

Red vs. Blue, Gold vs. Red, Green vs. Blue

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Abstract

The political battles between Democrats and Republicans that dominate modern American politics can be compared to two species fighting over similar natural resources. Similarly, third parties also compete for the same things, but the relationship that defines the interaction between third parties and the primary ones models competition between two sister species—similar yet incompatible. I argue that the parallels between American politics and the environmental concepts reveal patterns contingent to changing trends. An analysis of those political trends, close election races, and changes within the politics and how they correspond to environmental behaviors lead me to believe that third parties have a window of opportunity for a shift in electoral success. Through looking at how nature responds to changes in climate political parties can adjust their strategies to match. The dominance of Red and Blue in the political realm may be challenged within the upcoming years because of this concept.

Politics is to a party like a forest is to a small mammal—a battleground. From swarming campaign ads to bombardments of merchandise and signs when the time of the year comes around for national and local elections, red versus blue dominates “the forest” that is the United States political climate. Imagine a peregrine falcon and a bald eagle, two mighty birds of prey, locked talon to talon battling in the sky over the same territory in which they are to proliferate and thrive. The only difference is that the peregrine falcon and bald eagle are actually two old men exchanging mean words and debating policy to keep a seat a specific color. While the imagery between two different birds of prey dueling is quite the sight, come election time, there is another equally heated battle; only this time the birds at odds are much more similar and the conflicts much more *personal*.

Whether that be ecological or political, the species most adapted to the conditions will see its niche established and population thrive. However, the idea that two species or entities competing for the same resources cannot coexist equally in nature directly is known as the competitive exclusion principle (Amir). It is a perfect description of the relationship between third parties and the main ones. The dominating species in an area is heavily impacted by the environment and the conditions around it. Global warming, the consistent rising of the Earth’s average temperature, is driving a change of ecological climate and environments ([Global Climate Report – Annual 2015](#)). Similarly, the polarization of American parties combined with altering values, tendencies, and trends from voters all contribute to a change of *political* climate and environment.

In the natural realm, differences in environment and climate influence the species most adapted to survive. The concept of change and its relationship to the dominating organism is similar to American politics and can indicate future third-party success. Third parties’ plight lies in the binary

election system, a polarized climate, and public stigma. Analyzing concepts in nature draw parallels between third parties and their place in the political environment. Looking at nature's reactions to environmental change I argue third parties have a window for a significant competitive edge in the future.

Third parties make up the hidden opponents in the battle between red vs. blue; however, their similarities make them much more disadvantageous for the main groups. Much like the diet differences between a peregrine falcon and a bald eagle, Republicans, and Democrats, the two primary parties in America, draw from resources different from one another: funding sources, voter pool, volunteer base, media sources, etc. These resources typically fall into three categories in the political world and are utilized and approached by their respective sides. The political right, left, and middle makes up these three groups. While Republicans and Democrats use their associated side as a resource pool and compete for the center, third parties add a new level of competition.

Third parties are the sibling species to the two main ones—closely related with enough nuance to be incompatible (“Sibling Species | Biology”). Ideological perspectives differentiate third parties from their respective leading group. Libertarians diverge from typical Republicans regarding individual rights, war, government spending, and sticking to classical conservatism principles (*What Is a Libertarian?*). The Green Party diverges with typical Democrats regarding environmental policies, war, social injustices, and the ethics of corporate interests in the government (“The Real Difference”). Primarily, the parties are founded on the fundamental shortcomings of the main ones, making them “incompatible” when it comes to sharing resources. This concept is displayed in interactions ranging from Democrats petitioning ballot access for the Green Party in battleground states (Reed) to heated social media exchanges between the official Libertarian Party account and a former Republican Governor of Wisconsin (“Libertarian Party (@LPNational) / Twitter”). Incompatibility separates the collection of people that could be the “same species” to instead be sisters—similar but ultimately too different to co-exist.

This incompatibility not only defines the differences between third parties and the main but drives the vigorous competition for the “shelter” in the houses of government and the resources that fuel the fight—voters. This battle for voters takes the form of policy alterations and polarization. For example, the Green New Deal, a collection of legislation aimed to address climate change and environmental issues, originated in the work of the United States Green Party and was the focal point of their candidates since 2010, with Howie Hawkins running for a gubernatorial seat (“News”). However, as climate change and environmental justice gained popularity, gathered support, and produced pressure as a response in November of 2018 Democratic leaders adopted the policy into their platform (Roberts). The competition from the Green Party and its influence on the actions of the Democrats is an excellent example of polarization. Policy and stance change are the medium in which the competition takes place. This incompatibility, seen on both sides of the political spectrum, has been displayed throughout history.

