

The Impact of Minor Parties on Major Party Vote Shares: An Examination of State Legislative Races

William M. Salka
Professor of Political Science
Eastern Connecticut State University
Willimantic, CT 06226
salkaw@easternct.edu

Abstract: Minor parties have long operated on the fringe of the American electoral scene. As a result, little investigation has been done on the impact of these minor party candidates in legislative elections. Outside of academe, however, minor parties have been gaining increased attention as American voters become more disillusioned with the options offered by the two major parties. This study seeks to examine the impact of minor party candidates on legislative elections in an effort to fill this gap in the literature. Using elections from sixteen states during the 2000s, the study explores the impact that minor party candidates have on the vote shares of major party candidates, testing three competing theories to explain that impact. The results suggest that minor parties may be the preferred option for some voters who are not represented by the major party platforms.

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Minor political parties have long operated on the fringe of American electoral politics. Despite the fact that they have existed since the 1820s, running for office at all levels of government and in all regions of the country, these parties are rarely able to field candidates that are competitive in the American two-party system (Herrnson 2002; Gillespie 1993). As a result, states have traditionally imposed barriers on which candidates can appear on the ballot. Proponents of these restrictive ballot access laws argue that such limits are necessary to prevent excessively long and confusing ballots. Conversely, minor party advocates have long insisted that their lack of success stems partly from discriminatory state laws, suggesting these laws were written by elected officials from the major parties who want to maintain their two-party monopoly on elective office (Winger 1997).

Despite the persistent presence of minor parties in the United States, little research has been done on the actual impact of minor party candidates on elections. Indeed, the literature on U.S. elections has largely ignored minor parties and unaffiliated candidates, often even creating theory and statistical models based on two-party competition, as if the non-major party candidates did not exist. Before the discipline moves beyond the issue of minor parties, simply relegating them to an endless stream of unimportant historical footnotes, some effort should be made to explore whether or not the persistent presence of these political actors make any difference.

Outside of the academic literature, there does seem to be some popular interest in minor or “third” parties. One popularly held notion that relates to the topic of this paper is that minor party candidates occupy the extremes of the ideological spectrum, taking votes from the closest major party candidate. The fact that there could be minor parties at both extremes may explain combined efforts by Democrats and Republicans in state legislatures to curtail minor party and

independent candidates' access to the ballot. While this popular notion of vote taking may seem to accurately explain the 2000 presidential election, it may not explain electoral support for minor party candidates in less visible elections lower down on the ballot. Given methodological difficulties in determining why individual candidates receive the votes that they do, this popular notion that non-major party candidates take votes from their ideologically closest major party opponents has gone largely untested.

The present study seeks to explore this question using legislative elections in sixteen states from 2002 to 2010. Using the vote shares of individual Democratic and Republican candidates to lower legislative chambers, OLS regression is used to determine the impact of minor party candidates on the vote shares of their major party opponents. The popularly held notion would lead to a prediction that conservative minor party candidates will take votes away from Republicans, while liberal minor party candidates will take from Democrats. The counter theory tested in this paper suggests that relatively few American voters actually align themselves with minor parties, and that most votes cast for minor party candidates instead reflect opposition to the major party in power, as a form of protest against the two-party system. As a result, the presence of a minor party candidate in a particular race could result in a lower vote share for candidates from the dominant major party in each state, regardless of whether the minor party candidate is liberal or conservative.

Minor Party Support in a Two-Party System

For decades, the dominant understanding of voter behavior came from the so-called "Michigan School," which was launched with the publication of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). While this seminal work delved into a number of complex topics, the central argument held that voters develop their party identification while coming of age, largely through

the political socialization they receive from their parents and surrounding environment. Once party identification was solidified during an individual's formative years, this attachment was likely to remain stable throughout that individual's life. Given that most voters do not develop a well-defined or understood ideology, party identification became the primary means for making political decisions. As such, the Michigan School predicts that most voters will identify with a political party relatively early in life and generally cast their votes for that party's candidates from then on.

While the Michigan School has been challenged in recent decades, largely for its inability to explain split-ticket and retrospective voting (Fiorina 1981; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001), the theory may remain useful in explaining voting behavior in lower visibility races, like those for state legislatures. The Michigan School has also been challenged for its inability to explain the rise of voters who were unwilling to identify with a party, preferring instead to classify themselves as unaffiliated or independent. Many scholars today argue that voters are more apt to pay attention to the perceived performance of the incumbent or party in power, particularly as it applies to economic conditions; and reward or punish those incumbents for their past performance. Fiorina (1981) argues that voters use party as an important, but not overriding cue, when deciding how to vote. Instead, voters may deviate from their long held leanings if new information arises in a particular campaign. Evidence suggests, however, that many voters are likely to rely more heavily on party preferences in less visible races, even if those preferences are weak (Flanigan and Zingale 1994). In a sense, when voters have little information about candidates, many may return to a form of straight-ticket voting.

While there has been considerable investigation into voter support for major party candidates, the literature on minor party voting is rather thin. This is largely due to the relative

weakness of minor parties in America's two-party system. It has long been understood that single member, simple plurality election systems, such as those used for most U.S. legislatures, produce stable two-party systems (Duverger 1954). Given that a candidate must win more votes than all others in each district in order to gain representation in the legislature, ambitious parties try to appeal to the largest bloc of voters found near the center of a more or less normally distributed uni-dimensional ideological continuum of preferences. This strategy provides room for two "major" parties to compete for voters in the center of the spectrum, with one leaning left of center and the other to the right. Other parties, then, are forced to occupy the ideological fringes on either side of the major parties. Voters likewise tend to act strategically, casting their votes for one of the centrist parties, with the knowledge that only a candidate from one of the two major parties is likely to win. Votes for peripheral parties are often perceived as wasted, or at least ineffective, given the low probability that a minor party candidate will receive more votes than candidates from the major parties. Thus, minor parties tend to attract limited attention, campaign contributions and electoral support, as voters may fear that a vote for a minor party is at best wasted, or at worst, will help the candidate from their least preferred major party win the election.

