ISSUE CO-OPTATION: A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AGENDA-SETTING ROLE OF MINOR PARTIES IN THE AMERICAN TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

The story about the flow of issue ideas between the American major and minor political parties is very incomplete. Most scholars assume that the minor parties provide ideas to the major political parties, who periodically co-opt their platform planks for incorporation into their own platforms. However, because of the minor parties’ lack of electoral success, they are rarely studied in a systematic fashion, and the subject of issue co-optations has been woefully neglected. This dissertation systematically studies the flow of policy positions and ideas between major and minor political parties over the course of American history from 1840 to 2004 through an extensive content analysis of party platform positions. It documents the co-optation of minor party policy ideas by the major political parties and using multivariate analysis, accounts for variations in co-optations by employing such theoretically-relevant variables as the specific major and minor political parties, the major parties’ competitive position, the time period (especially before and after the Progressive reforms of the early 1900s), and the stage of the electoral cycle.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Which American political party was the first to demand that the government end slavery? Which was the first to insist that women receive the right to vote? To introduce the idea of international arbitration into the national policy arena? To demand that men and women in the United States should receive equal pay for equal work? To insist that all men should receive one day's rest out of every seven calendar days? To pioneer the idea of social security? To demand that the voting age be lowered to eighteen years of age? One would probably think that these important equal rights, labor and foreign policy issues were initiated in the United States by one of the two major parties. However, in each case, an American minor party was the first to introduce these fundamental policy items into the national political arena in the United States.

The preceding paragraph documents just a few of the innovative ideas that started out as policy planks on the national platforms of the minor political parties in the United States. One of the main problems associated with these novel political and social initiatives when they are first introduced into the national discourse during the competitive presidential campaign season is that they are attached to political parties that simply do not win elections. Except for the pre-Civil War Republican Party, the electoral success of the minor political parties, in general, has been very poor. A minor party has not risen to major party status and won a national presidential election since 1860.
A few simple descriptive statistics clearly illustrate the sub par electoral performance of these American minor parties. Only thirteen minor parties or independent candidates have amassed more than 5% of the presidential popular vote total since the beginning of presidential elections in America. Ross Perot and his Reform Party in 1996 was the last minor party to accomplish this feat. In regards to the all-important electoral vote, only 10 minor party or independent candidates have ever received any electoral votes. The most successful minor party in regards to the electoral vote was the Southern Democrats, which split from the Democratic Party in 1860. The Southern Democrats received 72 out of the 303 electoral votes that were available. To put that electoral total into perspective, besides the pre-Civil War Republican Party, which soon became a major party, the most successful minor party had only about one-half of the electoral votes necessary to win the national presidential election.

The second most successful minor party in regards to electoral votes received by any minor party or independent candidate in the United States occurred in 1912 when the Progressive Party, which was led by Theodore Roosevelt, received 88 out of the 531 up for grabs. The 1912 Progressives received approximately one-third of the electoral votes necessary to win. None of the other 8 minor parties that received electoral votes were able to come close to the success that the 1860 Southern Democrats and the 1912 Progressives were able to achieve.¹

Based on this historical data, it is pretty apparent that the minor parties have had no realistic chance of winning a national election in the United States. Since this is the case, one would presume that if an issue is going to receive its widest audience and have

¹ The electoral vote totals were obtained from http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/index.html.
a good chance of being enacted into law, it has to become a part of one of the major parties’ agendas. In other words, the major parties are the central gate-keepers or agenda-setters when it comes to the ideas that will be debated on the national stage during the presidential election season. The major political parties in the United States can decide to either open the gate and include an issue in the national discussion or close the gate and ignore an agenda item, effectively relegating that issue to obscurity in regards to the presidential contestation.

With all of that being said, it would appear that these inventive policy ideas proposed by the minor parties in the United States do not have a viable political vehicle by which they can be implemented. If these new political ideas are being touted and endorsed by minor parties, which do not really have the ability to win national elections, then one would probably think that these minor party policy ideas have no real chance of gaining a national audience and being translated into law.

Nevertheless, remaining in political obscurity is not always the fate of these minor party policy planks. Sometimes one or even both of the major American parties co-opt or take ownership of the minor parties’ agenda item thereby allowing it the opportunity to gain national exposure, which could eventually result in it being enacted into law. This political phenomenon is called issue co-optation.
Issue Co-optation Defined

Co-optation as defined by Philip Selznick “is the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence” (1949, 13). The co-optation of issues occurs when one of the political parties places an agenda item on its national platform that was already proposed on another political parties’ national platform during an earlier national convention. Thus, if a political party placed an agenda item on their national platform before another political party, then they are the first to argue in favor of that particular plank. If another political party, for whatever reason, decides to place that agenda item on its national platform in a similar manner then they were not the first to espouse that particular plank.

So, as defined in this study, an agenda item was co-opted from another party’s national platform no matter what the adopting party’s intentions might have been. Co-opting an issue from another party, in some cases, might be conscious and intentional and, in other cases, it might be completely unintentional and accidental. Nevertheless, a co-optation in this dissertation only addresses who was the first to introduce the idea into the political debate via their national platform. When the minor parties introduce a political or social solution into the national discourse and at least one of the major parties adds that issue to its own national platform after it was initially proposed by the minor party then it appears as if the minor parties, in essence, have found a way to agenda-set for the main political agenda-setters.
Agenda-setting

Agenda-setting is a multi-faceted research area that according to Rogers and Dearing can be differentiated into three distinct categories according to the source of agenda-setting in politics: media agenda-setting, public agenda-setting and policy agenda-setting (1988). The primary actors in the media agenda-setting research are the news media, polling agencies and the entertainment media (Soroka 2002, 11). The main actors in the public agenda-setting literature are interest groups, family/groups/friends, and issue publics (Soroka 2002, 11). The policy agenda-setters are considered to be the President or Prime Minister, the Lower House, the Upper House, Committees, bureaucracy and political parties (Soroka 2002, 11). This dissertation project specifically deals with the policy agenda-setting segment of this large body of academic research and accordingly will briefly review that specific area of agenda-setting literature.

Cobb and Elder suggest that the study of policy agenda-setting is an attempt to determine how “an issue or a demand becomes or fails to become the focus of concern and interest within a polity” (1971, 903 – 904). A year later Cobb and Elder produced a follow-up work concentrating on how public opinion combined with the media help to influence and determine the importance of issues on the national and state policy agendas (1972). From that point, there were several scholarly undertakings revolving around the media and policy agendas (e.g., Gilberg at al. 1980; Pritchard 1986, 1992; Wanta et al. 1989). There were also several research studies investigating the relationship between policy and public agenda-setting (e.g., Flickinger 1983; Mayer 1991; Page and Shapiro 1983). One study has attempted to analyze the relationship between all three segments of
the agenda-setting literature by studying the rise and fall of a series of issues in Canada (Soroka 2002).

Since this particular research project revolves around American major and minor political parties, the scholarly literature under which this study fits most easily is called inter-policy agenda-setting (Soroka 2002, 8). That is because major political parties are significant players in the policy agenda-setting process. Minor political parties are less significant and dominant than the major political parties, but they are political parties nonetheless and have historically been an important part of the political fabric of the United States.

Although many scholars have ceded an agenda-setting or issue incubation role to the minor parties, to this point in time, it does not appear that there have been any comprehensive, systematic studies on the flow of issues between the major and minor political parties in the United States. However, there have been studies investigating the agenda-setting process in regards to the American president and the Congress (Andrade and Young 1996), and, also, the political parties and the corresponding policymakers in Britain (Kaye 1994). In addition, there have been several research studies analyzing the relationship between policy and inter-policy agenda-setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995). This research study will help to fill the gap in the literature in regards to inter-policy agenda-setting revolving around how ideas flow between the major and minor political parties in the United States.
THE PRESENT STUDY

This present study is an extensive analysis of the agenda-setting role of the American minor parties via the major party co-optation of their issues. This issue co-optation strategy is by no means a new political phenomenon in the United States because it started occurring shortly after the initiation of national party platforms in 1840. The interesting fact about these issue co-optations is that even with such a long history, they have always been and in many cases continue to be an understudied political phenomenon in the academic and political arenas. However, this does not mean that all of the cases of issue co-optation in the United States have been trivial and inconsequential. That is because there have been conspicuous cases of issue co-optation that have occurred throughout American history. To illustrate this point, here is an extended quote from David Mazmanian listing some prominent examples of minor party national platform issues that eventually ended up on the national platforms of at least one of the two major political parties in the United States.