The rivalry between third parties and the main two reaches back to America's foundation, and an inspection of close-margin battles delineates the strained relationship displayed today. A notable example looks to the Bull Moose Party of 1912 that ultimately split the Republican vote resulting in the Democratic win for Woodrow Wilson (Kelly). The competition for progressive voters resulted in a loss for the Bull Moose Party and the political left. The angry aftermath is displayed

in various political cartoons from the era depicting blundering bull moose sabotaging the Republican elephant (“Political Cartoons Illustrating Progressivism and the Election of 1912”). This concept carries over to the 2000 election in which Green Party candidate Ralph Nader took 96,951 votes over the margin separating the Republican winner George Bush from Democratic candidate Al Gore (Graphics). Even in 2020 Libertarian candidate Jo Jorgensen is under criticism by the right for figures that show her vote share at higher margins than the difference between votes for President Trump and President-Elect Biden in battleground states. Examples include Georgia (critical in the decision for the Presidency), in which the Libertarian Party gathered seven times the number of votes that differenced the two primary candidates, and Arizona, in which they collected 0.8 points more than the separating margin (Bekiempis). Every major election year phrases like “wasted vote,” “throwaway vote,” “support for the other side,” and a plethora of other forms of vote shaming appear. This element of the rivalry directly traces back to the blame put on third parties for splitting the vote because of the established history.

Looking to the future, all the elements that contribute to the political climate of limited success for third parties are changing, in the same manner the global climate is—slowly but surely. Polarization margins are higher than ever. Voter participation has increased. And sentiment towards the two main parties and the system that perpetuates their dominance has changed. From looking at Supreme Court Justice voting records to exit polling stances on issues like immigration, polarization in America is extensively documented and displayed to be an increasing trend (“Political Polarization in the American Public”). Voter turnout, even during a pandemic, has increased dramatically in several states and nationwide during the 2020 election (Johnson and Real). Additionally, since 2016 activist groups have called for Electoral College reform to better reflect people’s interest through the use of ranked-choice voting, a process that has voters rank candidates in the order of preference (FairVote.org). Each factor contributes to the changing American politics.

The leveraging of these changes by third parties can shift successes in their favor, such as the voter makeup. By 2024 millennials will make up the largest voting bloc, and by 2032 Generation Z will make up an even larger percentage (Griffin et al.). There is a documented resurgence in feminist and antiracist activism and advocacy, especially among these two generations (Winch). The window that opens up for third parties here is their ability to leverage their work and plans that appeal to the generational value of intersectionality. Both the Green and Libertarian Parties have run female candidates for various offices including the presidency since 2000, a feat that has taken the two major parties twenty years since then to achieve (“Www.Gp.Org”). Among these female candidates, Cynthia Ann McKinney of the Green Party is a Black woman who ran for the presidential nomination in 2008 (“Cynthia McKinney On Her Run For President”). The combination of social justice, ecological justice, feminism, and grassroots democracy was the core of her platform and remained the Green Party’s fundamental principles. This intersection could be appealing to the incoming group of socially conscious voters. An expansion and diversification of third parties’ political resource pool give a window to recruit more voters to deviate from their typical candidate at the ballot box.

Ranked-choice voting is another change that could positively boost the success of Green Party candidates. Firstly the system itself inherently includes a third choice in addition to the first and second choice ([Ranked-Choice Voting \(RCV\) - Ballotpedia](#)). A large portion of the battles between

the main and third parties happens through ballot access; a guaranteed third spot reduces if not virtually eliminates this hurdle, which weakens the options of the main parties to suppress their competition. Additionally, removing the “winner takes all” system that functions on gerrymandered districts and dominating incumbents would cause a reset in the electoral process. Although not a guarantee, this equity gives third parties footing in their recognition, allows them to divert efforts away from legal battles, and empowers voters not to feel as if they are “wasting” a vote. Since the winner is decided by the candidate who gets the majority share of the first choice, second and third choice preference can genuinely impact a race’s decision. Third-party candidates may not be many voters’ first choices but ranked-choice voting makes the second choice strategically advantageous, especially in tight races. Combine the changes in values, the electorate, and the process itself, and it could spell out future victories for third parties.

Capitalizing on the changing public sentiment towards the main parties and improving party-image fits the changing conditions model. Still, polarization as an effect can dually be harmful. Take the movement Settle for Biden for example. They are a grassroots group of “Former Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders supporters who recognize Joe Biden’s flaws”(“Settle for Biden”) but rally behind the opposition of President Donald Trump. This concept of settling for a candidate stands in stark contrast with voting one’s conscience and indicates polarization preventing voters from doing so.

Sean Groff, a doctoral candidate, and Daniel J Lee, an assistant professor at the University of Nevada, dissent from the notion that polarization is advantageous for third parties by arguing polarization is a negative feedback loop. In the same way an increase in prey leads to a rise in predators that hunts the number of prey to an equilibrium, third parties influencing main parties hinder their prospects because of the increasing cost to a vote. Cost to voters factors in success/chances of winning, in which third parties have a long history of limited ones, and their feelings toward the lesser-favorable candidate. The more substantial the difference in feeling toward the unpreferred candidate in comparison to the preferred one the more costly a third-party vote. As third parties push major candidates to change and become more divergent, the cost of party support increases for the voter causing them to “settle” for one candidate over the other.