Studies that have examined electoral support for minor parties have generally focused on higher visibility, top-of-the-ticket races like those for president, the U.S. Senate or governor. Perhaps the most comprehensive work in this area was conducted by Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus (1996), who examined support for minor party candidates in presidential elections from 1840 to 1992. The authors concluded that support for minor party presidential candidates was mostly a function of the quality of those candidates, amounting largely to name recognition, and perceived failures or inadequacies of the major parties. Minor party presidential candidates

tended to do best when voters believed the major parties were not meeting their expectations; i.e. the major parties seemed unresponsive to key issues, the economy was performing poorly, or candidates from both major parties seemed inadequate.

Other studies have supported the findings of Rosenstone, et al. (1996), giving particular focus to voter dissatisfaction with the major parties and declining levels of trust in government among American voters (Peterson and Wrighton 1998; Howell 1994; Chressanthis and Shaffer 1993; Chressanthis 1990; Elliot, Gryski and Reed 1990; Howell and Fagan 1988). These studies suggest that support for minor party candidates may be less a reflection of support for the actual platforms of those minor parties, and more an expression of dissatisfaction with the constraining nature of the American two-party system. A growing number of voters believe that the U.S. system is broken, with the two major parties hopelessly trapped in gridlock, preventing them from addressing important issues of the day (Flanigan and Zingale 1994). This frustration with the viable major party candidates offered by the two-party system may also be partially responsible for the growing number of unaffiliated voters in recent decades. If a voter is dissatisfied with the major parties and their performance in government, that voter can most easily show her discontent by refusing to register with either party, abstaining from the election, or voting for a minor party candidate, even if they know little about the minor party that is on the ballot.

The evidence presented in the literature to date suggests, then, two possible explanations for voter support of minor party candidates. The more traditional theory, which will be called the “alignment hypothesis,” suggests that citizens cast their votes for minor party candidates that are more closely aligned with their own ideologies or party preferences. Thus, strong conservatives may vote for a conservative minor party candidate, such as a member of the Constitution Party,

when those candidates are on the ballot. A second possible explanation, which can be labeled the “protest hypothesis,” suggests that electoral support for minor party candidates might be less an expression of support for that minor party, and more a vote of protest against the performance of the major parties in the U.S. two-party system. This is particularly likely in lower visibility races where voters have little to no information about the candidates on the ballot. Thus, the protest hypothesis is distinct from the more widely held view covered by the alignment hypothesis, which holds that votes for a minor party candidate represent a voter’s support for the minor party’s platform.

If voters are supporting minor party candidates because they are more aligned with the issue positions or ideology of that party, as the alignment hypothesis predicts, then, the presence of a minor party candidate should result in a lower vote share for the ideologically closest major party candidate. For example, the presence of a Green Party candidate on the ballot should be associated with a lower vote share for candidates from the Democratic Party.

If, however, votes for minor party candidates are being used to express dissatisfaction with the political system in general, as the protest hypothesis suggests, votes for a minor party candidate should come at the expense of the dominant major party at the time of the election. The scenario might go something like this. Picture a state where a large majority of voters tend to support one major party over another, such as in Connecticut. Given that a relatively large majority of Connecticut voters tend to lean toward the Democratic Party, most of those voters are likely to vote for the Democratic candidate in the average legislative race where no minor parties are on the ballot. This option might be preferable, even if a voter is dissatisfied with the political system, given the voter’s socialization in favor of the Democratic Party and against the Republicans. When a minor party candidate is on the ballot, however, the voter is given an outlet

to express their dissatisfaction; they have an opportunity to vote against the system without having to vote for the Republican Party. It is also likely that a left leaning minor party will have arisen in that state, in an effort to capture the votes of those dissatisfied with the Democratic Party. Thus, in states where one party tends to dominate, we might expect that the largest minor party will occupy that side of the spectrum, and votes in favor of that minor party's candidates will come at the expense of the dominant major party. In states where partisan leanings are more evenly divided, we might expect more balanced minor party representation, and support for a minor party candidate may simply come at the expense of the party that is in power at the time of the election.

Data and Methods

This study is designed to explore whether the presence of minor party candidates has a systematic effect on candidates from one or the other major parties. Every minor party candidate receives at least some votes, so those votes are likely being taken from one or both of the major parties. Given the persistence of minor party candidates, it seems sensible to explore whether those candidates have any systematic impact on the votes received by the major party candidates. Since minor party candidates run for office only sporadically and do not appear on the ballot in every district in every election, it is possible to measure the vote share that major party candidates lose when a minor party candidate is on the ballot. Using the vote shares received by Democratic and Republican candidates as the dependent variables, the statistical models below test for the impact of minor party candidates by looking for a change in the vote share of major party candidates when a minor party candidate is on the ballot. The following analysis uses cross-sectional data over five election cycles, where the unit of analysis is the individual legislative districts in the lower legislative chamber in sixteen states. Using each major party's

vote share as the dependent variable, the inclusion of a dummy variable indicating the presence or absence of a minor party candidate on the ballot should indicate whether one or both major party candidates tend to lose votes when a minor party candidate is present. The models presented below should allow for a test of the protest and alignment hypotheses, by indicating which major party candidates tend to receive lower vote shares when competing against candidates from minor parties.

Data for this study were drawn from all two-party contested lower chamber elections from 2002 to 2010 in sixteen states. Uncontested races with only one major party candidate on the ballot were omitted to give a clearer picture of the distribution of the vote between the two major parties in each legislative district. The state legislatures included are California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas and Utah. With Maine, only elections from 2004 to 2010 were examined, as that state did not redistrict until 2004. While these states represent all regions of the U.S. and vary in their degree of legislative professionalism, they were primarily selected because they had the highest proportion of races with minor party candidates across the country and reflected diversity in terms of major party dominance in each state. Lower chambers were used instead of upper chambers in an effort to increase the number of districts with minor parties in the analysis.

The states were divided into four categories: strong Republican, strong Democratic, leaning Republican, and leaning Democratic, based on modified Ranney Index scores for each state (Ranney 1965). The traditional Ranney index is essentially a measure of Democratic Party dominance in a state over a particular time period. It includes the average proportion of seats held by the Democrats in both chambers of the state legislature, the proportion of the vote for the

Democratic gubernatorial candidate, and the proportion of gubernatorial terms where the Democrats held unified control of the governor's mansion and both chambers of the legislature. A modified Ranney index is used in this study to determine the balance of power between the two major parties prior to each legislative election, rather than over the entire decade. Ranney's measure was also modified to distinguish between divided and unified Republican control of each state's government.¹ Like the Ranney index, this measure produces scores ranging from 0 (complete Republican control) to 1 (complete Democratic control).² The modified Ranney index leads to the classification of four states as strong Republican, two as strong Democratic, four as leaning Republican, and six as leaning Democratic.

