

Why American Voters Decide to Vote for Third Parties in Presidential Elections

by Harmen Rockler

With just two major parties in the United States, it's odd to find a third party presidential candidate who gets a lot of support. It is virtually impossible to win in a system that awards the office to the candidate who gets a majority of the vote. That's why there have been no third party presidents ever elected.

Being able to understand why people decide to vote for candidates who have no chance of winning is important. It helps us better able to predict presidential race outcomes and could also lead to more successful third party candidates.

Quick and simple Here's why...

Third party voters in presidential elections tend to be:

- More independent voters who have not committed to one political party
- Younger voters are often supporters of third parties. Because they have not voted in as many elections as older voters, there is less of a pattern of votes for one particular party.
- Third party voters also tend to dislike government, in general. They are more likely to feel disenfranchised by the political process.
- The two main parties, they feel, do not accurately represent their views.
- They vote for third parties partly because they genuinely like the candidate and his views, and partly to cast a vote against the two main parties.
- These reasons for voting for third parties describe many, not all, third party voters. These patterns are evident in both a long-term study of American presidential elections and short-term case studies of individual presidential campaigns.

Background information

The factors involved and an overview of the U.S. electoral system

Here is a look at what major components of elections affect third party candidates and their voters:

• Duverger's Law + Institutional Factors

The United States electoral system awards the office of president to whomever wins a majority of the vote. This severely limits choice by creating a system where two major parties try and absorb different viewpoints. This is what is known as Duverger's Law. While I introduce the concept of institutional factors like Duverger's Law, I hold these institutional factors as constant throughout. The electoral system favors the creation of two major parties throughout the nation's history. It does not change in a major way throughout. Because the system stays generally the same, I do not run any particular analysis on the system itself.

If it were possible, I would examine factors like access to the ballot or whether a candidate can debate opponents from the major parties. The institutional factors are the existing framework. I look at other variables, beyond just institutional:

• Personal Factors

Age was one of the major significant characteristics which affected likelihood of voting for a third party candidate. Other factors like among others like gender, race, religion, geography, income, education, and interest in public affairs were insignificant.

Beliefs mattered a great deal. Third party voters are more likey to think the government is not relating to them.

• The Candidates

Candidates who are better known, get media attention, and more support from individuals who typically vote for major parties will do better.

