

Why New Political Parties Sizzle or Fizzle

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Across the globe, new political parties, from green parties to anti-immigration parties, are constantly emerging in democratic countries. But while some of these nascent single-issue groups fade away, others, often to great surprise, capture the electorate's heart, winning significant victories at the polls.

What determines the trajectory of niche parties? The answer, says Assistant Professor of Political Science Bonnie Meguid in her new book, *Party Competition between Unequals*, lies not so much in the parties themselves or in the inherent popularity of the issues they champion. Rather, says Meguid, the success or failure of small, single-issue political parties is largely determined by how established political parties respond to these less powerful competitors.

Combining statistical analyses with in-depth case studies from Western Europe, Meguid shows that dominant parties deliberately employ a wide range of strategies to undermine niche parties or to turn them into weapons against their mainstream party opponents. Focusing on these strategies offers a new theory of party competition, one that Meguid argues better explains the fate of new parties than conventional analysis of a country's socioeconomic climate or its electoral institutions.

For example, when the Green Party in Great Britain won 14.9 percent of the vote in the 1989 European Parliament elections, both the Labour and Conservative parties reacted by trying to be as "green" as possible to win back environmentally concerned voters. Eventually Labour was able to steal the thunder of the Green Party by co-opting its issue, leading to the

Green Party's steady decline in future national and European elections.

But, says Meguid, major political parties do not always work to undermine their smaller opponents. Parties sometimes follow the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." She cites the 2000 U.S. presidential election as a case in point. With most votes cast for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader coming from Democratic ranks, the Republican Leadership Council actually paid for and ran pro-Nader television ads highlighting Nader's environmental record. Founded on the idea that "a vote for Nader is a vote for Bush," the Republican's strategy turned the niche Green Party into a weapon against the Democratic competition and tipped the election to the Republicans.

Could a third party again play a swing role in the upcoming U.S. presidential election? Perhaps, muses Meguid, but this time the tables could be turned. With the help of the Democrats, Libertarian nominee Bob Barr may woo enough Republican voters to become the "king maker" for the Democratic candidate.

Provided by University of Rochester

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