The impact of minor party candidates on major party vote shares will be explored in two ways. The first method will explicitly test the protest hypothesis, which suggests that votes for any minor party are cast as a protest against the dominant major party in that particular state. If the protest hypothesis is correct, the presence of a minor party candidate should be associated with a lower vote share for candidates from the dominant major party, i.e. Republican Party candidates should receive lower vote shares in Utah, while Democratic Party candidates should receive lower vote shares in Massachusetts.

To test the protest hypothesis, thirty-two OLS models were run to determine if a correlation exists between the presence of any minor party candidate and the vote shares received by the Democratic Party and Republican Party candidates in each of the sixteen states. The dependent variable in each model, then, is the district level vote share for the Democratic or Republican candidates. The independent variable of interest is a dummy variable indicating whether or not any minor party candidate is running in each district. Based on the protest hypothesis, it is expected that the presence of a minor party candidate will be negatively

correlated with the vote share of Democratic candidates in those states where the Democratic Party is dominant, while not significantly impacting the vote shares of Republican Party candidates. The reverse is expected in states where the Republican Party is dominant, with the presence of a minor party candidate being associated with lower vote shares for Republican candidates.

Again, the protest hypothesis is based on the theory that weakly attached voters, even those that are dissatisfied with the political system, will tend to vote for the candidate from the majority party in each state. This type of voting, in fact, is what contributes to that party holding a majority in that state. Given their political socialization to favor one major party over the other, most voters may be disinclined to switch sides completely and vote for the opposing major party. When given a third option, however, such as a minor party candidate, weakly attached voters who feel alienated from the political system may choose to express their dissatisfaction by voting for a minor party candidate. Such a vote might represent a protest against the status quo, without requiring a voter to support the opposing major party. Data on legislative races were gathered from the Secretary of States' offices in each state.

In order to control for other factors that may influence vote shares, a number of additional independent variables were included in each model. Dummy variables were used to indicate the presence of a Democratic or Republican incumbent in each district, as this would certainly impact the votes received by either candidate. A number of district level demographic variables were also included to control for the effects of demographic variance across districts within each state. These variables are the percentage of residents in each district with a four year college degree, the percentage of residents below the poverty line and the percentage of residents classified as white/non-Hispanic by the U.S. Census Bureau. Data for the demographic variables

were obtained from Lilley et al. (2008). Dummy variables indicating the year in which each election was held were also included in each model.

The second group of OLS models seeks to test both the protest and alignment hypotheses by better controlling for the specific minor parties appearing on the ballot. It is plausible to expect that the previous tests might provide unwarranted support for the protest hypothesis if, for example, most of the minor party candidates running in Massachusetts were from the Green Party. Those Green Party candidates might be attracting support from liberal voters who would normally vote Democratic if there were no Green Party candidates on the ballot. In these cases, minor party candidates that are pulling more closely aligned voters away from the dominant major party may appear to be drawing protest votes, if the regression models do not specify particular minor parties. To control for this possibility, thirty-two new OLS models were run using the same dependent and independent variables, except the minor party dummy variable was omitted and replaced with multiple dummy variables indicating candidates from specific minor parties.

These models that distinguish between the different minor parties should provide greater insight into which hypothesis most accurately explains the electoral impact of minor party candidates. A finding that the presence of conservative minor party candidates is most often associated with lower vote shares for Republicans would provide evidence in support of the alignment hypothesis. Conversely, a finding that conservative minor party candidates are associated with lower vote shares for the Democratic Party in states where the Democratic Party is dominant would provide evidence to support the protest hypothesis.

A Note on a Possible Alternative Finding

While the above hypotheses are based on the assumption that minor party candidates will take votes away from those in the major parties, it is possible that the presence of a minor party candidate could lead to a *higher* than normal vote share for a major party candidate. Such a finding would suggest that the presence of the minor party candidate is actually providing an electoral benefit to candidates in the major party. One possible explanation of such a finding might be what has been termed a “decoy” or “compromise” effect (Brockington 2011). A compromise effect occurs when voters are presented with three choices in a campaign, instead of the more traditional two. American campaigns typically involve only two choices, a Democrat who is left of center versus a Republican who is to the right. When a third option is included in a campaign, in the form of a minor party who is further to the right or the left of the ideological center, the minor party might serve as a “decoy” that broadens the ideological debate in the campaign, pushing that debate further to the right or left. For example, assume a Green Party candidate enters a race that also includes candidates from the Republican and Democratic Parties. The Green Party candidate would presumably take positions further to the left of the Democratic candidate. In this situation, the Democratic candidate may become more appealing to moderate voters, as the Democrat would be situated between the more conservative Republican and the more liberal Green. A moderate voter may be inclined to vote for the Democrat, seeing that candidate as an appealing compromise between the other candidates to the right and left. In the analysis below, findings of *positive* correlations between liberal minor parties and the vote share of Democratic Party candidates or conservative minor parties and the vote share of Republican candidates will provide support for the compromise effect hypothesis.

Findings

The first group of OLS models examined the impact of any minor party candidate on the vote shares of Democrats and Republicans. In these models, the presence of a minor party candidate was indicated with a dummy variable that grouped all non-major party candidates together. As can be seen from Tables 1 – 4, the models performed as expected, in that the findings for the control variables were in the expected directions and mostly statistically significant. Thus, the presence of a Democratic incumbent was associated with a higher vote share for Democratic Party candidates and a lower vote share for Republican Party candidates, while the opposite was true for Republican incumbents. The percentage of residents in each district with a four-year college degree and the percentage below the poverty line tended to be associated with higher vote shares for Democratic Party candidates and lower vote shares for Republicans. Conversely, the percentage of residents classified as white in each district was associated with lower vote shares for Democrats and higher shares for Republicans.

