

America's Two-Party System: Too Ingrained to Change, J.T. YOUNG, The American Spectator, April 19, 2016

With half of each party's delegates going to an insurgent, no wonder many have begun speculating that one or both parties could split and America soon experience true multi-party contests. Such musings are provocative, and if realized would produce unprecedented twists, but this problem remains: It won't happen.

An American multi-party system is not emerging and not just due to historical precedent. More important is the electoral dynamic that has created — and will maintain — our two-party system.

America elects its Congressional representatives in 535 separate winner-take-all contests. Even the presidency — because it is decided by the Electoral College, via 50 individual state races — is an amalgamation of separate winner-take-all contests. These elements — separate and winner-take-all — create the incredibly durable two-party system the U.S. has had almost uninterrupted since its founding.

Because these races are local, a party must have enormous breadth and depth of support to have a national impact.

Having just depth or breadth is a ticket to quick oblivion. Even a deep regional party is quickly swallowed up — its issues, and even its elected members, co-opted into one of the two major parties. Even an extensive new national party lacking depth to win local races quickly becomes irrelevant congressionally and consumed by one of the two major parties.

Due to its winner-take-all nature, there are no partial victories — as in parliamentary systems. Its all-or-nothing outcomes mean high return and high risk. To maximize the former and minimize the latter, the optimum is having as few parties as possible encompassing diverging views. The optimum number: Two.

History validates the resiliency and power of America's two-party system. It has existed since George Washington left office. The two parties in the system have changed occasionally — the Federalists, the Anti-Federalists, the Whigs — but the two-party system has remained.

It has been challenged repeatedly by third parties too. The Greenback, the People's, the Free Soil, the Progressive, and many others all have crossed the stage — some even influencing presidential outcomes and winning seats in Congress. But all have exited the stage quickly too — their policies and followers being assumed by the one or both of the two major parties.

When third party Members have been elected to Congress, they still caucus with one of the major parties. Why? Because of the winner-take-all nature of our system: To gain a share of

political power in Washington, they must ally with one of the two major parties. Before long, they are incorporated: What point is there in electing a *de facto* member of one of the two parties? Why not simply elect one outright? This is why rarely more than a handful are in any Congress and why these third parties rarely outlive their individual Members.

So potent is the two-party system at the presidential level that only infrequently does a third party win even a single electoral vote. No third party has won more than one electoral vote since 1968, when 46 — roughly 10 percent of the total — were won. You would have to go back to 1912 to top that figure.

The 1912 election proves the rule of the two-party system's dominance, not its exception. When Teddy Roosevelt won 88 electoral votes and led the Progressive Party to a second place finish ahead of the Republicans, he still lost in a landslide. What's more, it was the Republican Party that survived — along with the two-party system. By 1916, Republicans ran a close second and the Progressives were gone. In 1920, Republicans won the White House overwhelmingly.

Even when downtrodden — as were Republicans in 1912 and Democrats in 1972 — the federal election dynamic and its resulting two-party system provide an anchor of electoral stability around which opposition rallies. Political tides can and do shift, but the system remains.

Certainly aberrations can be pointed out where third parties exist and continue for a time. But that they remain: Rarely even changing outcomes between the two major parties. And even when they affect the two parties themselves, the two-party system continues without interruption — as when the Republicans replaced the Whigs over 150 years ago.

The two-party system gives American politics its unique blend of disparate interests melded into two parties. While normal to Americans, it yields two amalgams of interests often having little in common collectively — except having their opposites residing in the other party.

Today, what is likely is for more volatility channeled through the two-party system. That should be no surprise; America's two-party system has proven more than adept at handling it. And in doing so through far more volatile times than those America now faces.