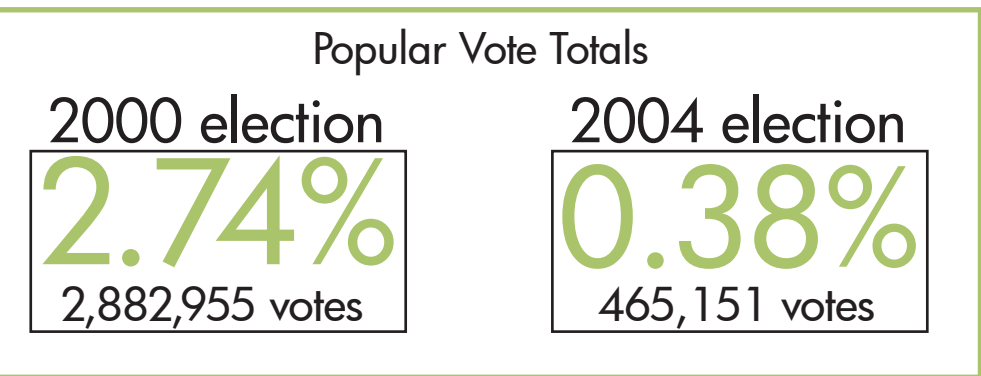
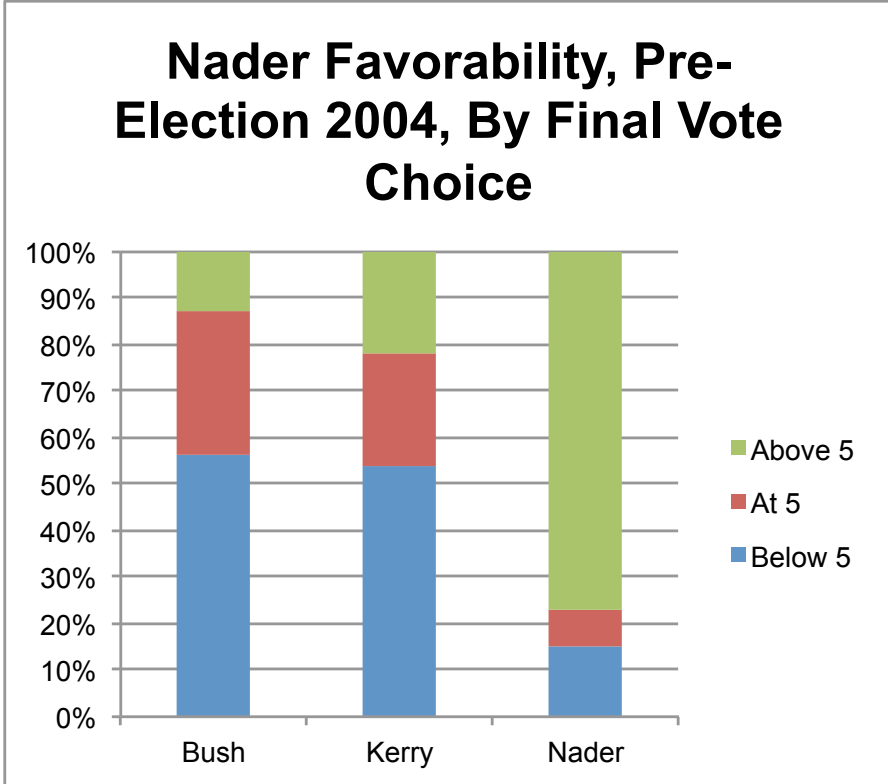