As can be seen from Table 1, the results from three of the four strong Republican states seem to support the protest hypothesis. The presence of any minor party candidate in Idaho, Texas and Utah was associated with a negative and statistically significant relationship between the minor party dummy variable and the vote shares of Republican Party candidates, which was the dominant party in those states. There was also no statistically significant relationship between the presence of a minor party and Democratic vote shares in those three states. The findings from Florida, however, run counter to the protest hypothesis, as the presence of a minor party candidate in that state was only associated with lower vote shares for Democratic Party candidates, who were in the minority in Florida in the 2000s.

The findings were even more mixed for the other states. With the strong Democratic states (Table 2), it was expected that the presence of a minor party candidate would be associated with a lower vote share for candidates from the dominant Democratic Party. The findings from Massachusetts, however, suggest that minor party candidates tend to take votes away from Republican candidates, and have little or no impact on Democratic candidates. The results from Rhode Island suggest candidates from both major parties lose votes when a minor party candidate is on the ballot. Similar mixed results were found with the leaning Republican states (Table 3). In Kansas and Michigan, the protest hypothesis was supported, as the presence of a minor party candidate was associated with lower vote shares for only candidates from the dominant Republican Party. The opposite was true in Indiana, where only Democratic candidates seemed to be significantly impacted by minor party candidates. In Minnesota, as with Rhode Island, candidates from both major parties seemed to be effected.

Finally, the results from the moderate Democratic states may provide the least support for the protest hypothesis (Table 4). Only Connecticut and New York exhibit statistically significant correlations in the expected direction, where the presence of a minor party candidate was associated with a lower vote share for members of the dominant Democratic Party. Candidates from both major parties tended to receive lower vote shares when a minor party was on the ballot in Maine, and only Republican Party candidates seemed to lose votes to minor parties in California, Colorado and Oregon.

Thus, the results of the OLS models that included a single dummy variable indicating only the presence of any minor party candidate provide only limited support for the protest hypothesis. This hypothesis was supported in only seven of the sixteen states, suggesting that deeper examination of the impacts of minor party candidates on the major parties is warranted.

INDIVIDUAL MINOR PARTIES

In the next four tables, where the regression models are more fully specified with dummy variables indicating the specific minor parties appearing on the ballot, a number of interesting findings arise. First, it seems clear that the findings in support of the protest hypothesis in the first group of models may be better explained by the alignment hypothesis in this section.

Whereas the first models found evidence in support of the protest hypothesis in Idaho, Texas, Utah, Kansas, Michigan, Connecticut and New York, the presence of conservative minor parties may better explain the decline in vote share for Republican candidates in Idaho, Texas, Utah and Kansas, and partially in Michigan. Further, the presence of the left leaning Working Families Party in Connecticut and New York may better explain the lower vote shares for Democratic candidates in those states.

A test of the alignment versus protest hypotheses is best done with the minor parties that are clearly to the right or left of center. In the states included in this study, three minor parties were classified as liberal: the Green Party, the Working Families Party and the Liberal Party. The alignment hypothesis would lead to a prediction that these liberal parties will be associated with lower vote shares for Democrats. On the other side of the spectrum, the alignment hypothesis would lead to the expectation that the conservative Constitution Party and Conservative Party candidates would take votes from Republicans. The Libertarian Party is somewhat more difficult to classify, however. While typically thought of as a conservative party, given the calls for smaller government in the economic realm, Libertarians also tend to be quite liberal on social issues. For example, the first principle of the Libertarian Party's Platform, which addresses Personal Liberty, calls for the protection of abortion rights and laws that do not discriminate against individuals based on sexual orientation (Libertarian Party Platform 2012). Given that the

Libertarian Party promotes both conservative and liberal views, it is plausible to expect that Libertarian candidates may take votes from either major party.

One fact that is clear from the sixteen states in this sample is the prominence of the Libertarian Party in legislative races. Libertarian candidates appeared on the ballot in thirteen of the sixteen states; and across all states, Libertarian candidates ran in 53 percent of the races that included at least one minor party candidate. The next most prevalent minor party was the Green Party, which ran candidates in just under 9 percent of the districts with a minor party candidate present. Green Party candidates also appeared in only nine of the sixteen states.

Tables 5-8 contain the coefficients for the dummy variables indicating the presence of candidates from a particular minor party in each state, with states again grouped based on the dominance of one or the other major party. The reader should note that these OLS models contained the same control variables as the previous models (the incumbent dummies, demographic and year effects variables), but those coefficients were not reported in the tables for the sake of simplicity.³

As can be seen from Table 5, which contains the four states classified as being strong Republican, the alignment hypothesis seems to better explain the impact of minor party candidates in Idaho, Texas and Utah. In Idaho, the presence of a Conservative Party candidate was associated with a lower vote share for Republican candidates. The same was true for the presence of Constitution Party candidates in Utah. Further, the presence of a Libertarian candidate in Idaho and Texas was associated with a lower vote share for Republican candidates, suggesting that more conservative residents may have been shifting their votes to the Libertarian party when given the opportunity. In Florida, however, the presence of a Libertarian candidate was associated with a lower vote share for Democratic candidates. This finding may also be

explained by the alignment hypothesis, if fiscally conservative and socially liberal voters in that state were shifting their support from Democrats to Libertarians. The presence of Green Party candidates did not appear to have any impact on the vote share of candidates from either major party in Florida or Texas. This finding may be explained by the relatively low number of Green Party candidates appearing on the ballot in each state.

The results from the strong Democratic states reported in Table 6 provide additional support for the alignment hypothesis. In both Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the presence of Libertarian candidates on the ballot was associated with lower vote shares for Republican candidates. This suggests that fiscally conservative voters may have shifted their support to the more fiscally conservative Libertarian candidates when given the opportunity to do so. The presence of a Green Party candidate in Massachusetts, however, was associated with a lower vote share for Republican, but not Democratic, candidates. This finding seems to be more supportive of the protest hypothesis.