“The slavery restriction and internal improvement themes of the Free Soil party of 1848 and 1852 were seized by the Republican Party in 1856, and both became public policy under the Republican administration of the 1860s. Progressive taxation, regulation of railroads, child labor laws, and social insurance were ideas introduced into the political dialogue by Socialists, Farmer-Laborites, Progressives, and Populists...Third parties have been particularly prominent in battles over suffrage and election reform. Long before such ideas were accepted by the major parties, the Populists, Progressives, and Socialists were advocating the direct election of U.S. Senators, women’s suffrage, the recall and referendum, primary elections, and corrupt practice legislation, most of which were enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,” (1974, 81-82).
Since there are so many well-known cases of issue co-optation by the major political parties, scholars seem to be in agreement that the major parties have periodically adopted minor party issues throughout history. Nevertheless, the literature on issue co-optations is very sparse. Political scientists have not spent a lot of energy and ink delving into this political phenomenon. There are quite a few books that have short lists of prominent cases of issue appropriations that have occurred throughout American history; however, there was not a specific, systematic study of issue co-optations. In most cases when scholars feel as if the subject has to be discussed, they simply state that issue appropriations have occurred during different times throughout history and they quickly move on to another subject. More than 160 years have passed since the inauguration of the national platform and the reality is that, up to this point, no one really knows much about issue co-optations beyond the observation that it does occur periodically. With that being said, this present study will start out by systematically testing this major presumption in the political parties’ area of study about issue co-optations and after that it will address a series of research questions that will begin to fill in this large gap in the political parties’ literature.
Research Questions

Section 1 – The frequency of co-optation and the factors that affect it

Research Question 1: Do major parties co-opt the issue positions of minor parties?

The first research question will systematically determine whether the presumption that major parties in the United States do periodically co-opt minor party issues is correct. In other words, do major parties place issues that were initially proposed by the minor parties on their national platforms? If the answer is yes, and it is unmistakable that it will be, then it will be necessary to attempt to establish the relative significance of this issue co-optation phenomenon by calculating how frequently these minor party issues have been co-opted. The overall issue co-optation percentage, which will be the answer to research question 2, will offer a look at how often the major parties employed this issue co-optation strategy over the course of history and at particular times.

Research Question 2: How frequently are minor party platform issues co-opted by the major parties throughout American history?

The time period that is covered in this issue co-optation dataset encompasses over 160 years of American history. And as everyone knows, there have been many social, technological, economic and legal changes and advances that have occurred between the years 1840 and 2004. With that being said, the rest of this section is going to introduce
several research questions that will attempt to determine whether certain electoral and party era changes have caused any variation in the frequency of major party issue co-optations.

*Research Question 3:* Which party era produced the highest percentage of major party issue co-optations?

There is a lot of debate about the number of party eras that have occurred in the United States up to this point in time, but since this analysis is not really about party eras, the decision was made to simply employ the party systems that are generally agreed upon by most scholars.² With that being said, here are the party eras that will be utilized to answer the third research question along with their corresponding years: the second party era – 1840 to 1856, the third party era – 1860 to 1892, the fourth party era – 1896 to 1928, the fifth party era – 1932 to 1964, the sixth party era – 1968 to the present. Most of the party eras in this analysis are 32 years long except for the second and sixth. The second party system is not 32 years long because the Democratic Party instituted the national platform in 1840, which was in the middle of the 2nd party era. The sixth party era is longer than 32 years because it spans from 1968 to 2004. When scholars begin to coalesce around the idea that a seventh party system has begun, then the dataset will be modified to take into account that updated information.

² “Scholars generally agree that there have been five party systems: 1789-1828; 1828-1860; 1860-1896; 1896-1932; and 1932 to the present. The 1828, 1860, 1896, and 1932 critical elections, it is argued, mark the beginning of new party systems because each brought about a reshuffling of the political cleavages between the parties and a redefinition of the issues that dominated political discourse” (Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus 1984, 144). Whether 1968 is a critical election or not is still somewhat in dispute; however, it will be employed as the start of the sixth party system in this analysis.
Research Question 4: Did the Progressive reforms cause a decrease in the frequency of issue co-optations in the United States?

The basic argument behind this Progressive reform research question is that minor political party activity in the United States was very lively and enthusiastic during the years before the Progressive reforms and politicians had to periodically utilize the co-optation strategy to quell these zealous minor political party threats. The general state of the pre-Progressive reform minor parties is captured nicely by Michael Kazin in The Populist Persuasion: An American History.

“Third parties were common if not respectable features of the frenzied political landscape of the late nineteenth century, which featured lavish pageants and the highest voter participation in American history. For two decades, critics of the Democrats and Republicans had been contesting national, state, and local elections under a diversity of banners: Prohibition, Greenback, Anti-Monopoly, Labor Reform, Union Labor, United Labor, Workingmen, and hundreds of local and state Independent parties whose very name denoted repudiation of the rules of the electoral game. Established politicians had grown accustomed to deploying whatever linguistic and legal weapons were needed – ridicule, repression, co-optation – to swat down these disjointed but persistently fractious challengers,” (1995, 27).

But then the Progressive reforms

“which included adopting the secret ballot, implementing personal registration and ballot access laws, and moving to direct popular election of senators and presidential electors, installed unprecedented obstacles to third-party participation in elections. Combined with the changes that accompanied industrialization, urbanization, and state building, the reforms brought the vibrant third-party activity of the 1900s virtually to an end,” (Disch 2002, 13).
So, the argument is that after a series of Progressive reforms like the Australian ballot and direct primaries were implemented, the political value of the minor political parties in the United States began to change. This change in the political landscape is important for this project because those Progressive reforms more than likely negatively affected the agenda-setting role that the minor parties had forged for themselves through issue co-optation. As Epstein (1986) argues in *Political parties in the American mold*, the Progressive reforms made the major political parties more open to issues and ambitious candidates thereby reducing the need for the “safety valve” role of the minor political parties.

*Research Question 5:* Did the 5% threshold for matching funds cause a change in the frequency and importance of issue co-optations?

If the incidences of major party co-optations decreased after the Progressive reforms, then it is very possible that the frequency of major party co-optations increased after the 5% threshold for federal campaign support was instituted during the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA). One could posit that FECA has given the minor parties a target to strive for, besides winning the presidential election. Evidence that this is the case is that one of the goals of the 2000 Green Party was to reach that 5% presidential popular vote threshold, so that it could receive federal funding in 2004 (Bibby and Maisel 2003, 8). Consequently, because of FECA, the voters that are sympathetic to a minor party might decide to vote for that minor party to ensure that it has funding for the subsequent presidential election. If this is the case, the major parties
might have found it to be in their best interest to employ the issue co-optation strategy more often than they did after the onset of the Progressive reforms in order to capture these minor party voters and quell the rising threat of the determined minor political parties.

Section 2 – What is the timing of the co-optations?

An issue co-optation, as defined in this study, can occur during the same election year that it was initially placed on a party’s national platform. For instance, the Socialist Party held their national convention in May 12-18, 1912. The Republican Party released their national platform on June 18, 1912 and the Democratic Party released their national platform on June 25, 1912. If either the Republican or Democratic Party in 1912 placed one of the 1912 Socialist Party’s original platform planks on its national platform, then it was considered to be a co-optation. Or an issue co-optation can occur during any national presidential election after it was initially proposed. There are no time limitations as to when these issue adoptions can take place. So, answering research questions about the timing of issue co-optations will be an important step in beginning to understand when these issue appropriations take place. Here is the first research question in this section about the timing of issue co-optations.

Research Question 6: What is the timeline between the minor party proposing a platform issue and the subsequent usurpation by one of the major parties.
There is a new theory about the demise of “significant” third parties in the United States called the dynamic of third parties (Rapaport and Stone 2005). This new theory about the timing of major party issue co-optations deals specifically with the most important or “significant” minor political parties and it will be investigated in research question 7.

*Research Question 7*: Will at least one of the two major parties *co-opt* the significant minor party’s issues *one election* after it received at least 5% of the presidential popular vote?

The dynamic of third parties theory is an attempt to explain why significant minor parties rarely remain prominent the election after their successful, in minor party terms, presidential election season. The theory basically states that a third party that threatens the two major parties by receiving at least 5% of the presidential popular vote during the previous election will not remain viable enough to threaten the major parties again during the following presidential election (Rapaport and Stone 2005, 4-6). The 5% threshold was taken from Walter Dean Burnham’s (1970) definition of a successful minor party. The idea is that the 5% cut-off point is a good indication that a political realignment is occurring and there are new issues in the country that the political parties are not addressing. Burnham suggests that the 5% threshold indicates that the minor party housing the new ideas and coalitions has now become strong enough that they must finally be addressed by the major parties and the country.

The causal mechanism behind this dynamic of third parties theory is that before the next presidential election, one of the major parties will court the voters from the
successful minor party by proposing to espouse their all-important issue or issues if those voters will cast a ballot for the major party instead of the minor party. A portion of the minor parties’ voting coalition switches from the minor party to the major party in an effort to give their issue a better chance of being implemented, which means that they have effectively taken away support from the significant minor party. When the next presidential election rolls around, the once significant minor political party has lost electoral support and is no longer able to remain politically relevant (Rapaport and Stone 2005, 4-6).

“In order for such a movement as Perot’s to have a lasting impact on the two-party system, its policy agenda must attract the attention of one or both parties. This is the signaling function of third parties alluded to by such scholars as Mazmanian, Burnham, and Sundquist. The general logic is simple: the third party succeeds by tapping a constituency motivated by concerns that the major parties are not representing. By its success, it signals to the major parties the availability of the constituency in future elections. The major party that is best able to make a credible appeal to the constituency (or the party – perhaps the minority party – with the strongest incentive to make the appeal) actively bids for the third-party backers’ support in the interelection period” (2005, 11-12).

The last research question in this section about the timing of issue co-optations revolves around the electoral cycle and party eras. Since there generally are major shifts in party coalitions during critical or realigning elections, then it is possible that there will be an increase in issue co-optations during the critical elections. With that being said, here is the eighth research question.