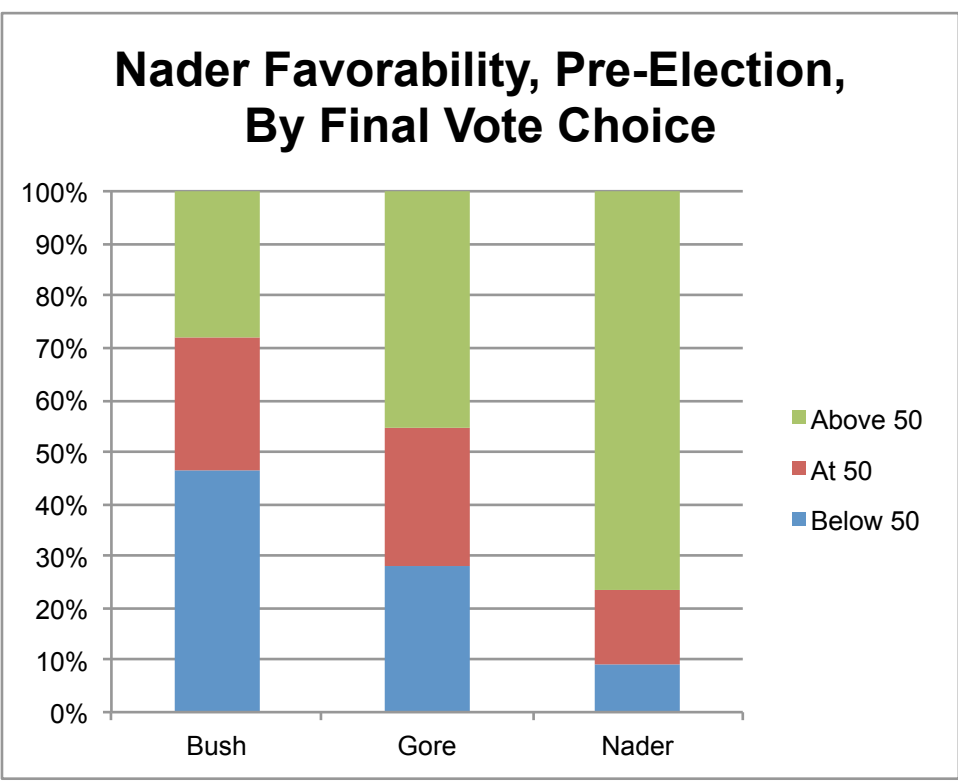
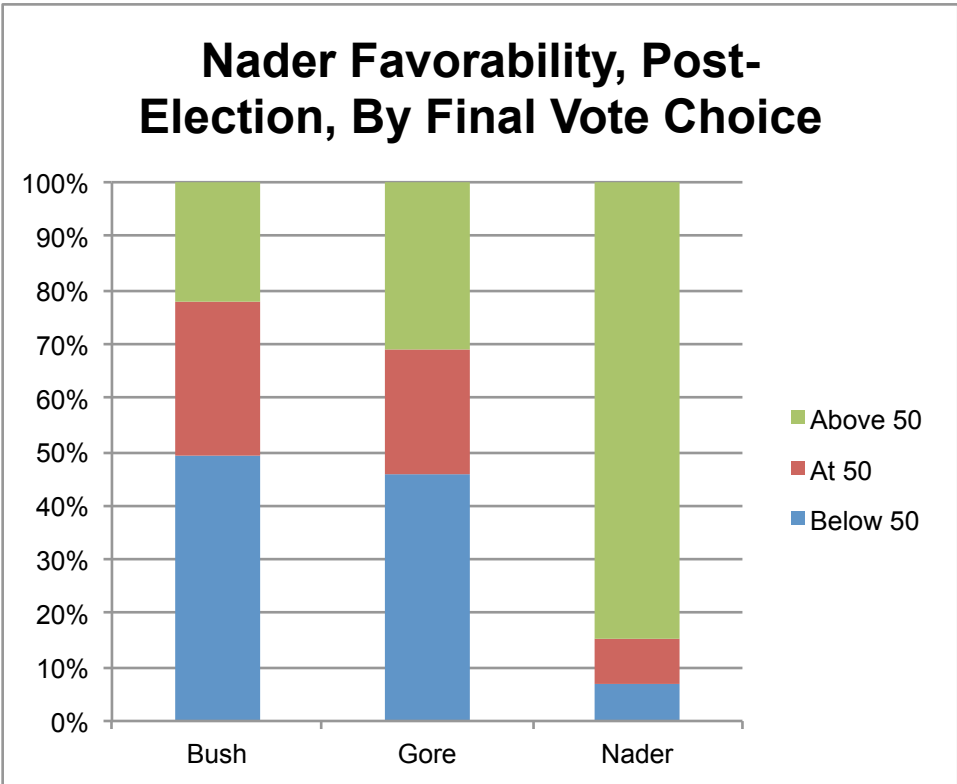