Examination of the results from the more moderate Republican states, shown in Table 7, again provides mixed results for the two hypotheses. In Indiana and Michigan, the presence of Libertarian candidates was associated with lower vote shares for Democratic candidates, which may provide support for the alignment hypothesis if one assumes that fiscally conservative and socially liberal voters who tend to support the Democratic Party shifted their vote to the Libertarian candidate when given the opportunity to do so. The findings were reversed in Kansas, where the presence of a Libertarian candidate was associated with a lower vote share for Republicans. The coefficients for the Green Party variable in Michigan and Minnesota, however, seem to be more supportive of the protest hypothesis. In Michigan, the presence of a Green Party candidate was associated with a lower vote share for candidates in the majority Republican

Party, and in Minnesota, the presence of a Green Party candidate was associated with a lower vote share for candidates from both major parties. The results for the Minnesota Independence Party are more difficult to interpret. The Independence Party is Minnesota's third largest party and, like the Libertarians, its platform contains both conservative and liberal planks. The presence of Independence Party candidates was associated with lower vote shares for both Democrats and Republicans. This finding might suggest that voters who traditionally lean toward one or the other major parties may shift their vote to the Independence Party as a protest of the two party system; or, these votes may reflect actual support for the more ideologically pure party.

The results from the leaning Democratic states provide additional support for the alignment hypothesis (Table 8). The presence of Libertarian candidates was associated with lower vote shares for Republican candidates in California and Colorado, but with Democrats in Oregon. The presence of candidates from the liberal Working Families Party was associated with lower vote shares for Democrats in both Connecticut and New York. These findings suggest that more ideological extreme voters who tend to support one or the other major parties were willing to shift their votes to more extreme minor parties, when given the chance.

Finally, the results presented in Tables 5-8 provide only limited support for the compromise hypothesis. This hypothesis led to a prediction that the presence of a more ideologically extreme minor party makes one of the major parties seem like a more moderate or compromise option, leading to increased support for that party. There were five statistically significant, positive correlations between the presence of a specific minor party candidate and the vote share for major party candidates. Two of these relationships are difficult to interpret, however, as one applies to a collection of minor party and unaffiliated candidates classified as

“other” in New York, and the other is for the Independent Party in the same state. The Independent Party is a non-ideological party focused primarily on electoral reform, and has no clear left or right leanings (Salit 2012).

The results from Michigan, classified as a leaning Republican state, appear to provide evidence to support the compromise hypothesis (Table 7). In that state, the presence of a Green Party candidate was associated with a lower vote share for Republican candidates, but a higher vote share for Democrats. This finding may be interpreted as supportive of the compromise hypothesis. In this case, when voters were given three options, among Republican candidates on the right, Greens on the left and the Democratic candidates in the middle, some voters may have been willing to shift their vote to the Democratic candidate, as that candidate represented a more moderate compromise between the seemingly more extreme Republican and Green candidates.

A similar scenario may have occurred in Massachusetts, which was classified as a strong Democratic state (Table 6). In this case, the presence of a Libertarian candidate was associated with a statistically significant decrease in the vote share for Republican candidates, but an associated increase in the vote share for Democratic candidates. Here, again, it may be that the socially liberal platform of the Libertarian candidates positioned the Democratic candidates in the middle of the ideological spectrum, making those Democratic candidates more appealing to moderate voters in the center.⁴

The compromise hypothesis is not supported by a third positive correlation. The presence of a Conservative Party candidate in Idaho (Table 5) was associated with a statistically significant decrease in the vote share for Republican candidates, but an increase in the vote share for Democratic candidates. In this case, the more ideologically extreme minor party fell to the right of the Republican Party, not to the left of the Democrats, as the compromise hypothesis

would have predicted. This finding might best be explained as a case where the presence of the more ideologically conservative minor party caused Republican candidates to move their platforms further to the right, so as not to lose conservative voters to the minor party candidate. This shift to the right may have made the Republican candidates less appealing to moderate voters in the center, causing those voters to shift their support to the Democratic Party.

Discussion

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the above analysis is that the presence of minor party candidates does seem to have a systematic impact on the vote shares received by the major party candidates, at least in the sixteen states examined here. In every state, the presence of a minor party candidate was associated with a statistically significant decline in the vote share for one or both of the major parties. Further, the prevalence of the Libertarian candidates across the states in this sample suggests that the Libertarian Party may be the most influential minor party in the U.S. today. While the purpose of this study was not to explore whether the presence of minor party candidates tends to make legislative elections more or less competitive, future research could explore this question in more depth.

The analysis conducted in this study did provide evidence in support of all three hypotheses that were tested. The first models, which grouped all minor party candidates into a single variable, suggested that the protest hypothesis seemed to explain the impact of minor party candidates on their major party opponents in at least seven states. The second round of analysis, however, in which the specific minor parties were identified with separate dummy variables, suggested that the alignment hypothesis more accurately explained the impact of minor parties in most, but not all, states. This finding indicates that support for minor party candidates tends to be more a reflection of support for the minor party's platform or candidate, and not simply a protest

against the dominant major party or the two-party system. Such a finding provides evidence that some voters may be more rational than otherwise thought, as these voters may be using their ballots to express support for their preferred candidate or ideology, even in the less visible elections to the lower chamber of state legislatures.

The findings presented above also indicate that the presence of a minor party candidate can provide an electoral advantage to a major party in some instances. The results from Michigan suggest the presence of a Green Party candidate may make the Democrat more appealing, possibly as a compromise choice in the middle of the ideological spectrum. And, the presence of a Libertarian candidate in Massachusetts may have been providing a similar benefit to Democrats in that state. The results from Idaho, however, run counter to the compromise hypothesis. In that state, the presence of a candidate from the Conservative Party, which falls to the right of the Republican Party, was associated with an increase in vote shares for Democratic, not Republican, candidates. This finding is likely explained by Republican candidates, in that heavily Republican state, moving to the right to retain the support of conservative voters. This ideological shift may have caused more moderate voters to cast their ballots for the more moderate seeming Democratic candidates.

Overall, then, the results presented in this study do indicate that minor parties have a systematic impact on legislative elections in the states. The extent of this impact, however, is largely unknown given the limited research on the topic. Since it is quite likely that minor parties will remain a fixture in American politics, future research should continue to explore the extent of their impact on American elections at all levels.

