](http://swampland.time.com/2013/11/12/the-9-congress-approval-rating-hits-the-single-digits/) of President Obama’s job performance, numbers that could indicate general dissatisfaction with the two-party domination of government.

Nevertheless, the two parties enjoy a sort of quasi-official status in the U.S. electoral system that protects their dominance by guaranteeing ballot access in all 50 states while competing parties must meet stringent requirements to even be listed on the ballots, which vary wildly from state to state. Further, the Democrats and Republicans benefit from taxpayer subsidies in the form of public funds to hold party conventions and private primary elections, as well as lavish corporate contributions.  In 2012 taxpayers shelled out over $600 million for party conventions and primaries, even in states where they are not permitted to vote in the primaries due to registration requirements.

As IndependentVoting.org put it recently in a letter to Barack Obama’s [Presidential Commission on  
Election Administration,](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dGZSZWpXd0lsWmZZd0d0NEJrWlNsaFE6MA#gid=0) “In many states, we are barred from primary voting altogether, even though we – as taxpayers – finance those closed party primaries.”

Further entrenching the two-party system, independents and third parties have no representation on the Federal Elections Commission or Boards of Elections, which are instead controlled by the two quasi-official parties. Perhaps even more significantly, the two main parties enjoy a near monopoly of media coverage, and in presidential elections, successfully conspire to exclude third party candidates from televised debates. This means that Americans are kept in the dark about political alternatives even when these candidates are listed on the ballots.

This dynamic could change however in the next presidential election cycle. A couple of high-profile independents are already flirting with presidential bids, including Vermont’s socialist Senator Bernie Sanders and former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, and with enough popular backing, they could conceivably challenge the two-party grip on media coverage.

The *Burlington Free Press* [reports](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20131115/NEWS03/311150043/Sanders-wants-progressive-2016-presence) that Sanders may run if no one else emerges to take on Wall Street, address climate change and the collapse of the middle class, tackle poverty and fight austerity. “Under normal times, it’s fine, you have a moderate Democrat running, a moderate Republican running,” Sanders said. “These are not normal times. The United States right now is in the middle of a severe crisis and you have to call it what it is.”

For his part, Ventura is eager to take on the Republican-Democrat duopoly. “I like the idea of waging war on the Democrats and the Republicans,” Ventura recently [told](http://www.politico.com/story/2013/10/instrumental-to-a-jesse-ventura-2016-bid-howard-stern-for-vp-98345.html#ixzz2l7boTcx3) Politico. “I enjoy it because they’re so vulnerable. They’re so easy. If I can debate them, I can beat them.”

Of course, the problem is, the two dominant parties will do everything in their ability to eliminate any competition to their 150-year old duopoly of power. While the D’s and the R’s appear to passionately disagree on many things, even recently bringing the government to a grinding halt over disputes over health care reform, one thing they are in complete agreement over is the need to sideline alternative voices and ensure that U.S. elections are safe and predictable. The parties’ corporate sponsors feel the same way.

One thing to keep in mind though is that Americans actually have the right to hear a range of views and not be denied the opportunity to form their own parties or run for office as independents. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, the United States is required to provide legal protections to all political parties to ensure that they are able to compete on a level playing field.

“The legal framework should ensure that all political parties and candidates are able to compete in elections on the basis of equal treatment before the law,” the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) [noted recently](http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/104573?download=true) in newly published international election guidelines.

This doesn’t happen in the United States, where third parties are required to meet extraordinary challenges to even appear on the ballot, and even after they pass those hurdles, are generally shut out of the media. This further violates U.S. election-related commitments enshrined in the ICCPR. This treaty, ratified by the U.S. in 1992, guarantees the right of voters “to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

ODIHR points out that the OSCE Copenhagen Document goes even further, by mandating that OSCE member states take proactive steps to provide political parties and organizations “with the necessary legal guarantees to enable to compete with each other on a basis of equal treatment before the law and by the authorities.”

Besides being an international obligation of the United States, opening up American elections to genuine competition would go a long way towards improving the civil discourse, ending partisan gridlock, and elevating the national debate. What makes multi-party democracy superior to the American system is that it enables genuine debate in which nuances and distinctions can be drawn between positions, rather than simplistic binary arguments that come down essentially to either “this way or that way.”

For example, today in Denmark, a multitude of parties [competed](http://cphpost.dk/local-elections-13) in local elections that were largely focused on public transportation, the integration of immigrants, legalization of cannabis, and local tax rates. Rather than just two perspectives on each of these issues, however, Danish voters were offered a variety of views from the left to center to the right.

Perhaps due to the nuanced choices Danes are given, voter turnout tends to be much higher in Denmark than in the United States. Turnout for today’s local elections was estimated at least 70 percent, while in U.S. elections earlier this month, turnout rates [ranged](http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/11/winners_and_voter_turnout_for_election_day_2013.html) from about 13 percent in Texas to 37 percent in Virginia. Incidentally, the highest voter turnout, at 57 percent, was in Seattle, which elected its first Socialist City Council member in modern history.

*Cross-posted at* [Essential Opinion](http://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/).