Case Study: Ralph Nader Campaigns 2000, 2004

Ralph Nader's support dropped 83 percent in the span of just two elections. While other third party candidates have been studied extensively, Nader's candidacy has not been deeply analyzed - until now. Nader is unique because he has run for president multiple times. We can track how his support changes from year to year and develop a clearer understanding of third party voters.

Voters for Nader fit into the greater narrative of third party voters. His supporters were unlikely to see differences between the candidates, express a level of frustration with government, and were mostly moderates.

This section uses the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to analyze Nader's candidacy. This dataset was used because it includes a larger sample size of Nader voters, particularly in 2000, so we will be better able to study what caused voters to support him.



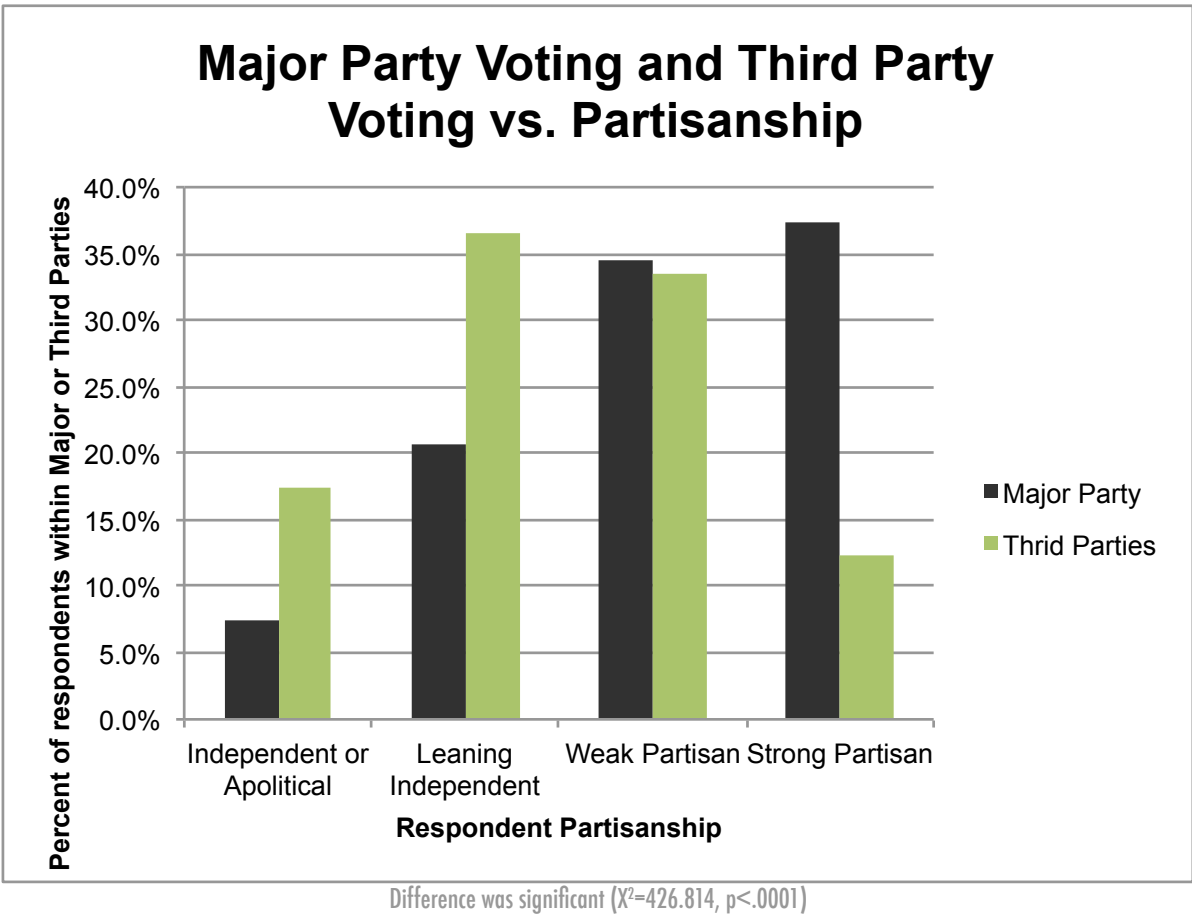
A Drop in Favorability After the 2000 Election

After the 2000 election, we see that voters who eventually voted for Gore more strongly dislike Nader. Before the election, we see a quarter of Gore voters rate Nader below 50 degrees on a thermometer (meaning colder). Nearly half of the voters after the election rated him below 50 degrees. This demonstrates that Nader's negative effect on Gore mattered. It is what likely reduced Nader's impact in the subsequent election.