¹ Several scholars have offered critiques of the original Ranney index, primarily noting that using a single measure of party competition in a state over time may not account for changes in partisan control during that time period

(Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993; King 1989; Kenney and Rice 1985; Tucker 1982). For example, a southern state shifting from Democratic to Republican control over a decade would appear to have relatively high levels of party competition, despite the fact that only the dominant party had changed. The index score for such a state would be very similar to another state where the two major parties were more evenly matched.

The modified version of Ranney's index was created to address the problem of party competition changing over time, and to create an index more appropriate for the present study. Rather than creating an index score for the entire decade, each state's score is calculated for the gubernatorial term prior to each election. For example, each state's score in 2004 is calculated using the partisan makeup of both legislative chambers in the session prior to that election, and the election results from the previous gubernatorial race. Rather than using the Democratic gubernatorial candidate's share of the total vote, the Democratic candidate's share of the two major parties' vote was used. This method should minimize the impact of non-major party candidates in the race, thereby magnifying the vote share of one major party candidate over the other. The fourth component of the index measures the degree of unified Democratic Party control over the state prior to the election. Specifically, the state is coded 1 if the Democratic Party held the governor's office and majorities of both chambers of the legislature. A state was coded 0.67 if the Democrats controlled two of the three institutions (for example, Democratic majorities in both legislative chambers with a Republican governor), 0.33 if they controlled only one institution, and 0 if there was unified Republican control. This modification provides a more accurate measure of major party control, as it distinguishes between divided government and unified Republican control.

² The formula for this modified Ranney index is:

$$\frac{\% \text{ Democratic seats in the state house prior to the election} + \% \text{ Democratic seats in the state senate prior to the election} + \% \text{ Democratic gubernatorial candidate's share of the two party vote in the previous election} + \% \text{ Democratic control of state government prior to the election}}{4}$$

³ The direction of the coefficients and the p values were unchanged when the specific minor party dummy variables were added to the models.

⁴ It is also possible that the presence of a far right Libertarian candidate is forcing the Republican candidates to move their platform to the right in an effort to protect their support from conservative voters. This scenario seems less likely, however, given the large proportion of Democratic-leaning voters in Massachusetts. It would seem irrational for a Republican to move further to the right in most Massachusetts legislative district if the Republican were trying to win the seat.

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Table 1: Impact of Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Share in Lower Chambers in Strong Republican States, 2002 – 2010.

	FL Repub Vote	FL Dem Vote	ID Repub Vote	ID Dem Vote	TX Repub Vote	TX Dem Vote	UT Repub Vote	UT Dem Vote
Minor Dummy	0.855 (1.42)	-4.75** (1.412)	-1.07** (0.27)	0.11 (0.27)	-2.85** (1.02)	-0.16 (1.01)	-2.63* (1.288)	-1.90 (1.31)
Dem Incumbent	-12.07** (1.60)	11.98** (1.59)	-9.26** (1.64)	9.36** (1.63)	-13.37** (1.30)	13.61** (1.29)	-15.05** (1.80)	14.85 (1.84)
Rep Incumbent	6.01** (1.22)	-6.17** (1.21)	4.07** (1.18)	-3.91** (1.17)	3.14** (1.26)	-2.87* (1.24)	4.31** (1.55)	-4.49** (1.59)
Education	-0.017 (0.103)	0.041 (0.102)	-1.06** (0.10)	1.08** (0.10)	-0.02 (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)	-0.17 (0.10)	0.20* (0.10)
% Poverty	-0.299* (0.147)	0.312* (0.15)	-1.17** (0.15)	1.19** (0.15)	-0.15 (0.10)	0.15 (0.10)	0.31* (0.14)	-0.38** (0.15)
% White	0.118** (0.033)	-0.12** (0.03)	-0.09 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.27** (0.03)	-0.27** (0.03)	0.46** (0.06)	-0.49** (0.07)
2002	-4.21* (1.77)	4.643** (1.75)	-4.42** (1.66)	4.21** (1.65)	-7.48** (1.41)	7.64** (1.40)	-5.77** (1.99)	6.16** (2.03)
2004	-2.80 (1.82)	3.00 (1.81)	-4.18** (1.62)	4.22** (1.61)	-7.19** (1.48)	7.22** (1.47)	-1.87 (2.01)	2.76 (2.06)
2006	-7.83** (1.68)	7.92** (1.67)	-7.18** (1.66)	7.22** (1.65)	-9.22** (1.42)	8.88** (1.41)	-5.79** (1.92)	5.45** (1.97)
2008	-4.47** (1.58)	4.42** (1.57)	-2.91 (1.59)	2.95 (1.58)	-8.12** (1.39)	8.26** (1.37)	-6.89** (1.79)	6.97** (1.84)
Adj. R ²	.472	.502	.625	.616	.680	.689	.583	.577
n of cases	245	245	197	197	325	325	271	271

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 2: Impact of Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Share in Lower Chambers in Strong Democratic States, 2002 – 2010.

	Massachusetts Republican Vote	Massachusetts Democratic Vote	Rhode Island Republican Vote	Rhode Island Democratic Vote
Minor Dummy	-7.34*** (1.39)	-1.31 (1.37)	-8.18*** (1.36)	-3.89** (1.51)
Dem Incumbent	-6.61*** (1.68)	7.47*** (1.24)	-3.29** (1.13)	2.90*** (1.25)
Rep Incumbent	18.76*** (1.89)	-17.78*** (1.86)	12.21*** (1.71)	-12.34*** (1.89)
Education	-0.25*** (0.08)	0.29*** (0.07)	-0.003 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.08)
% Poverty	-0.87*** (0.20)	0.99*** (0.20)	-0.73*** (0.15)	0.76*** (0.17)
% White	0.02 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.18*** (1.36)	-0.17** (0.06)
2002	-5.69*** (1.55)	5.34*** (1.52)	-2.26 (1.43)	3.24** (1.58)
2004	-10.16*** (1.41)	10.13*** (1.38)	-0.41 (1.32)	0.86 (1.46)
2006	-9.43*** (1.69)	9.76*** (1.66)	-4.20** (1.47)	4.30** (1.63)
2008	-6.65*** (1.94)	6.32*** (1.90)	-4.33** (1.38)	3.28* (1.53)
Adj. R ²	.621	.622	.765	.728
n of cases	278	278	203	203

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 3: Impact of Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Share in Lower Chambers in Leaning Republican States, 2002 – 2010.