*Research Question 8:* Is there an increase in the major party co-optations of minor party issues during the critical elections as the party coalitions shift?
From that point, the issue co-optation frequencies will be compared between party eras as defined on pages 12-13. This information will help determine in which party era the minor political parties were most successful in setting the agenda for the major parties.

Research Question 9: Which minor party in each party era was the most successful in having their issue stances co-opted by at least one of the major parties?

Answering this research question will shed light on which individual minor political parties in the United States had the highest percentage of issues that were co-opted by the major political parties in each party era. Once this information is obtained, it will be necessary to delve into these successful minor political parties more thoroughly to discover why so many of their national platform issues ended up on the major party platforms.

Section 3 – Which major party co-opts?

Once the timing of the major party issue co-optations has been systematically established, then the next set of research questions will revolve around which major party co-opts.
Research Question 10: Is the dominant or first major party more likely to ignore a minor party platform plank than the second major party? And is the second major party more likely to co-opt a minor party platform plank than the dominant or first major party?

There are two basic reasons why the less dominant major party in a two-party system is more likely to co-opt a minor party agenda item than the dominant major party. The primary reason revolves around the second major party’s attempt to become the first major party. The second reason deals with the less dominant major party’s attempt to quell the threat of the rising third party. The American political system has only two political parties that have a legitimate chance to win national elections and the second major party wants to ensure that it does not fall to third party status. So, the second major party in the United States utilizes issue co-optations strategically to manage and hopefully solve the problem from above, which is overtaking the dominant major party, and at the same time, suppress the third party threat that is potentially rising from below. Issue co-optation seems to be a win-win strategy for the less dominant major party in a two-party system. The next few paragraphs will offer a more complete explanation as to why this is the case.

According to Duverger’s Law, there will only be two electorally-successful political parties in a country were there is a simple-plurality electoral system coupled with single-member districts. The United States fits both of those criteria, which is why it has a two-party electoral system. Throughout American history, there is usually a dominant major party and a less dominant major party. So, the second major party in the United States is, in essence, not that far away from becoming the first major party. The
problem is that the coalition of people that vote for the second major party is not as large as the group of people that vote for the dominant major party. Minor party voters are usually very enthusiastic about their issues, but they also recognize that they are strategically limited in implementing their issues without winning political office. So, adopting minor party issues is a good way for the less dominant major party to begin to sway the third party constituents to come over to its side and vote for the second major party during subsequent elections. The purpose of this strategy is to eventually cause the second major party to become the dominant major party.

If one thinks about the strategy of the first major party in this situation, they already have a winning set of issue stances and they already have a winning coalition of voters. They are already the dominant major party. Co-opting a minor party issue could potentially woo new voters to its side but it could also alienate some of the voters that are already on their side and have established them as the first major party. Based on those constraints, the dominant major party is less likely to co-opt a minor party issue stance than the less dominant major party.

Gaining new voters to win elections is more than likely the main motivation behind the second major party’s use of the issue co-optation strategy. However, co-opting minor party issues also allows the less dominant major party to safeguard its place in the American two-party system. This might not be one of the central reasons as to why the second major party adopts minor party issue stances; nevertheless, the issue co-optation strategy does help the less dominant major party keep at bay a rising minor party competitor. Now, I am going to briefly offer the story of the American political party system utilizing what is perceived to be the best strategy for the dominant and less
dominant major parties in regards to a rising minor party threat. This will illustrate how issue co-optation helps the second major party preserve and defend its place in the American two-party system.

As stated earlier, because of how the electoral laws and voting districts were established in the United States, there are only going to be two political parties that are relevant in America at any particular point in time. In the first party era between 1796 and 1824, the Democratic-Republican Party was the dominant major party and the Federalist Party was the second major party. However, in the first party system, the idea that it was good to have a less dominant major party and that there should periodically be a rotation of political power was not how the political elites thought about the operation of government (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 249). The first major political party wanted to destroy the second major political party and vice versa and this became the fate of the Federalist Party (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 249). The problem with this political process is that before another major party comes on the scene, the dominant major party has to try to “be all things to all people,” which is a very difficult undertaking (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 249).

In the second party era, which was between 1828 and 1856, Martin Van Buren helped to change how the dominant Democrats looked at the less dominant major party, which was the Whig Party (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 252). Martin Van Buren “sought to make Democrats see that their only hope for maintaining the purity of their own principles was to admit the existence of an opposition party” (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 252). In other words, the dominant major party should not try to utterly destroy the less dominant major party, but instead it should allow the
second major party to “represent parts of the society that it could not” (Edwards, Wattenberg and Lineberry 2005, 252). Thus, the dominant major party should not include every position of each and every coalitional group in the United States under its political umbrella. It was the job of the less dominant major party to represent the segment of society that sees issues differently than the constituents that make up the first major political party.

So, in the second party system, the Democratic and Whig parties took their place as the two major political parties in the United States. They had secured their prominent seats of power and political influence in the American two-party system. But, almost immediately, threats to these two major parties’ power began to rise via minor parties. That is because the dominant major party had their winning coalition of voters and the less dominant major party had the group of people that it represented; however, there were parts of the society that felt as if they were not being represented by the two major parties and they wanted their needs and issues to be addressed also. So, how do the major party elites deal with these rising third party threats?

If a minor party threat rises, it is very unlikely that the dominant major party will be removed from being one of the two major parties. Therefore the first major party’s chief threat is the second major party. The immediate threat for the dominant major party is becoming the less influential major party, not losing its place in the American two-party system. Consequently, the first major party’s best strategy in regards to emerging minor party threats is probably to simply ignore the rising third party threat. There is no reason to give the rising minor political party legitimacy and credibility, therefore the first major party is more likely to ignore the minor party issues. So, once again, the first
reason that the dominant major party is less likely to co-opt minor party issues than the 
second major party is that they do not necessarily need new voters because they already 
have a winning electoral coalition. Secondarily, the first major party’s seat in the two-
party system probably will not be at stake if a minor party does happen to become one of 
the major parties.

However, the second major party’s best strategy is not to ignore the third party 
threat, but instead to somehow co-opt the voters of the up and coming minor party, if 
possible. That is because the less powerful major party must ensure that it stops a third 
party from taking its place as one of the two relevant American political parties. If a third 
party was able to become one of the major parties, then more than likely the second or 
less dominant major party would be the major political party that was removed from the 
two-party system. Campaigning, bidding for voters and winning elections are all 
important, but if the second major party becomes irrelevant because it has become a third 
party, then it no longer will have a legitimate chance to win any more elections. Their 
seat of power in the two-party system would have been seized by another. So, the reason 
that issue co-optation is the second party’s best strategy is two-fold. It gives them a 
chance to gain more voters in an attempt to become the dominant major party and 
secondarily, it allows the less dominant major party to quell the threat of rising third party 
competitors.

On the surface, it might appear as if ensuring that the second major party is not 
removed from its seat of power is not an important extra benefit that comes from issue 
co-optation; however, if one takes a closer look at American political history, minor party 
threats should not be taken so lightly because there are dire consequences for the second
major party if the third party threat is not dealt with properly. As the old saying goes, ‘Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it’. With that being said, there are three reasons why the second major party should consider a successful minor party as a threat to their seat of power in the two-party system.

The first reason is that one minor party has already replaced a major political party in the American two-party system and relegated it to political irrelevance. The Whig Party used to be the second major party before the Civil War started. The Republican Party threatened its position in the two-party system and quickly replaced it, becoming the dominant major party in the United States. The Democratic Party was the first major party before the Civil War and their best strategy in regards to the minor party threat was to simply ignore the third party threat. The Whig Party’s best strategy was to co-opt the third party threat since they were the second major party.

In other words, co-opting some of the most salient third party issues would have more than likely allowed the Whig Party to maintain their competitive position in the American two-party system and to survive as a political party. Their coalition of voters would have definitely shifted around because the slave-owning wing of the Whigs would have left the party and the Whig Party would have probably looked more like the Republican Party in 1856. But the Whig’s seat of power would have been maintained because there would have been no overwhelming reason to vote for a minor political party that in general could not win the presidential election when one could, instead, vote for a major party that is espousing the same platform item and could potentially win the election. So, the minor party threat to the second major party is lessened by simply removing the incentive for a certain group of voters to cast a ballot for the minor party.
The second reason that the less dominant major party should take the minor party’s threat to become one of the two major parties seriously is that a rich or famous third party presidential candidate has the potential to sway many American voters to his or her side if an important issue is ignored by the major parties. Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996 is probably the model for this type of third party threat to the two major parties. If one actually retraced the ebb and flow of Perot’s candidacy in 1992, one would discover that in the early stages of the election process, Ross Perot was actually receiving higher poll numbers than both the Democratic and Republican candidates (Zaller and Hunt, 1994-1995). Unfortunately for his prospects, as the election season progressed, the voters started to gradually merge back into the camps of the two major parties (Zaller and Hunt, 1994-1995).

Even though the election did not work out as Perot had hoped, in regards to the future, the dye for another famous and/or wealthy third party candidate has been cast. These types of candidates often have the ability to gain the American electorate’s attention and these types of candidate-centered third party threats could potentially threaten the less dominant major party for their seat in the two-party American system in the future.

