



Lesson Plan: Third-party politics in America

<p>Prepared by</p>	<p>Dr. Daniel Butler Professor of Political Science Washington University in St. Louis</p> <p>Ms. Amanda Perschall, MAE Social Studies Instructor Lebanon High School, Lebanon, MO</p>
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<p>Overview</p>	<p>In the United States, third parties regularly appear on ballots and sometimes attract votes, yet they almost never win elections. This lesson uses polling and research evidence to help students explain why: winner-take-all elections create strong incentives for strategic voting, which discourages voters from “wasting” their vote on a candidate who is unlikely to win. Even when third parties do not win, they can still matter by shaping the major parties’ issue agendas. Students analyze public opinion about the two major parties and interpret evidence that Democrats increase attention to environmental issues when the Green Party poses a greater threat of “spoiling” a close election. The activity ends by evaluating whether electoral reforms could make third-party candidates more competitive.</p>
<p>Essential Questions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What does it mean for a third party to spoil an election? ● What is strategic voting? Why does it hurt third parties in American elections? ● Why might Democrats and Republicans adopt issues championed by third parties?

Lesson Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain why third parties face structural barriers in U.S. elections (especially winner-take-all rules). ● Define and apply the concept of strategic voting and describe how it limits third-party support. ● Explain how third parties can influence major-party platforms even when they do not win office.
Suggested Unit in A.P. Government	Unit 5.5
Core Skills Used	Data Analysis Concept Application
Activity Duration	20-45 minutes
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>LEGO Video</i>: Why Third Parties Don't Win in America ● Student Activity ● Background Materials for the Student Activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pew Report: How Americans Feel about the Republican and Democratic Parties ○ Research Article: Minor Party Major Change: Democratic Environmental Re-Prioritization in Response to Green Party Competition
Procedure	<p>Warm-up (2–3 min):</p> <p>a. What is a third party?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emphasize that in the U.S. context, “third party” means any party other than the Democratic and Republican parties that runs candidates and seeks public office.
	<p>Quick examples (1–2 min):</p> <p>a. What are some third parties?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Answers could include: Libertarian, Green, Working Families Party, Constitution Party, Party for Socialism and Liberation. ● Historical examples also include: Progressive Party / Bull Moose Party (1912, 1948), Dixiecrats (States’ Rights Democratic Party (1948), American Independent Party (1968)
	Key concept—spoiler (1 min):

	<p>a. What does it mean to spoil something?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Merriam-Webster Dictionary: to damage seriously: Ruin <p>b. What does it mean for a third party to spoil an election for another party?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A third party “spoils” an election when it draws enough votes away from a major-party candidate that it helps the other major-party candidate win (often by changing who gets the plurality).
	<p>Video (3 min): Show the LEGO video “Why Third Parties Don’t Win in America.”</p>
	<p>Activity (5-15 min): Use the Student Activity</p>
	<p>Debrief (3–5 min): Review answers as a class. Focus on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● winner-take-all incentives ● strategic voting ● issue uptake as both a form of third-party influence and a mechanism that can reduce third-party electoral success
	<p>Optional extension (5–10 min): (Part 3 of the Student Activity Sheet) Discuss reforms that could change incentives for voters and parties (e.g., ranked-choice voting, proportional representation, fusion voting, easier ballot access).</p>

Answer Key for Student Activity	Model Answers
<p>1) What does Figure 1 suggest about how Americans feel about the Republican Party and the Democratic Party?</p>	<p>Many Americans report negative emotions toward both parties. For example, 75% say the Democratic Party makes them feel frustrated (and 64% for the Republican Party). Positive feelings are much lower: 16% feel proud of Democrats (vs. 27% for Republicans).</p>
<p>2) If many people feel frustrated or angry with the major parties, why aren’t third parties more successful?</p>	<p>The U.S. uses single-member districts and plurality (“first-past-the-post”) elections, which usually reward the top two parties. Voters anticipate this and often vote</p>

	strategically to avoid “wasting” a vote or helping their least-preferred major party win (fear of the third party as a spoiler).
<p>3) What pattern do you see as elections get closer (moving from 10% to 1%)?</p>	<p>The dots move further right from zero, indicating that the Democratic Party is putting more emphasis on environmental issues in their party platform. So Democrats talk more about environmental issues when the risk of a Green Party “spoil” is greatest in very close race</p>
<p>4) What does this figure imply about third-party political power? Give one pro and one con.</p>	<p>(Pro): Third parties can influence the major-party agenda—major parties may adopt or highlight the third party’s issues to attract those voters.</p> <p>(Con): If major parties co-opt those issues, the third party’s distinctiveness shrinks, making it harder to win votes/seats.</p>
<p>5) Name one rule change that could help third parties win more. Explain why it could change outcomes.</p>	<p>There is not a right answer here. The more important thing is for students to demonstrate their thinking by providing justifications about the incentives of voters and/or candidates. That said, two common answers might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Ranked-choice voting (instant-runoff) reduces the spoiler problem because voters can rank a third party first and a major party second; if the third party is eliminated, the vote transfers, so voters can support third parties without “throwing away” their vote. ☐ Proportional representation. Because parties can get seats with small numbers of votes, voting for them is

	much less likely to mean wasting one's vote.
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