	Indiana Repub Vote	Indiana Dem Vote	Kansas Repub Vote	Kansas Dem Vote	Michigan Repub Vote	Michigan Dem Vote	Minnesota Repub Vote	Minnesota Dem Voter
Minor Dummy	-1.06 (1.15)	-3.54** (1.16)	-3.73** (1.25)	-1.21 (1.27)	-1.83* (0.90)	-1.30 (0.89)	-4.16*** (0.81)	-3.50*** (0.02)
Dem Incumbent	-9.07*** (1.35)	9.36*** (1.36)	13.32*** (1.40)	13.69*** (1.42)	-10.68*** (1.04)	10.87*** (1.03)	-8.77*** (0.85)	10.51*** (0.85)
Rep Incumbent	7.58*** (1.44)	-7.40*** (1.45)	6.24*** (1.17)	-5.96*** (1.19)	10.83*** (1.06)	-10.58*** (1.05)	8.21*** (0.85)	-6.79*** (0.86)
Education	0.13 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.07)	0.013 (0.06)	0.001 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.27*** (0.04)	0.24*** (0.04)
% Poverty	-0.62*** (0.13)	0.62*** (0.13)	-0.33** (0.12)	0.34** (0.12)	-0.52*** (0.12)	0.51*** (0.12)	-0.66*** (0.07)	0.60*** (0.07)
% White	0.31*** (0.03)	-0.32*** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.04)	-0.15*** (0.04)	0.45*** (0.03)	-0.46*** (0.03)	0.32*** (0.02)	-0.31*** (0.02)
2002	-1.26 (1.47)	2.03 (1.47)	-7.41*** (1.59)	7.21*** (1.62)	-3.63** (1.31)	4.14** (1.30)	-1.88* (0.94)	2.16* (0.95)
2004	-2.90* (1.38)	3.37* (1.39)	-5.56*** (1.56)	5.66*** (1.59)	-5.20*** (1.31)	5.52*** (1.30)	-5.26*** (0.91)	5.58*** (0.92)
2006	-7.34*** (1.37)	7.56*** (1.38)	-8.71*** (1.46)	9.07*** (1.49)	-10.13*** (1.33)	10.36*** (1.33)	-7.29*** (0.91)	7.79*** (0.92)
2008	-7.05*** (1.37)	7.46*** (1.38)	-6.57*** (1.44)	6.51*** (1.47)	-8.95*** (1.32)	8.99*** (1.31)	-5.03*** (0.89)	5.06*** (0.90)
Adj. R ²	.706	.714	.551	.540	.761	.766	.749	.736
n of cases	310	310	333	333	530	530	652	652

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 4: Impact of Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Share in Lower Chambers in Leaning Democratic States, 2002 – 2010.

	CA Rep Vote	CA Dem Vote	CO Rep Vote	CO Dem Vote	CT Rep Vote	CT Dem Vote	ME Rep Vote	ME Dem Vote	NY Rep Vote	NY Dem Vote	OR Rep Vote	OR Dem Vote
Minor Dummy	-3.9** (1.04)	-1.2 (1.03)	-1.1** (0.23)	0.11 (0.22)	0.3 (0.88)	-3.7** (0.90)	-14** (1.25)	-4.8** (1.19)	-0.01 (0.93)	-4.6** (0.93)	-2.7* (1.43)	-1.1 (1.41)
Dem Incumbent	-9.5** (1.11)	9.9** (1.1)	-5.9** (1.26)	6.3** (1.23)	-6.8** (0.90)	6.9** (0.92)	-8.9** (0.9)	8.9** (0.85)	-9.8** (0.99)	11.2** (1.0)	-9.6** (1.55)	9.8** (1.52)
Rep Incumbent	11.2** (1.27)	-11** (1.26)	8.0** (1.33)	-7.4** (1.31)	13.1** (1.08)	-13** (1.1)	10.4** (1.0)	-10** (0.91)	13.0** (1.13)	-12** (1.14)	8.2** (1.39)	-8.0** (1.37)
Education	-1.0** (0.07)	0.97** (0.07)	-0.9** (0.07)	0.9** (0.07)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.1 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.4** (0.04)	0.4** (0.04)	-0.8** (0.08)	0.8** (0.08)
% Poverty	-1.0** (0.11)	0.97** (0.11)	-0.6** (0.12)	0.6** (0.12)	0.3* (0.11)	0.23* (0.12)	-0.05 (0.09)	0.03 (0.08)	-0.6** (0.07)	0.6** (0.07)	-0.6** (0.15)	0.6** (0.15)
% White	0.4** (0.04)	-0.4** (0.04)	0.5** (0.04)	-0.5** (0.04)	0.3** (0.03)	-0.3** (0.03)	0.3* (0.14)	-0.3* (0.13)	0.3** (0.02)	-0.3** (0.02)	0.3** (0.05)	-0.3** (0.05)
2002	2.8 (1.46)	-2.49 (1.44)	1.7 (1.71)	-1.2 (1.68)	-1.1 (0.98)	1.2 (1.0)			-1.8 (1.11)	2.7* (1.11)	-0.1 (1.76)	-0.1 (1.73)
2004	1.1 (1.43)	-0.9 (1.41)	-1.8 (1.63)	2.5 (1.6)	-4.5** (1.03)	5.0** (1.1)	-5.3** (1.03)	4.9** (0.97)	-4.8** (1.11)	5.1** (1.12)	-4.1* (1.77)	3.9* (1.75)
2006	-1.1 (1.44)	1.2 (1.42)	-4.0* (1.61)	4.7** (1.58)	-7.4** (1.0)	7.1** (1.0)	-7.1** (1.03)	7.2** (0.98)	-6.0** (1.10)	6.6** (1.10)	-5.7** (1.66)	5.6** (1.63)
2008	-3.8** (1.44)	3.3* (1.42)	-4.1** (1.56)	4.7** (1.53)	-7.1** (1.0)	6.9** (1.03)	-7.9** (1.06)	7.1** (1.0)	-5.7** (1.11)	6.5** (1.11)	-4.6** (1.79)	4.7** (1.76)
Adj. R ²	.739	.749	.705	.709	.774	.758	.536	.497	.862	.867	.699	.696
n of cases	371	371	258	258	480	480	558	558	517	517	229	229

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 5: Impact of Specific Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Shares in Strong Republican States, 2002 – 2010.