The third reason that the less dominant major party should take a third parties’ challenge seriously is because in the early part of the twentieth century, a third party was able to gain more popular and electoral votes than the second major party in a national election. The minor party was the Progressive Party in 1912, and it was led by Theodore Roosevelt. With that being said, if the second major party is not careful and does not strategize properly, it is not out of the realm of possibility that a rich and/or famous
independent or minor party candidate could establish and develop a political organization that could potentially displace the weaker major party as one of the two major parties, which happened to be the unfortunate plight of the Whig Party before the Civil War. So, the argument is that the second major party is more likely to co-opt a minor party issue stance because it could potentially woo new voters to vote for it in the upcoming elections, which could make them the dominant party. Secondarily, issue co-optation helps the less dominant major party to keep at bay a rising third party that could possibly take its seat in the American two-party system. Issue co-optation appears to be a win-win strategy for the second major party.

*Research Question 11: Is the Democratic Party more likely to co-opt minor party issues than the Republican Party?*

The eleventh research question suggests that the Democratic Party is more likely to co-opt a minor party platform plank than the Republican Party. The Republican Party is often characterized as the political party for the wealthy Americans and business interests while the Democratic Party is seen more as the political party of the middle-to-lower class. If this is the case, then one could argue that middle and lower class people have more problems that require attention through the political process because of their lack of money and social status than the wealthy. Furthermore, since most of the American population is not wealthy, the lower and middle classes have the numbers that could make them an influential voting bloc during an election season. Considering those two points, more minor political parties will come into existence that deal with middle
and lower class issues than ones that address the issues of the wealthy and business classes. Since the Democratic Party was generally considered to be the party of the middle and lower classes over the history of the two-party system and since their agenda items arise more frequently because more minor political parties will rise to fight for the rights of the less fortunate, these suppositions are the assumptions that underpin the eleventh research question.

Research Question 12: Are the major parties more likely to co-opt from the minor parties that are ideologically similar?

The underlying assumption here is that a major party will find it very difficult to co-opt issues from minor parties that are not ideologically similar to them. Absorbing the issue stances from a minor party that has different core beliefs does not appear to be a good strategy. It would potentially bring unnecessary division within the major party structure and cause more problems than it was worth. The dominant major party already has a winning coalition and issue stances, so interjecting agenda items based on a new ideology into that mix would probably cause dissension in the ranks and could cause the first major party to lose its hold on their position of political dominance. The second major party needs new voters and possibly new issues but bringing in new issues that are completely divergent to their existing coalitions could also be disastrous. If the less dominant major party looses the voters that it already has, it could potentially be in danger of becoming a third party. Co-opting minor party issue stances from ideologically
dissimilar minor parties does not appear to be a good strategy for either the dominant or less dominant major political party.

Section 4 – From which minor party are co-optations most common?

Because minor political parties have had such poor electoral showings throughout the years, most scholars generally lump them into one bunch. However, for this statistical analysis, it seemed like a reasonable idea to disaggregate the minor political parties into various groupings. In the following paragraphs will be a brief description and at least one example of the six minor political party types. All six of these minor political party types were taken from American Political Parties: Stability and Change by Gitelson, Conway, and Feigert (1984).

The first type of minor party is called a left-wing splinter. This group leans toward a Marxian interpretation of politics. The Socialist and Communist parties would be examples of this class of minor party.

The second type of minor party is the one-issue obsessionist. The single-issue minor parties are generally “given over to a single issue that is either not understood or lacking popularity.” The Prohibition Party would be an example of this type of minor party.

The third broad category is the one-state minor party. This group has an ongoing existence in only one state with the hope of influencing the candidate selection and the
program of one or the other major party. Two examples of this kind of minor party are the Conservative and Liberal Parties of New York.

The fourth is the personalistic or dissident hero type of minor party. This group is basically transitory because it usually disbands when the “leader either re-enters the major party or leaves electoral politics” altogether. So, this type of party is organized around the personality of its leader, not issues. Teddy Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Party in 1912 would be an example of this fourth grouping of minor parties.

The fifth category of minor political parties is the dissident wing of a major political party. This type of minor party often splinters from a major party when there is a significant disagreement over an issue amongst the ranks. Once the issue is resolved usually this type of minor political party dissolves when its members either rejoin the major party or unite themselves with the other major political party. Strom Thurmond is an example of a politician who eventually became a part of the Republican Party after being initially a member of the Democratic Party. So, the Dixiecrats in 1948 would be an example of this type of minor party.

The sixth category is the true minor party, which looks like a major political party in every respect except for its electoral standing. In other words, they have a “broad base of electoral support at least temporarily,” a broad set of issue positions, and they also have the “potential for becoming a major party.” The Populists are an example of this category of minor parties.

Hopefully, this research question will uncover whether one category of minor political parties has had a significantly larger percentage of political platform issues that have been co-opted than other groups. This information could help scholars clarify
whether all six of these minor party types can still be lumped into one all-encompassing bunch, at least where agenda-setting is concerned. It might become apparent that some kinds of minor parties are more effective agenda-setters, which would hopefully mean that they would be given more credit for their ability to formulate and articulate innovative and enterprising ideas. Based on this grouping of minor parties, here is the thirteenth research question.

Research Question 13: What type of minor party are the major parties more likely to co-opt from?

This fourteenth research question is attempting to discover whether minor party issue stances have a different major party issue co-optation percentage based on the success of the minor party. One would posit that the minor parties with greater electoral success would have more of their agenda items co-opted by the major parties than minor parties that had lower presidential popular vote totals.

Research Question 14: Is there a difference in the major party co-optation percentage based on minor party success?
Section 5 – What kinds of issues are most likely to be co-opted?

There are probably many different methods in which to categorize these minor party platform planks; however, in this study, the classification system that was employed by Gerald Pomper in *If Elected, I Promise* (1967) will be utilized. In that article, he performed a content analysis of the Democratic and Republican platforms between 1944 and 1964. The study, of course, covers only a few of the years that will be studied in this research project so the specific platform issues may not be the same because of the different time frames being analyzed. However, the general categories, in my opinion, seem to somewhat apply to all the platform planks no matter what year is being studied. Therefore, since Pomper’s categorization has already been used in attempting to code national platforms, I have decided to employ his classifications in this analysis. Here are the nine categories that will be utilized in this analysis: foreign policy, defense, economic policy, labor, agriculture, resources, social welfare, government, and civil rights and ethnic policy. Now, here is the fifteenth research question.

*Research Question 15:* What kinds of issues are most readily co-opted?

Once issue co-optation is established as a frequent occurrence in the first two research questions, the remaining thirteen research questions represent the most common or promising explanations for issue co-optation. They include whether co-optation varies with time (party era, before and after the Progressive reforms and the 1974 Federal
Election Campaign Act and time since origination), what kinds of issues are most commonly co-opted, which major party more commonly co-opts (dominant or less dominant and Democratic or Republican), which minor party’s issues are most frequently co-opted (type of minor party, electoral success, ideological similarity, the minor party itself). In some cases, previous research enables the identification of a specific relationship. In most cases, so uncommon is research on issue co-optation, no prior expectation has been set and the analysis is exploratory.
CHAPTER 2

CODING PARTY PLATFORMS FOR ISSUE INITIATIONS AND ADOPTIONS

In order to address these research questions, a comprehensive, historical dataset of issue co-optations across the 1840 to 2004 time period was created. This issue co-optation dataset is based on a careful and comprehensive coding of the issues contained in minor and major party platforms throughout this period, then an examination of the connections between appearances of these issues in minor and major party platforms, looking especially at the major party co-optation of issues first introduced by minor parties.

The issue co-optation dataset starts in the year 1840. The reason that 1840 is the starting point is because that was the first time that a major party, the Democratic Party, offered an official written statement of their policy views. The Democratic Party produced another national platform in 1844 and the Whig Party, which was the other major party at the time, followed the Democrats lead and also offered an official written statement of their political stances in 1844. The Liberty Party was the only significant minor party during that presidential election year and they also produced an official national platform in 1844.
All of the major political parties and almost all of the minor parties have followed suit by offering an official national platform since 1844. Since the data for this issue co-optation dataset would be collected from the national party platforms, the best starting point seemed to be at the very beginning with the first Democratic national platform in 1840. The issue co-optation dataset ends in the year 2004. The reason that 2004 serves as the stopping-point for this issue co-optation dataset is because the 2008 national platforms in the United States had not been agreed upon and released when this dataset was finalized, making 2004 the election year with the last set of available national political platforms.

**Major Parties**

Before an actual systematic relationship can be established between the minor party platform ideas and their subsequent co-optations by the major parties, an operational definition must be given for the major and minor political parties. This research paper will utilize the definitions offered by Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus in *Third Parties in America*.

“In a given election, we shall call a political party “major” if it runs candidates for local, state, and federal offices in a majority of the states and if prior to the contest the party holds one of the two largest blocs of seats in the House Representatives…By this definition, the Democrats became a major party in 1832; the Whigs attained that status in 1836 and were replaced in 1854 by the Republicans, who captured a plurality of the seats in the House of Representatives in that year’s elections. Since then the Democrats and the Republicans have retained their major party standing,” (1984, 9-10).

With that being said, since the Democrats offered the first national platform in 1840, the major political parties in this analysis are as follows: the Democratic Party from 1840 to 32
2004, the Whig Party from 1844 to 1852, and the Republican Party from 1856 to 2004. Every other political party from this point will be called either a minor or third political party.

