

# A Pizza Problem: Why Those Third Party Polls Don't Pan Out

According to a recent survey conducted by NBC News and GenForward, 71% of millennials believe America needs a third political party. That sentiment varies with race, sex, and current party affiliation, but holds strong majorities in every demographic.

There's nothing particularly new here. In every presidential election, pluralities or majorities say they're "willing to vote for" or "interested in seeing" a third party candidate. In between, pluralities or majorities proclaim the "need" for a third party.

That excites third party activists like me (I'm a long-time Libertarian). But in election after election, the actual voting returns Republicans and Democrats to Congress and the White House.

Why? For part of the answer, consider pizza toppings.

According to a 2011 Point of Sale survey by Brian Roemmele, pepperoni accounts for 36% of topping orders. That leaves 64% as a "different topping" market which could presumably out-sell pepperoni.

But there's a problem: Customers don't agree on what that different topping should be. 14% order sausage, 11% prefer mushrooms, 8% just want cheese. Tomatoes, peppers, and anchovies account for 2% each. 64% of customers want something other than pepperoni on their pizzas. But they don't want the SAME something.

Think of the Republicans and Democrats as the pepperoni of politics — and consider the fact that in politics, when a bunch of people put in their various orders (that is, vote in an election), only the pizza with the most popular topping actually gets made. Everyone else goes hungry.

Many, maybe most, Americans want a third political party. But some of them want it to be a party of the left and some of the right, while still others want a centrist party or are obsessed with different sides of single issues (like abortion or guns or drugs).

Plurality or majority support for a generic third party in principle is not the same thing as plurality or majority support for a specific third party in the voting booth.

In practice, most voters who say they want a third party end up voting Republican or Democrat, or just not voting. Why?

Perhaps they can't find a third party they agree with any more than they agree with the

Democrats or Republicans.

Or maybe they find a third party they like, but fear-mongering supporters of the “lesser evil” variety of pepperoni convince them that their preferred party can’t win and that the “greater evil” pepperoni type absolutely must be defeated.

Or, as too often happens, the pepperoni lobby makes it difficult or impossible for the restaurant to even put anchovies on the menu. Er, that is, major party legislators pass “ballot access” laws to exclude the option of voting for third party candidates.

Is it impossible for third party candidates to win elections? No. They often do at the local level and occasionally for state legislature or Congress. But it’s a tough row to hoe.

For a new party to consistently get into the winner’s circle, voters are going to have to coalesce around something more specific than “something else.” Hopefully, that something else will be freedom.