

# PERIODICALS

*Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad*

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## POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

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### *Why We Need A Third Party*

"Toward a More Responsible Three-Party System" by Theodore Lowi, in *PS* (Fall 1983), American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

For more than a decade, Democrats and Republicans have searched for ways to shore up their party organizations. A vain exercise, declares Lowi, a Cornell political scientist. The best medicine for both would be a third national political party.

Lowi contends that Americans' thinking about third parties is muddled by political myths. One article of faith, for example, is that the two-party system is the foundation of American democracy. In fact, from about 1896 until the 1950s, "we were governed by two competing one-party systems." Democrats dominated the South, Republicans (to a lesser degree) the North. By the time two-party competition was restored, White House political power far exceeded that of the party organizations on Capitol Hill.

Also mistaken is the notion that two-way contests, because they produce clear winners and losers, make for more effective government. In Congress, the majority party rarely votes as one. Except during the brief "honeymoon" early in his first term, no U.S. president can count on his confreres on Capitol Hill to fall in line behind him. Hence, party programs and party labels mean little to voters (30 percent of whom now call themselves "independents").

How would a third party help? Lowi believes that it "could clarify the policies, programs, and accountability of the two major parties by reducing their need to . . . be all things to all people." That would not only make parties more cohesive and voters more loyal, but also relieve the president of an impossible burden of public expectations that Lowi feels is partly behind the ignominious exits of our past four chief executives.

Popular fears that a third party would mean political chaos leave Lowi unmoved. So much the better if a third-party presidential candidate won enough votes to deny either of his opponents an electoral college majority and forced the House of Representatives to pick the winner. That would make the president more responsive to Capitol

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Hill. So what if third-party congressmen held the balance of power between the two parties? They would surely reach "across the aisle" and compromise, just as Democrats and Republicans frequently do today.

"Nothing about the present party system warrants our deep respect," Lowi concludes. "Presidents need a party and have none. Voters need choices and have none. Congress needs cohesive policies and has none." Americans ought to get over the notion that the two-party system is "the true and only American way to govern."

### *Defending Single-Issue Groups*

"In Support of 'Single-Issue' Politics" by Sylvia Tesh, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1984), 2852 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-0148.

"Single-issue" groups such as the National Rifle Association and the Gay Rights National Lobby don't have many defenders in academe. Yet Tesh, a Yale political scientist, finds it odd that "having a passionate conviction about abortion, disarmament, homosexuality, guns, feminism, tax laws, or the environment" is seen as a political vice.

Single-issue groups, she says, are often viewed as just another "special interest" or "pressure group." But traditional interest groups work for legislation that directly (often economically) benefits their members; membership is open only to certain occupational or ethnic groups. One must be a doctor, for example, to join the American Medical Association, a powerful force on Capitol Hill. "Issue" groups are open to the general public. "Frankly organized around ethical principles," Tesh says, they appeal not to self-interest, but to "moral convictions about the rightness of policies."

"Single issue" may be the wrong tag for such groups, she adds. Usually, they "consider issues concrete examples of abstract principles, and they advance them not only as important policies but also as a means to advance a particular vision of society." Right-to-life advocates, for example, see legalized abortions as a threat not only to unborn children, but to the traditional role of women and to religious belief.

Tesh doubts that issue groups are quite as uncompromising in their views as their detractors suggest. But she also argues that such groups should not compromise too much. After all, they represent ideas, not economic interests, and it is up to them to advocate their positions as forcefully as possible; compromise is the job of legislators, who weigh competing claims and arguments. And unlike traditional interest groups, which are supposed to "bring home the bacon," issue groups are formed to set right what they see as wrong. Settling for half-measures would cost them the loyalty of their members.

The ultimate goal of issue groups, Tesh notes, is "to make what was once the vision of a few become the vision of the many." And while everybody can reel off a list of obnoxious "single-issue" groups, one can also name other groups—antislavery Abolitionists, women suffragettes, black civil-rights activists—whose "tunnel-vision" brought the United States closer to its professed ideals.