**Minor Parties**

In total, there have been 274 minor parties in the United States that have contested presidential elections since 1840. For a minor party to be included in this analysis, it had to fulfill two basic requirements. The first prerequisite was that the minor party had to have authored and published an official national platform. This eliminated one minor party from the dataset. Without the national platform, this type of comprehensive historical dataset and study would not be feasible.

The dataset was further reduced by examining only minor parties receiving at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote when they were a contestant during their presidential election season. Almost 90% of the minor parties did not reach this threshold. If the two reasons why major party co-optations occur are to gain a group of new voters and to quell a rising third party, then it is difficult to come up with a good argument as to why the major parties would be interested in the issue stances from the

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3 I was able to calculate this number by going to [http://uselectionatlas.org/](http://uselectionatlas.org/). Once there I clicked on the election results link. This is where there is a historical list of all of the major and minor parties that competed in every general election going all of the way back to 1789. At that point I counted all of the minor parties between 1840 and 2004 and the number turned out to be 273. The Populist Party was a viable minor party in 1896 but they selected William Bryan, the Democratic presidential nominee, as their presidential nominee, so they were not included as a separate minor party on the website. I went ahead and added the 1896 Populist Party to the count of minor parties, which means that there were 274 minor parties between 1840 and 2004. The Republican Party is not included in this count because they never ran in any of the quadrennial presidential elections as a minor party. Also, this count does not include the 21 independent candidacies that were not formally attached to a minor party.

4 The only minor party that had to be removed because of this first precondition was the 1996 Reform Party because as the *Congressional Quarterly* stated, they did not produce a national platform for that election year (1997, 186).
insignificant minor political parties because they simply do not have large voting constituencies. The 27 minor political parties that met these two qualifications are illustrated in table 2.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Party</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>American (Know-Nothing) Party</td>
<td>21.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Southern Democratic Party</td>
<td>18.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>16.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>American Independent Party</td>
<td>13.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Constitutional Union Party</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>10.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Populist Party</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
</tr>
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<td>1852</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>4.91%</td>
</tr>
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<td>1920</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Greenback Party</td>
<td>3.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Socialist Party</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Progressive Party</td>
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<tr>
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Table 2.1: The Minor Parties in the Issue Co-optation Dataset  
Continued
Continued – Table 2.1

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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
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</table>

*Party Policy Issue Positions*

Party issue positions were determined from party platforms. A political party’s platform is

“the principal official statements that exist of party principles and policies. To be sure, there are other important statements, but the platforms are evidence of what those party leaders who draft the declarations believe to be the important issues of the year...In this way, platforms often reflect political trends. Developments of new economic, social and political movements may be observed, particularly when declarations contained in previous minor party platforms are adopted by the major parties after sufficient public opinion has been generated to support the change,” (Johnson and Porter 1973, vi).

Platforms also are adopted by majorities of the party’s quadrennial nominating convention, thus implicitly making them the only official statement of the party. They will be seen as the issue positions taken by each political party. Therefore, the formal
Policy Planks

There are generally two types of planks in a national platform; rhetorical statements and policy-specific planks. Here are a few examples of policy-specific planks. The national platform of the Free Soil Party in 1852 states “That the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is repugnant to the Constitution…We therefore deny its binding force upon the American People, and demand its immediate and total repeal.” In 1908 the Prohibition Party stated that they were for “The establishment of postal savings banks and the guaranty of deposits in banks.” Most policy planks are similar to those two examples in that they are usually either for or against a specific policy. These policy-related statements made by the political parties are generally found in the middle sections of the national platform.

Rhetorical Planks

Rhetorical statements can be found in three different places in a national platform. One can find them in the section before the actual planks are listed. This section is like the preface or preamble. Rhetorical statements can also be found in the middle section where the actual platform planks are listed. The last place where one can find rhetorical

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5Most of the major and minor party platforms for this project have already been compiled in National Platforms, 1840-1972 (Johnson and Porter 1973). The 1976 national platforms are in National Party Platforms, Volume II 1960-1976 (Johnson 1978). The 1980 national platforms are in National Party Platforms of 1980 (Johnson 1982). The last year that Johnson published the national platforms was 1980, so the rest of the national platforms were found on the internet.  

6The 1852 Free Soil Party’s national platform plank, along with the many platform examples to follow, will be taken directly from National Platforms, 1840-1972 (Johnson and Porter 1973).
An example of a rhetorical statement is in the national platform of the Liberty Party in 1844 where it says “Resolved, That human brotherhood is a cardinal doctrine of true Democracy, as well as of pure Christianity…” This Liberty Party statement proclaims that they are for human brotherhood, true democracy and pure Christianity. That phrase is important because it established the Liberty Party’s support for several lofty ideals; nevertheless, that whole statement was deemed to be rhetoric. Rhetorical declarations can be very powerful and can be co-opted by one of the major parties just as easily as policy-centered planks. The minor party statements that address specific policy planks will definitely be included in this analysis, but the question is what should be done with the rhetorical statements?

The decision for this analytical study was to exclude all of the rhetorical statements in the preamble and the concluding paragraphs of the national party platforms. If a rhetorical statement appears as a free-standing idea in the policy-specific section of the national platform, then it was included in this analysis. Here is an example from the 2000 Green Party. “We believe the right of a woman to control her body is inalienable.” Even though that is a rhetorical statement, it is a stand-alone statement in the policy-specific portion of the 2000 Green Party’s national platform, and was included in the analysis.

Once the preliminary parameters were established, the first step in constructing this issue co-optation dataset was to assemble a complete list of the platform agenda
items that each of the selected minor political parties in the United States articulated
during their national conventions. This data-building process was one of the most
difficult parts of this project, and the next few paragraphs will illustrate why that was the
case.

Occasionally, the minor parties numbered their platform planks and placed one single platform plank in that small sentence or paragraph. Here are several examples. In 1888 the Prohibition Party stated in plank number 4 that they were “For the immediate abolition of the Internal Revenue system, whereby our National Government is deriving support from our greatest national vice.” In the issue co-optation dataset, this whole sentence is considered to be just one plank and it was recorded as “For the abolition of the Internal Revenue system.” The 1892 Populist Party stated that “We demand a graduated income tax.” In the dataset, the plank is, “For a graduated income tax.” The Socialist Party in 1908 was for “The abolition of the senate.” That plank was recorded in the dataset as “For the abolition of the senate.”

In 1912 the Socialists were for “The immediate curbing of the power of the courts to issue injunctions.” In the dataset, it states “For curbing the power of the courts to issue injunctions.” The Socialist Party in 1916 under political demands stated in plank number 2 that they were for “The immediate adoption of the so-called ‘Susan B. Anthony amendment’ to the constitution of the United States granting the suffrage to women on equal terms with men.” In the issue co-optation dataset, the plank was “For women’s suffrage.”
Sometimes the planks were not numbered but they were still very easy to determine. Here are a few examples. The Southern Democratic Party of 1860 stated a plank in this way. “Resolved, That the Democratic party are in favor of the acquisition of the Island of Cuba, on such terms as shall be honorable to ourselves and just to Spain, at the earliest practicable moment.” This plank in the dataset is coded, “For the acquisition of Cuba.” On their 1892 national platform, the Prohibition Party stated that “Arbitration is the wisest and most economical and humane method of settling national differences.” That particular plank was coded “For international arbitration.” Whether the paragraph or sentence is numbered or not, these minor party platform planks are the easiest, by far, to decipher because they are usually dealing with one specific platform issue.

There are other times when short paragraphs or numbered planks have more than one platform plank embedded in them. In these instances, it is more difficult to ensure that the correct number of planks have been listed in the dataset. For example, number 9 under international relations in the 1932 Socialist Party national platform states that they are for “The complete independence of the Philippines and the negotiation of treaties with other nations safeguarding the sovereignty of these islands.” In this case there are two planks embedded in this sentence. The first agenda item was that the Socialists were “For the complete independence of the Philippines.” The second demand was that they were “for the United States negotiating treaties with other nations safeguarding the sovereignty of the Philippines.”

In 1908, the Socialist Party stated that they were for “The improvement of the industrial condition of the workers, By forbidding the interstate transportation of the products of child labor, of convict labor and of all uninspected factories.” Since child
labor, convict labor and uninspected factories are all distinctively different, there are 3 platform issues embedded in this one sentence. The first plank is “for forbidding the interstate transportation of the products of child labor.” The second agenda item is “for forbidding the interstate transportation of the products of convict labor.” The third platform plank is “for forbidding the interstate transportation of the products from all uninspected factories.”

The hardest policy planks to code were the planks that were embedded in long paragraphs with a lot of rhetorical statements. The first example is the complete national platform of the 1860 Constitutional Union Party.