Who votes for third parties? A comprehensive look at the data: 1948-2004

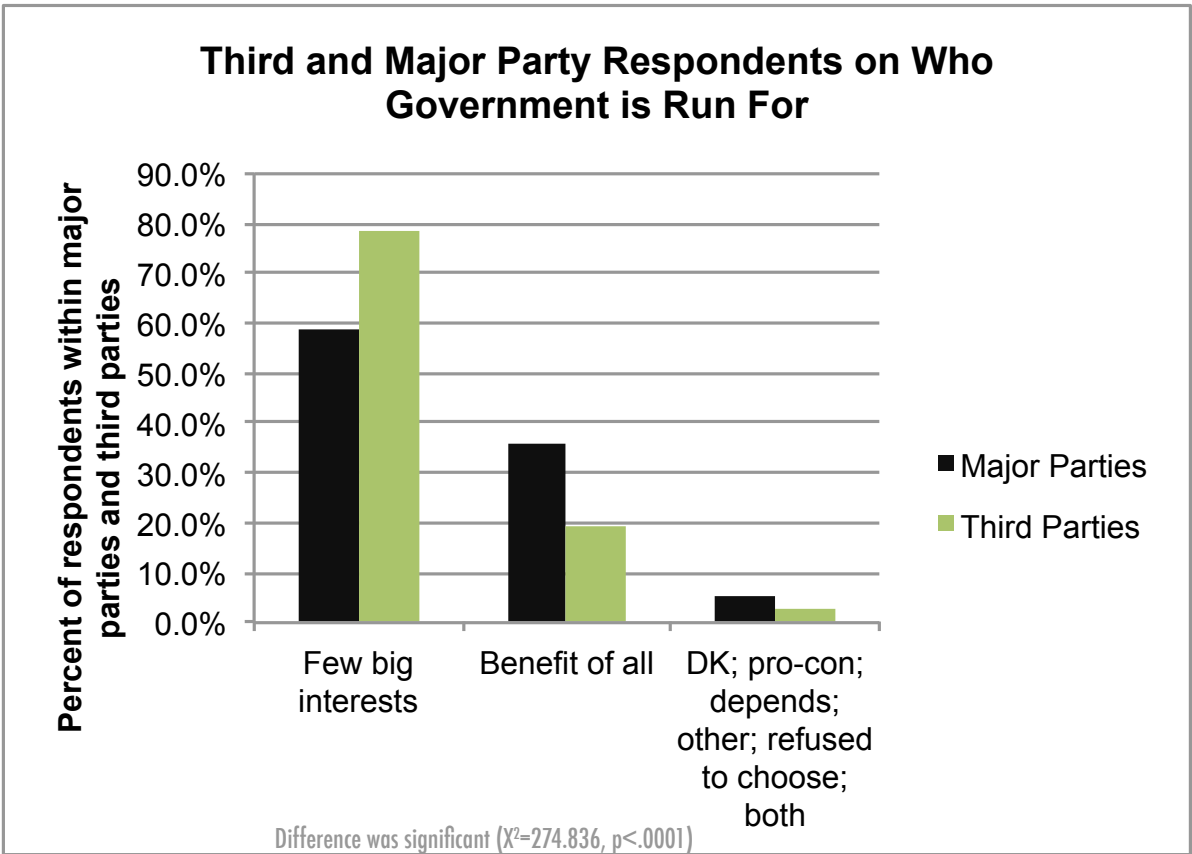
The American National Election Studies (ANES) time series cumulative data file in this analysis. The survey has been run since 1948, meaning that multiple election years will be taken into account. In all the instances when variables are compared in crosstabs, I used VCF0705 (Codebook, p. 615-6), which separates the party of a respondent's vote for president into either: Democrat, Republican, or Other. "Other" includes third party candidates, minor party candidates, and write-ins. This was re-coded to group votes for Democrats and Republicans together - meaning there were two valid voting options: Major parties or "other." I count these "other" votes and refer to them as third parties, throughout the rest of the data analysis.

In reality, the votes for "other" are third and minor party candidates, including write-ins. Including write-ins could potentially affect the results of the data analysis. This was found to be acceptable because in some states, third party or minor party candidates do not receive enough support to appear on ballots. Thus, supporters must use write-ins to vote for a third party.



Self-Described Moderates and Independents

Third party voters aren't likely to describe themselves as strongly partisan or extreme in any way. Instead, they're more likely to identify themselves as independent or leaning independent. This is one of the key factors that third party voters from major party voters.



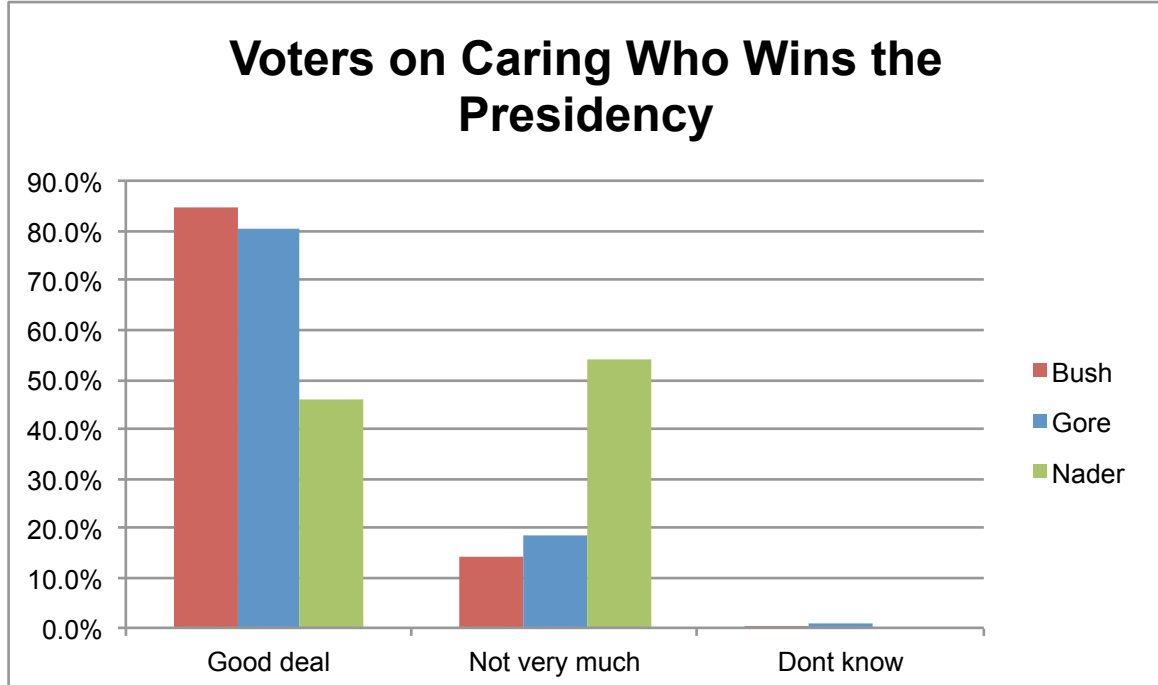
Respondents who say government can only be trusted "some of the time"

