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Elections With Three Viable Candidates

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Elections With Three Viable Candidates

Has there ever been an election with three viable candidates?

Several elections in U.S. history had more than two strong candidates. One of them occurred in 1912, when any one of three contenders could have won the White House: Woodrow Wilson (who received 42 percent of the vote), Theodore Roosevelt (27 percent), and William Howard Taft (23 percent) all made a respectable showing. Well, in Taft's case it was not exactly respectable; Taft's last place finish is the only time in American history that the incumbent came in third on Election Day.

Another trio had a shot in the contentious Election of 1800. Two Democratic-Republicans, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, came in tied with 73 Electoral votes apiece, while incumbent president John Adams, the Federalist candidate, had a respectable 65 votes. The problem arose because Burr had agreed to be Jefferson's vice president, but Burr thought better of it when he did surprisingly well in the College. When Burr refused to step aside, the election was thrown into the House of Representatives. Anything could have happened, but 36 ballots later, Hamilton's deal-making swung the election to Jefferson.

Now, there have been elections in which third and fourth candidates, while not themselves viable, had a huge impact on the outcome nevertheless. Take the election of 1824. John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, William Crawford, and Henry Clay were all competing for the prize. Counting just the popular votes, Jackson should have won handily; he received 42 percent of the vote; next was Adams with 32 percent; Crawford and Clay each came in with 13 percent. But because none of the four candidates received a majority in the Electoral College, the contest was thrown into the House of Representatives. There, following the provisions of the 12th Amendment, the House considered only the top three candidates who received the most Electoral College votes. That rule eliminated Clay from the running (who had come in fourth in the Electoral College). The Great Compromiser threw his support to Adams. That had a huge impact. For the 12th Amendment stipulates that each state -- no matter how many representatives in its delegation -- will vote as a single unit; a simple majority determines which candidate gets that state's single vote. So little Rhode Island's single vote counts as much as mighty New York's. Clay's support gave Adams several states (i.e., several votes), and the Massachusetts scion won by 5 votes, receiving the support of 13 states in the House, to Jackson's 7. The outcome was totally at variance with what had happened in the popular vote.

(Question from WUOM listener [Ann Arbor, MI])