“Whereas, Experience has demonstrated that Platforms adopted by the partisan Conventions of the country have had the effect to mislead and deceive the people, and at the same time to widen the political divisions of the country, by the creation and encouragement of geographical and sectional parties; therefore

Resolved, that it is both the part of patriotism and of duty to recognize no political principle other than THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COUNTRY, THE UNION OF THE STATES, AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAWS, and that, as representatives of the Constitutional Union men of the country, in National Convention assembled, we hereby pledge ourselves to maintain, protect, and defend, separately and unitedly, these great principles of public liberty and national safety, against all enemies, at home and abroad; believing that thereby peace may once more be restored to the country; the rights of the People and of the States re-established, and the Government again placed in that condition of justice, fraternity and equality, which, under the example and Constitution of our fathers, has solemnly bound every citizen of the United States to maintain a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

After reading the entire Constitutional Union Party’s national platform many times, it became apparent that there was not even one policy-specific platform agenda
item in their whole national platform. There were quite a few rhetorical declarations like being against geographical and sectional parties, being for the Constitution of the United States, being for the union of the States, being for the enforcement of the laws, being for public liberty and national safety. As one can see, it takes a while to really glean through the paragraphs that are not explicitly numbered in order to systematically determine which statements are rhetorical and which are policy-centered. In this case, the Constitutional Union Party of 1860 could not be credited with proposing any original policy-specific platform planks.

In 1924 the Progressive Party stated that

“We denounce the mercenary system of foreign policy under recent administrations in the interests of financial imperialists, oil monopolists, and international bankers, which has at times degraded our State Department from its high service as a strong and kindly intermediary of defenseless governments to a trading outpost for those interests and concession-seekers engaged in the exploitations of weaker nations, as contrary to the will of the American people, destructive of domestic development and provocative of war. We favor an active policy to bring about a revision of the Versailles treaty in accordance with the terms of the armistice, and to promote firm treaty agreements with all nations to outlaw wars, abolish conscription, drastically reduce land, air and naval armaments, and guarantee public referendum on peace and war.”

In this Progressive Party example, the first portion of the paragraph seems to be pure rhetoric. The policy part of the paragraph appears to start at “We favor an active policy to bring about a revision of the Versailles treaty…”

Next is a brief example of how rhetoric and policy can be intertwined into a sentence making the decision on what is rhetorical and what revolves around policy very difficult. In the 1852 Free Soil national platform, it states “we inscribe on our banner,
FREE SOIL, FREE SPEECH, FREE LABOR and FREE MEN, and under it will fight on and fight ever, until a triumphant victory shall reward our exertions.” Now, let’s systematically go through the thought process in determining whether anything in this sentence should be included in the issue co-optation dataset.

Free Soil could be considered a policy-specific platform plank because it references the free land that the Free Soil party wanted citizens to have as they moved out west; however, the Free Soil party addressed that issue earlier in the platform so the decision was not to include Free Soil in the issue co-optation dataset because it was a repeat issue in this platform. Free Speech is an important ideal; but the conclusion was that it was rhetorical and since this rhetorical statement was in the Free Soil Party’s concluding remarks, Free Speech was not included in this dataset. Lofty phrases like Free Labor and Free Men were important in that day and time; however, after scanning their earlier platform statements, the Free Soilers already offered their specific planks about the abolition of slavery. Accordingly, the final decision was not to include those two statements in the issue co-optation dataset.

“And” versus “Or” Statements

If a minor party statement employed “or” instead of “and,” rarely was the sentence broken up into multiple individual planks. For example, in 1968, the American Independent Party stated that “We advocate educational opportunity for all people regardless of race, creed, color, economic or social status.” Because “or” was the conjunction employed here instead of “and,” the decision was not to break this plank up into five individual planks but instead to leave it intact. The whole point of this American
Independent Party statement was to promote the idea that everybody should have educational opportunities so there was no reason to break this sentence into multiple planks.

To further make this point, here is another example from the 1968 American Independent Party. The leaders of the American Independent Party in 1968 proclaimed via their national platform that they were “For those unemployable by reason of age, infirmity, disability or otherwise, provision will be made for their adequate care through programs of social services based on the requirements and needs of these persons.” As in the previous example, this particular sentence was not broken out into three or four individual planks because it used the conjunction “or” instead of “and.” If one dissects the American Independent Party’s statement, they are really highlighting the fact that if a person is unemployable for whatever reason they should be given adequate social services. Being unemployable is the main point, not how the person became unemployable. Therefore, there was no reason to split their statement into individualized agenda items. However, the decision was usually different when a sentence, which seemed to have multiple planks embedded into them, utilized the conjunction “and.” Here are a few examples to illustrate the point.

In 1884 the Prohibition Party stated that “no State should be admitted to the Union until its Constitution shall expressly and forever prohibit polygamy and the manufacture and sale of intoxicating beverages…” In this sentence there appear to be three distinct platform planks because of the use of the conjunction “and.” The first plank is about prohibiting polygamy, the second one is about forbidding the production of alcohol and the third plank demands the prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages.
The use of the conjunction “and” indicates that three minor party planks are embedded in this one sentence.

In 1904 the Socialist Party was “for the insurance of the workers against accidents, sickness and lack of employment…” Once again, because “and” was used instead of “or,” it is pretty clear that they had three distinct issues in mind when writing this platform sentence. The Socialists wanted workers to have disability insurance, some type of sick leave and unemployment insurance.

After that task was accomplished, the next major step was to type and scan all of the major party platforms onto the issue co-optation spreadsheet. Then, each and every major party platform plank from 1840 to 2004 had to be analyzed in an effort to determine which of the major party platform planks were originally proposed by one of the minor parties in a previous national convention.

*What was the issue co-optation coding system?*

There were four different codes that each of the platform planks received. If the minor political party platform issue was not co-opted by at least one of the major parties, it received a code of 0. The platform plank was given a code of 1 if the minor party issue stance ended up on one of the major party’s national platforms after initially being proposed by one of the minor political parties at its national political convention. If the minor party agenda item was not original but was instead co-opted from one of the other major parties, then that platform plank was given a code of 2. And lastly, if the minor party issue was already proposed by another minor party then that particular platform
plank received a code of 3. In the next paragraphs, there will be a more complete
description of how this coding scheme works.

*Code 0*

A code of 0 initially tells one that this particular minor party plank has never been
cooperted by any of the major political parties. It also tells us that this plank had not been
proposed by any other minor or major party in a previous election. So, in essence, one is
looking at the first appearance of this agenda item on anyone’s national platform. For
example, the 1968 American Independent Party stated that “With respect to the Supreme
Court and the Court of Appeals I would propose that this (constitutional) amendment
require re-confirmation of the office holder by the United States Senate at reasonable
intervals.”

There are two planks embedded in that sentence and they are as follows. “Favor a
constitutional amendment whereby members of the Courts of Appeals would require
reconfirmation of the officeholder by the U.S. Senate at reasonable intervals. And “favor
a constitutional amendment whereby members of the Supreme Court would require
reconfirmation of the officeholder by the U.S. Senate at reasonable intervals.” Both of
those planks received a code of 0 because they originated with the 1968 American
Independent Party and no major party has placed that agenda item on its national
platform as of 2004.

*Code 1*

A code of 1 tells us that this particular platform plank originated with this minor
political party and was co-opted by a major party. So, the minor party agenda item was
not proposed by either a major or minor party in a previous election. More importantly, a code of 1 indicates that this original minor party issue was co-opted by at least one of the major parties in a subsequent election. In other words, that agenda item originated with this particular minor political party but it ended up later on at least one of the major party platforms. The next paragraphs are going to offer a full explanation as to when a minor party plank would receive this code.

After coding smaller versions of this issue co-optation dataset, it became very apparent that if one only coded a plank as being co-opted when the wording was identical or almost word-for-word then almost none of the minor party agenda items would receive a code of 1. This could be one explanation as to why scholars have not systemically studied issue co-optations. Their interpretation of an issue co-optation was too strict to make this project worthwhile.

Here is one example of how a strict word-for-word definition of issue co-optations has caused previous scholars to miss an important issue appropriation. In 1896, the Populists placed the ideas of the initiative and referendum on their platform. They proclaimed, “We favor a system of direct legislation through the initiative and referendum.” In 1900, the Democratic Party placed on its platform that “We favor direct legislation whenever applicable.” After reading these two platform statements, some scholars have concluded that the referendum and initiative were never appropriated by either of the major parties, even though they were enacted into law in many states shortly after (Gillespie 1993, 26-27).
Nevertheless, this study concluded that the initiative and referendum were actually co-opted by the Democrats. It is true that the wording was not identical; however, the result is the same because the idea of direct legislation was mentioned in the Democratic political platform for the first time in 1900 and the Democrats never mentioned the idea of direct legislation in any of their previous national platforms. What threw off most scholars was that the Democrats did not explicitly use the words initiative and referendum. So, sometimes the minor party platform issues can be co-opted without the phrases and sentences being completely explicit.

The previous example is a good illustration as to why the decision was made to be a little more flexible when determining whether or not an original minor party issue stance was co-opted. Whether the wording was identical or not, if one political party started proposing an agenda item on their national platform in a similar manner after another political party had already touted it, then that policy plank was considered to be co-opted. Therefore, the best way to describe the coding system for major party co-optations is a direct to indirect continuum. In other words, whether the wording was identical or whether the wording was totally different but the idea was the same, the end result was that that particular plank was given a code of 1 because it was considered to be co-opted.

On the direct end of the spectrum, the wording was completely identical. As stated earlier, rarely did the major parties co-opt an issue word-for-word from a minor party, but occasionally it did happen. In 1968, the American Independent Party said that “We will support needed legislation and action to seek out and bring to justice the criminal organization of national scope operating in our country.” In 1972, the
Democratic Party stated that “We will support needed legislation and action to seek out and bring to justice the criminal organization of national scope operating in our country.” This issue co-optation is a direct match but the occurrences of completely identical co-optations were few and far between.