54% vs. 73.8%
Major party voters vs. Third party voters

On a scale from: None of the time, some of the time, most of the time, just about always, or "don't know." Difference was significant ($\chi^2=119.889$, $p<.0001$)

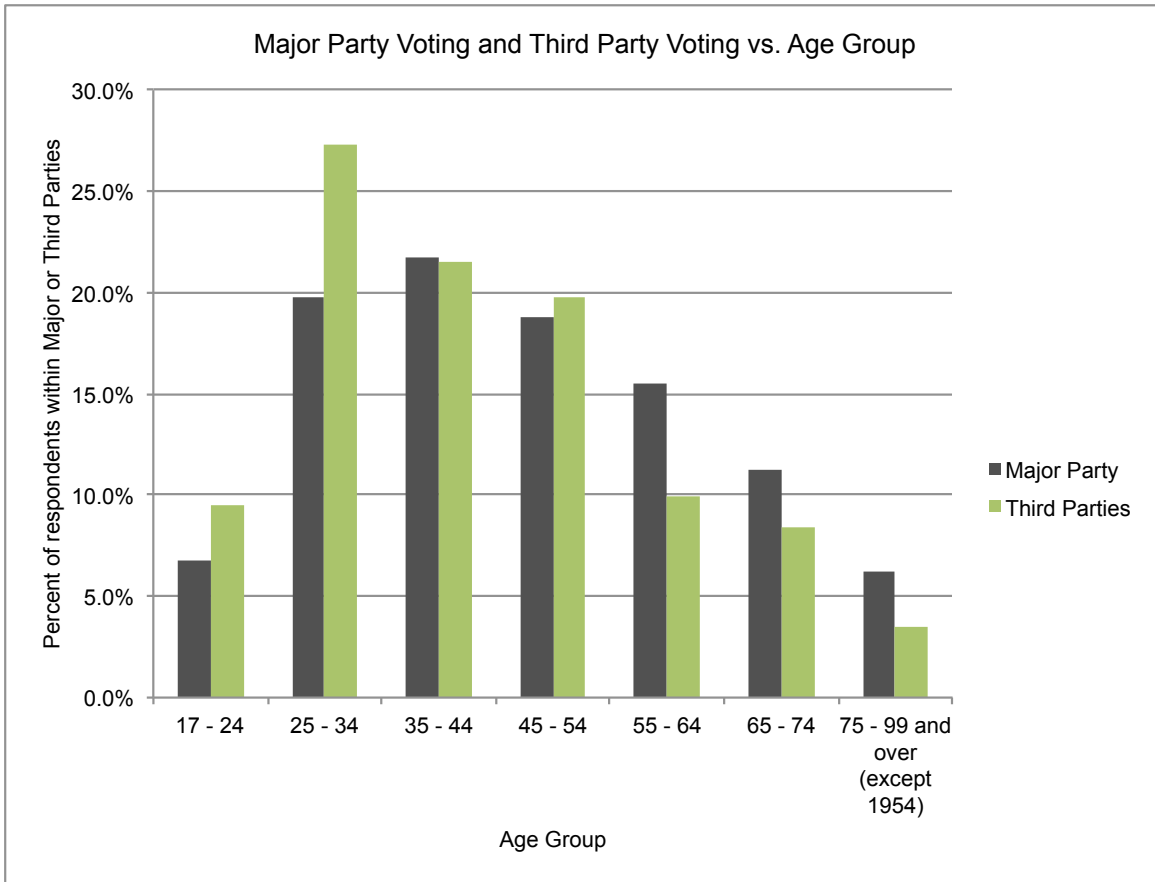
Those Frustrated with Government

- Find that they are disenfranchised from government.
- More likely to say that government officials are "crooked," or express a feeling that the system is against them.
- More likely to say that representatives loose touch with the public.
- They are more likely to say public officials don't care what people like them think.
- Third party voters are not more conservative or libertarian, suggesting the distrust of government is not because of underlying ideological views.