	FL Rep Vote	FL Dem Vote	ID Rep Vote	ID Dem Vote	TX Rep Vote	TX Dem Vote	UT Rep Vote	UT Dem Vote
Libertarian	0.71 (1.82)	-4.49** (1.81)	-3.30* (1.75)	-0.56 (1.74)	-2.62** (1.03)	-0.25 (1.02)	-0.60 (1.92)	-2.24 (1.97)
Green	-3.94 (4.33)	-0.12 (4.31)			-6.28 (3.89)	2.55 (3.86)		
Other Conservative			-12.0** (3.2)	7.61* (3.17)			-3.11* (1.5)	-1.12 (1.53)
Other	2.06 (2.18)	-5.65** (2.18)	-4.68 (2.72)	-0.28 (2.7)			-0.96 (2.71)	-1.89 (2.78)
Adj. R ²	.471	.499	.631	.623	.681	.688	.580	.574
n of cases	245	245	197	197	325	325	271	271

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

N of races with each party: **Florida:** Libertarian/Tea Party = 41; Green = 4; Other: No Party Affiliation = 17 / **Idaho:** Libertarian = 21; Conservative = 5; Other = 7 / **Texas:** Libertarian = 129; Green = 4 / **Utah:** Libertarian = 33; Other Conservative: Constitution = 66; Other = 16

Table 6: Impact of Specific Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Shares in Strong Democratic States, 2002 – 2010.

	Mass Rep Vote	Mass Dem Vote	Rhode Island Rep Vote	Rhode Island Dem Vote
Libertarian	-9.83** (2.88)	6.3* (2.76)	-16.47** (6.74)	13.16 (7.34)
Green	-8.47* (3.89)	-1.28 (3.74)	-9.75 (6.45)	4.24 (7.02)
Independent			-7.45** (1.45)	-5.54** (1.58)
Other	-5.56** (1.59)	-3.74* (1.53)	-11.93** (4.6)	2.70 (5.0)
Adj. R ²	.617	.635	.764	.738
n of cases	278	278	203	203

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

N of races with each party: **Massachusetts:** Libertarian = 10; Green = 5; Other: Unenrolled/Independent = 38 / **Rhode Island:** Libertarian = 1; Green = 1; Independent = 23; Other = 2

Table 7: Impact of Specific Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Shares in Leaning Republican States, 2002 – 2010.

	Indiana Rep Vote	Indiana Dem Vote	Kansas Rep Vote	Kansas Dem Vote	Michigan Rep Vote	Michigan Dem Vote	Minnesota Rep Vote	Minnesota Dem Vote
Libertarian	-0.95 (1.21)	-3.33** (1.21)	-3.11* (1.34)	-1.05 (1.36)	1.27 (1.05)	-3.74** (1.04)		
Green					-5.96** (2.01)	3.91* (1.34)	-3.39** (1.46)	-3.56** (0.91)
Independent	-0.94 (2.85)	-5.08 (2.85)						
Independence							-3.9** (0.91)	-3.08* (1.45)
Other			-4.62 (2.73)	-3.98 (2.77)	-5.06** (1.34)	1.53 (1.34)	-2.18 (2.61)	-4.54 (2.61)
Adj. R ²	.705	.715	.549	.541	.769	.772	.747	.737
n of cases	310	310	333	333	530	530	652	652

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

N of races with each party: **Indiana**: Libertarian = 54; Independent = 8 / **Kansas**: Libertarian = 52; Other = 11 / **Michigan**: Libertarian = 107; Green = 24; Other = 56 / **Minnesota**: Green = 28; Independence = 79; Other = 8

Table 8: Impact of Specific Minor Party Candidates on Major Party Vote Shares in Leaning Democratic States, 2002 – 2010.

	CA Rep Vote	CA Dem Vote	CO Rep Vote	CO Dem Vote	CT Rep Vote	CT Dem Vote	ME Rep Vote	ME Dem Vote	NY Rep Vote	NY Dem Vote	OR Rep Vote	OR Dem Vote
Libertarian	-3.6** (1.1)	-0.9 (1.1)	-4.7** (1.5)	0.5 (1.4)	-0.06 (1.6)	-1.5 (1.6)					0.8 (1.8)	-4.2** (1.6)
Green	-1.7 (2.2)	-3.4 (2.2)					-16** (1.5)	-3.1* (1.4)	-1.5 (2.0)	-2.8 (2.0)		
Working Families					0.32 (1.2)	-2.5* (1.2)			1.6 (2.0)	-6.7** (2.0)		
Independent					3.9* (1.9)	-8.7** (1.9)	-9.6** (2.1)	-8.3** (1.98)	-0.7 (1.6)	-6.0** (1.6)	-2.2 (6.0)	-0.2 (5.9)
Other Conserv.									-2.8* (1.3)	-1.1 (1.3)	-5.8* (2.5)	2.7 (2.4)
Liberal									-1.2 (3.0)	-3.1 (3.0)		
Other	-1.63 (2.4)	-1.33 (2.4)	-2.3 (2.5)	0.3 (2.4)	-0.3 (1.7)	-5.1** (1.7)			4.9** (1.95)	-6.0** (2.0)	-10.1* (4.2)	4.7 (4.1)
Adj. R ²	.737	.749	.704	.708	.775	.767	.540	.500	.864	.870	.703	.704
n of cases	371	371	258	258	480	480	558	558	517	517	229	229

* p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

N of races with each party: **California**: Libertarian = 114; Green = 17; Other: Peace & Freedom = 15 / **Colorado**: Libertarian = 52; Other = 12 / **Connecticut**: Libertarian/Christian Center = 22; Working Families = 39; Independent = 16; Other = 20 / **Maine**: Green = 36; Independent = 18 / **New York**: Green = 20; Working Families = 17; Independent = 28; Liberal = 9; Other = 19; Other Conservative: Conservative = 43 / **Oregon**: Libertarian = 34; Independent = 2; Other Conservative: Constitution = 13; Other = 4