As one begins to move away from the direct end of the issue co-optation continuum, the wording is very close but it is not identical. Here are a few examples. On the Populist national platform of 1896 it states “We demand the election of …United States Senators by a direct vote of the people.” On the Democratic national platform of 1908 it proclaims “We favor the election of United States Senators by direct vote of the people.”

The Free Soil Party in 1848 stated that they were for “the abolition of all unnecessary offices and salaries.” Twenty years later the Democratic Party stated that they were for “the abrogation of useless offices.” The Union Labor Party in 1888 stated that “Postal savings banks should be established…” During the 1908 national election, the Democratic Party said that “We favor a postal savings bank…” Even though the phrases are not 100% identical or direct, the ideas are clearly the same. Since the co-optations that are close to the direct end of the continuum are actually pretty straightforward, most scholars would probably agree that these issues were co-opted by at least one of the major parties.

Sometimes the issue co-optation was embedded in a wordy sentence or paragraph. For example, in 1884, the Greenback Party said that “We denounce…stock watering.” In 1900, the Democratic Party stated that “Existing laws against trusts must be enforced and
more stringent ones must be enacted providing for publicity as to the affairs of corporations engaged in inter-State commerce requiring all corporations to show, before doing business outside the State of their origin, that they have no water in their stock…” The 1900 election was the first time that the Democratic Party announced that they were against the corporate practice of stock watering.

Sometimes one must read the major and minor party platforms carefully to determine if the idea proposed by the minor has been appropriated by one of the major parties. For example, in 1880, the Greenback Party proclaimed that “we demand a graduated income tax.” Neither one of the major parties ever used the phrase “graduated income tax,” but in 1908, the Democrats stated that “We favor an income tax as part of our revenue system, and we urge the submission of a constitutional amendment specifically authorizing Congress to levy and collect a tax upon individual and corporate incomes, to the end that wealth may bear its proportionate share of the burdens of the Federal Government.” The phrase about the proportionate share of taxes being paid by the wealthy leads one to conclude that the Democratic Party is indeed suggesting that there should be a graduated income tax scale.

As one can see, the issue co-optations in this category are moving farther and farther away from the direct end of the issue co-optation spectrum. The co-optations closer to the indirect end of the continuum definitely take careful reading to discern whether the political parties are actually talking about the same subject matter in a similar way. With all of this in mind, it is clear that the indirect end of the issue co-optation category is more subjective, which makes its coding somewhat problematic; however, it appears that including issue adoptions along the direct to indirect continuum is necessary
in order to more fully capture those minor party ideas and issue stances that are picked up in an indirect manner by the major political parties.

For the dissertation study, there was no attempt to differentiate between the appropriations on the different ends of the spectrum. With that being said, there was considerable difficulty in determining whether an issue had been appropriated if the wording was closer to the indirect end of the spectrum. The co-optations that were closer to being direct were much easier to discern because the wording was very close in both the major and minor party national platforms. The final rule concerning these indirect co-optations was that if the major party mentioned the minor party issue in a similar way, that particular platform plank was coded as a co-optation.

*Code 2*

The code of 2 had to be added to the issue co-optation coding system because of an unexpected political phenomenon. After coding quite a few of these minor party agenda items, it became clear that co-optations were not solely confined to major political parties. Surprisingly, minor parties have appropriated some of their platform ideas from the major parties as well. Here is an example. The 1936 Union Party proposed that “Congress shall legislate that there will be an assurance of a living annual wage for all laborers capable of working and willing to work.” After a careful reading of the national platforms, it became obvious that the Union Party was not the first party to propose that idea. The Democratic Party in 1916 had already stated that they were for “A living wage for all employees.”
For a minor party plank to receive a code of 3, that agenda item cannot be original. It had to already have been proposed by one of the minor parties in a previous election. So, the minor party is actually repeating or reintroducing an issue that was originally proclaimed by another minor party on an earlier national platform. Here is an example of an agenda item that received a code of 3.

In 1948, the Progressive Party announced that “We support measures for public control of patents and licensing provisions to insure that new inventions will be used for the benefit of the people.” The interesting point here is that this platform plank was originally proposed by the Socialist Party in their national convention in 1912. The Socialist Party said that they were for “The abolition of the monopoly ownership of patents and the substitution of the collective ownership of patents, with direct reward to inventors by premiums or royalties.” This was an original minor party agenda item as of May 1912.

On November 5, 1912, the Progressive Party repeated the idea about the necessity of patent reform on their national platform by saying that “We pledge ourselves to the enactment of a patent law which will make it impossible for patents to be suppressed or used against the public welfare in the interests of injurious monopolies.” So, the Progressive Party plank received a code of 3. In 1916, the Socialist Party once again placed the idea of patent reform in their national platform by saying that they were for “The abolition of the monopoly ownership of patents, and the substitution of the

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7 The national convention date for the 1912 Progressive Party was found on the internet at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29617
collective ownership of patents, with direct reward to inventors by premiums or royalties.” One can argue that the reason that the Socialists reintroduced this patent reform issue was probably because the major parties did not adequately address the issue in the intervening four years.

Then in 1920, the Democratic Party indirectly co-opted the idea of patent reform by placing this statement in their national platform. They said that

“The Democratic Party heartily endorses the creation and work of the Federal Trade Commission in establishing a fair field for competitive business, free from restraints of trade and monopoly and recommends amplification of the statutes governing its activities so as to grant it authority to prevent the unfair use of patents in restraint of trade.”

One of the major parties had finally decided to take up the issue of patent reform. The Democrats did not go as far as the minor parties in saying that the patent system should be nationalized but they did suggest that something had to be done about the monopolization of patents.

One would think that this patent reform issue was in the process of being resolved once the Democratic Party took up its cause. One would also assume that the issue was resolved or being addressed because the minor parties stopped placing that agenda item on their national platforms after the Democratic Party espoused it. But as stated earlier, in 1948 the Progressive Party must have not been satisfied with how the major parties dealt with this issue because they once again proposed that patents should be nationalized. So, the 1948 Progressive Party plank about the nationalization of patents received a code of 3. It did not originate with the 1948 Progressives but instead was a 1912 Socialist issue
that was both co-opted by the Democratic Party and repeated several times. This repeat issue category does not seem to be anywhere in the political parties’ literature; however, there are probably some interesting stories and discoveries that could be unearthed once this category is analyzed as an extension to this project.

To ensure that this issue co-optation dataset was as accurate as possible, two major procedures were taken to attempt to discover how each platform plank should be coded. The first step was to go to edit on the excel toolbar and select find. Place the word or phrase that needed to be located where it says “find what.” Then click “find all.” This function found every place that the word or phrase was located in the whole spreadsheet. Here is an example of how the process worked.

The States’ Rights Party of 1948 stated that “We oppose the elimination of segregation employment by Federal bureaucrats called for by the misnamed civil rights program.” The first step in this process was to see if there was a direct word-for-word co-optation anywhere in the national platforms. To see if this was the case, one would have to place “segregation employment,” “Federal bureaucrats” and “civil rights program” into the “find all” function of excel to see if there were any matches. If a direct match could not be found then one had to search for an indirect match. To do this one had to put in a series of variations to the previous three phrases like “Federal employment,” “job,” “segregation,” “employment,” “work,” “bureaucrat,” “bureaucracy,” “civil right” and “Negro” to try and discover how to code this particular minor party plank. In this case, at least ten different words and phrases had to be placed in the “find all” function and sometimes there were hundreds and hundreds of platform planks that had to be sifted
through for each word and phrase. So, this “find all” function in Excel was definitely helpful in finding co-optations.

The second method was to read each and every major and minor party platform a multitude of times to determine if there were any co-optations that had inadvertently fallen through the cracks. This approach was very tedious but it did successfully uncover several co-optations that were not initially discovered because of wording peculiarities. With that being said, by employing both of these approaches, one can safely argue that most, if not all, of the issue co-optations have been located and documented between 1840 and 2004.
CHAPTER 3

MINOR PARTIES AND THEIR PLATFORM ISSUES

Before systematically examining each of the research questions identified in Chapter 1, some basic parameters of third party success, platform activity, and platform issue adoption need to be considered.

I begin with all of the platform planks from minor parties attaining at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote between 1840 and 2004 that were included in the dataset to be analyzed for this study. Figure 3.1 presents the distribution of their destinations. The fifth column shows that the 27 minor political parties in the dataset produced 2,747 minor party planks. Column four shows that 1662 out of the 2,747 minor party planks (or 59%) were repeat issues in the sense that they had appeared in an earlier national minor party platform. The extent of circulation of minor party platform positions throughout the minor parties is surprising, demonstrating that most issues are not new to the party system. They deserve comprehensive study in their own right and will be the focus of analysis at another time.

Column 3 graphically represents the issues that minor parties adopted from the major parties. The results show that 443 out of the 2,747 minor party planks, which is
around 16%, were originally major party issue stances. This is another category that does not receive any attention in the political parties’ literature. Once again, this grouping of platform planks will not be studied in this dissertation but they will definitely be examined and dissected as this project is extended. Even though columns 3 and 4 were simply byproducts of the issue co-optation collection process, a result showing that 75% of the minor party agenda items were either repeat issues or minor party co-optations is still a very surprising discovery by itself.