Nader and Gore: Attracting the Same Ideologies

The typical third party voter remains similar in the Nader election. These are still individuals dissatisfied with the options the two major parties propose. They were less likely to care which party wins.



Younger Voters

Among third party supporters, those up to 34 are more prone to vote for third parties. Major parties attract support more evenly among age groups. Younger voters are less likely to be strongly partisan. They're also less likely to have a long voting record, leading them not to be devoted to one of the two major parties.

Respondents who say there is "no difference" between the major parties

30.6% vs. 42.7%
Major party voters vs. Third party voters

Difference was significant ($\chi^2=46.634$, $p<.0001$)

Those Dissatisfied with the Major Party Offerings

A common trait with third party voters was their dissatisfaction with the two major parties. This can be seen not only in thermometer ratings of major parties, but also in the way they characterize the major parties. They are more likely to not see a difference between the candidates and the parties. Although, a majority of voters see a difference between the parties.

Further Research

Because of the small sample size of third party voters, data was only analyzed when there were a high number of cases (600 or more). Unfortunately, some questions which have relevance to this analysis could not be included because of the small sample size (usually 100-300). Asking respondents to react to statements like "Is voting the only way to have a say in government?" or "It doesn't matter if I vote or not?" or "Are things in the U.S. going well or not?" or "Do you favor or oppose term limits?" could have further developed our understanding of who third party voters are. These are issues that are related to a difficulty finding third party voters, a small proportion of the electorate.

There are also no direct questions asked to respondents about why they are voting for a third party. This forces an interpretation of the questions that were asked - giving us an incomplete look at third parties.

Percentage of Support for Each Candidate by Self-Rated Ideology Scale in the 2000 Election (Pre-Election Interview)				
General election ballot for president				
	Bush	Gore	Nader	
Conservative or liberal	Very conservative	0.13	0.02	0.01
	Conservative	0.50	0.14	0.15
	Moderate	0.31	0.47	0.46
	Liberal	0.05	0.31	0.24
	Very liberal	0.01	0.06	0.14
Total Valid Responses (n=)		2581	2189	176
Difference was significant ($\chi^2=1694.772$, $p<.0001$)				

Nader and Gore: Attracting the Same Ideologies

Evidence suggests that Nader voters did not like Gore nor Bush.

- The percentage of support Nader and Gore recieved from different ideologies is nearly identical.
- Nader attracted more "very liberal" voters, but both had strong appeal to moderates compared to Bush. If the theory about third party voters viewing the two major party candidates as unappealing or similar is true, then Nader supporters should not be switching to vote for Gore.

Unfortunately, the crosstabs only examine what the voters for the particular candidate said. There is no way to measure the responses of supporters who changed from Nader to Gore. Those who switched may have been able to see enough of a difference between the two parties to support Gore. They may have voted for Gore because the prospect of a Bush presidency was unappealing. These potential explanations cannot be supported by the data but are offered only as possibilities.

Overall Conclusion

Third party voters are individuals who are:

- dissatisfied with the options the two major parties have presented
- moderates are more likely to feel this way
- younger voters are more likely to feel this way

For third party candidates to be successful the candidate:

- should appeal to moderates
- needs to capitalize on the failure of the two major parties is critical for the success of a third party candidate

While there is still work to be done on researching third party candidates and voters, this analysis builds on the existing knowledge. We better know the kinds of supporters third parties attract. There have been 44 presidents, with none being from third parties. Perhaps, in the future America may elect a third party president, but it will take an exceptional candidate.

Sources:

- American National Election Studies - Cumulative File (1948-2004)
- Annenberg Public Policy Center - 2000 and 2004 dataset
- Federal Election Commission presidential election results, 2000 and 2004 elections