Whether it is the idea of a “protest vote” or closeted support for the alternative candidate, people and the main parties themselves tend to view third parties as hostile. For example, a mother’s video expresses this sentiment in her viral reaction to her son voting independent on election day in 2020 (“TikTok”). She expresses visual and audible disapproval of the son Chis’s vote for a third-party candidate and is joined by the grandmother on the phone saying, “Why would you do that,” in response to the news. Based on the video’s viral status and comments supporting the mother’s sentiment of “Now we done lost a vote that’s going to Trump,” the broader theme of voter confidence in the third party is displayed. In response to her son’s rebuttal claiming they “worship candidates like gods,” the mother states it is about having someone with “sense” in the office. This showcases the need the mother and grandmother feel to “settle” for this election, which can be deemed a shared sentiment across party lines at various times in history.

Another stigma third parties must overcome in an attempt to adapt to the current political climate is the concept of being a single-issue party. Perceptions of third parties by voters are often stereotypical and limited, which is mostly in part to direct competition with the primary parties on

the right and left. Campaign financing from potential donors is divided disproportionately between Democrats and Republicans, blockades on debate and ballot access, and domination of media coverage by the red and blue powerhouses is solidified by nearly a 200-year advantage. The control of resources by the dominating forces overshadows the third parties' accomplishments, stances, and actions. Disrupting the system that upholds binary party domination will involve breaking the stigma created by the circumstances. Voters increasing awareness and deciding to not "settle" contributes to a change in the political climate that increases the chances of third-party successes.

A flip in niche dominance as a result of climate change can be viewed in European birds and the outcomes of their fatal competition (Samplonius and Both). The pied flycatcher and the great tit compete to the death for breeding spaces and food during peak egg-laying months. While not nearly as deadly, the nature in which these two organisms compete mirrors that of a third-party competing with its respective primary party. The concept of competitive exclusion prevents both the flycatcher and the great tit from simultaneously having prime egg-laying periods. The flycatcher is a migratory bird that goes away in the winter and returns in the spring. The great tit is a resident bird that will kill the pied flycatcher in confrontation if found in a potential residential area without a mate. Successful mating between pied flycatchers is dictated by the arrival time from their migration, and that falls within a specific window between winter and the spring. The great tit is more hostile during their peak mating season as they compete for resident space just like the primary parties during their election seasons.

A study involving the two birds conducted by researchers Jelmer M. Samplonius and Christiaan Both at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands found that synchronous mating windows increases the mortality of the flycatcher but changes in the climate altered the migration pattern of the pied flycatcher as a response. Warmer and shorter winter fronts prompted the pied flycatcher to adapt their migration schedule. This change caused the mating window between the two birds to be asynchronous, decreasing mortality from confrontations, and increasing successful mating. In other words, because the pied flycatcher was able to adapt to the changing climate they were able to get a noticeable advantage over the bird that previously dominated the area. The great tit still holds control because flycatchers are still killed in confrontation, but because of the environment changes, the pied flycatcher has an advantage that it did not before. The trend of increasingly warmer winters only widens the asynchronous nature of their breeding windows and in a matter of time that gives a considerable advantage to the pied flycatcher.

Third parties are the pied flycatcher in the political climate, while the primary parties dominate the forest as the great tit. The sheer size, power, and "residency" of the Democratic and Republican Party typically result in a political fatality when confronted by the Green or Libertarian Party. But as the factors that contribute to the political climate in America continue to shift third parties have a window to adapt their strategy and get a foothold in the previously dominated battleground and they are beginning to realize this. Both the Libertarian Party and Green Party harp on the main parties' failures directly on their website. In an interview with Chris Robinson, an established member and organizer for the Pittsburgh Green Party, he looks to increased awareness of the party platform as the key to long-term success. When asked about future projections, Chris says, "We don't see Climate policy and human policy as two separate things we do both at the same time, and we think the mission of incorporating all of those movement groups with the idea of explaining that the Green Party can be used as an intersection—that's where we're headed, and we try to

organize members under that idea” (Robinson). This quote embodies the reaction of nature and applies it to create a strategy. The acknowledgment of the stigma and its incorporation with a new political emphasis on the values of intersectionality is an adaptation to increase the success of the party.

Whether it be the migration patterns of a bird or the directional growth of a plant, nature reacts to changes. Although the differences between political science and environmental science are vast, the concepts overlap. Competitive exclusion and sister species delineate the hostile relationship between third parties and the primary ones; positive and negative feedback loops highlight the drawbacks of polarization and adaptation principles in a changing climate outline room for potential success to the political underdogs. The challenges are clear; the opposition from main parties, polarization, and stigma all stand in the way of third-party success. The changing climate is indisputable; voters’ values, the electorate, and the system itself are all in question. The resources are defined as people, ballot space, and support. And the strategy to leverage changes to be advantageous, like using intersectionality, appealing to the new voter blocs, and altering the system is adaptation. That comes from nature. In a few years, the battle between that blue peregrine falcon and red bald eagle may be joined by gold, green, or even purple birds of prey in the struggle for nesting in government buildings.

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