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<td>Column 2 is the grouping of minor party planks that are the primary focus of this dissertation. The results show that 204 out of 2,747 minor party platform agenda items</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
were eventually co-opted by one of the major parties. The commonly-held view that an important role of minor parties lies in its issue agenda-setting for the major parties is based on these 204 issues, which was only 7% of the total number of issues in the platforms of significant minor parties (≥1.5% of the presidential vote) platforms across 164 years. Column 1 gives an illustration of the original minor party platform planks that were not co-opted by at least one of the major parties. There were 478 out of 2,747 platform planks in this category, which is approximately 17%.

The first research question asks whether or not the minor parties actually co-opt minor party issues. Figure 3.1 actually gives the answer to this research question. Yes, the major parties do indeed co-opt minor party issue stances. So, the assumption that this political phenomenon does exist is valid.

The second research question asks for the overall historic co-optation percentage from 1840 to 2004. Figure 3.1 shows that the overall historic percentage is 7% if one includes every single platform plank on the minor parties national platforms; however, that frequency is a skewed representation of the real proportion. That is because 75% of the minor party planks were never available for a major party to co-opt either because they were repeated from an earlier minor party platform or originated with a major political party. The appropriate percentage of overall historic major party co-optations must be derived only from the minor party platform planks that were actually available to be appropriated by one of the major political parties. Based on the results, there were 682 original minor party agenda items and 204 of them eventually ended up on the national platform of at least one of the American major political parties in a subsequent election year. So, figure 3.2 illustrates that the historic major party co-optation frequency between
An overall historic major party co-optation rate of approximately 30% is indeed a remarkable finding, in and of itself.

Figure 3.2: The Percentage of Original Minor Party Issues that were Available to be Co-opted by the Major Parties between 1840 and 2004

There are 27 minor parties in the issue co-optation dataset, representing all minor parties that polled at least 1.5% of the vote in a single election. Figure 3.3 shows how they were distributed across the party eras as defined by Third Parties in America (1984) along with the disputed sixth party system, which begins in 1968. As one sees, there were only four minor parties in the second party era and the number of significant minor parties increased to seven during the third party era. Since only 16 years were accounted for in the second party system, that probably explains why there were fewer minor political parties that met the 1.5% popular vote threshold in the second party era. The number of minor parties with a popular vote total of at least 1.5% peaked at ten during
the fourth party system and then fell back to four during the fifth party era, which was the previous low that occurred during the second party system. Then during the sixth party era one sees that only two minor parties met the 1.5% presidential popular vote total. When one looks at the drop-off in significant minor parties during the sixth party era, one might initially wonder if minor parties are becoming less significant in the most recent party era because it had the smallest number of significant minor political parties ever in American history.

![Figure 3.3: The Number of Minor Parties with at least 1.5% of the Presidential Popular Vote](image)

If one wants to argue the merits of that inference, one must also remember that the independent candidates were not included in this statistical analysis. And if the two independent candidates that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold would have been included in this analysis, both of them would have been added to the sixth
party system. John Anderson received 6.61% of the presidential popular vote in 1980 and Ross Perot received 18.91% of the presidential popular vote total in 1992. Then there was the 1996 Reform Party, which did not adopt an official national platform; nevertheless, it still received 8.40% of the presidential popular vote total. When the independent candidates are considered, there will not be a drop-off of minor party candidates in the sixth party system. When the issue co-optation dataset is expanded to include such independent candidacies, which are a modern phenomenon, each party era will have at least four significant minor political party or independent candidacies. So, it appears as if the form of “third-partyism,” but not its frequency, has changed during the sixth party system.

![Figure 3.4: Number of Significant Minor Parties Based on whether they were New or Already Established](image-url)

Figure 3.4: Number of Significant Minor Parties Based on whether they were New or Already Established
Figure 3.4 illustrates that 9 out of the 27 (or 33%) minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote were new minor parties. A new minor party is one which did not exist before the presidential election in which it received at least 1.5% of the popular vote total. For example, the Free Soil Party came into existence in August of 1848 in Buffalo, New York (Kruschke 1991, 66). The Free Soil Party began as a political party in 1848, and it was able to receive 10.12% of the presidential popular vote in that same year.

Two-thirds (18 of 27) of the minor parties that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold were established minor parties. An established minor party is a minor party that was able to receive at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote total and was already in existence during the previous presidential election. For example, the Liberty Party received 2.3% of the popular vote in 1844. But, this was not the first national election in which they contested.

The Liberty Party was founded in Warsaw, New York in 1839, and it contested the presidential election in 1840 (Kruschke 1991, 91-92). However, it was not very successful in 1840 because it received only 0.29% of the popular vote total during that election year (Kruschke 1991, 92). The Liberty Party did not give up its quest to have their anti-slavery position addressed and consequently became very successful in the next presidential election. Overall, twice as many successful minor parties were in the already established category, so the data shows that it is much more likely that an already established minor party will reach the 1.5% presidential popular vote total in an election year than a brand new minor political party.
Figure 3.5 shows that there was only one new minor party that met the 1.5% popular vote criteria during the second party era, while there were 3 established minor parties during that same party era. The established minor parties were more prevalent during this time in history. During the third party system, there were 3 new minor parties and four established minor parties. The third party era was the time period when the new minor parties had their largest amount of success as a group. Approximately 43% of the successful new minor parties occurred between 1860 and 1892.

![Graph](image)

Figure 3.5: Number of Significant Minor Parties by Party Era and whether the Minor Party was New or Already Established
There were 2 new minor parties during the fourth party era while there were 8 established minor parties. The fourth party system was the time period when the established minor parties were most successful. That is because about 44% of the established minor parties appeared between 1896 and 1928. In the fifth party era there were two new minor parties and two established minor parties. Considering the fact that there were twice as many established minor parties, the new minor parties were proportionally more successful during the fifth party system. The data from the sixth party era illustrates that there was only one new minor party and only one established minor party. And just like in the fifth party era, the new minor party group was proportionally more successful in the sixth party system.

The 2,747 platform planks that have been proposed by these minor parties have changed over the years. That is because there have been many technological, economic and social changes that have occurred in the United States that have caused shifts in the prevalent issues of the day. In each party era, there is usually a dominant major party and a less dominant major party and they have both established a set of issues that they choose to concentrate on. When a critical election comes around approximately every 32 years, the party coalitions often are rearranged, and new issues come to the forefront. And, consequently, there are new issues that the minor parties feel as if the major parties are not adequately addressing. The next grouping of figures will illustrate how the mix and intensity of issues changed from party era to party era.

Figure 3.6 displays by issue topic the number of platform planks proposed by the minor parties in the second party era between 1840 and 1856. The first interesting piece of information is that none of the minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the
presidential popular vote proposed any defense or agricultural agenda items in this era. There were so many internal problems and divisions in American during the second party era that those problems took precedence in regards to the hot-button issues of the day. However, it is very curious that there were no agricultural minor planks. One could argue that the prominent farmers of that day were the plantation owners and their issues and demands were intertwined with the question of slavery. So in a way, the agricultural issues were being discussed through the issue of slavery.

Figure 3.6: Total Number of Minor Party Planks Proposed by Issue Type in the 2nd Party Era (1840-1856)
There was only one social welfare issue and only two labor issues proposed by the minor parties during the second party era, and all three of them occurred in 1844. It appears as if these types of issues may have been tabled because of the continued agitation brought about by the slavery question. There was one natural resources platform plank in 1848 and then there were three more in 1852. But then the American (Know-Nothing) Party became prominent in 1856 and the issues about land and other resources took a back seat. There were five foreign policy issues in the second party era, and they all arose during the 1852 election. The minor parties addressed issues like international arbitration and how to deal with countries like Haiti, but the other important domestic issues of that day once again took center stage in 1856, and the foreign policy minor party planks disappeared once again.

There were six economic issues that were proposed in 1848 by the minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote, but then that number dropped to five in 1852. And then only one economic issue was offered by a significant minor party in 1856. It appears as if the importance of economic issues in the minds of the minor party leaders was declining because the civil rights and governmental issues were becoming so contentious that certain states were talking about possibly seceding from the Union. These issues had to be satisfactorily addressed so that the United States of America could remain intact. Thus, it appears as if the prevalent issues that the minor parties wanted addressed during the second party system revolved around civil rights (really, slavery) and ethnic policy and the government.

There were five minor party platform planks about civil rights in 1844 and that number fell to four in 1848. The civil rights planks more than doubled in 1852 when
there were nine minor party agenda items about that subject. The rhetoric about the slavery issue was really escalating and becoming vitriolic as the country moved closer to the Civil War. The civil rights and ethnic policy issues offered by the minor parties fell to three in 1856. That is because the Republican Party had risen to major political party status, and they were co-opting some of the anti-slavery planks from the past anti-slavery minor parties because they were an anti-slavery major party. So, there was no major reason for the minor political parties to propose any more anti-slavery planks. However, the American Party in 1856 had problems with the immigrants and the civil rights and ethnic policy planks were transformed from a focus on slavery to addressing immigration issues.

There were six minor party planks about government issues in 1844 and that number rose to eight in 1848. The minor party agenda items about government stayed high at 8 in 1852 and then increased again to twelve in 1856. The minor party planks about the government never waned during the second party era. The reason is probably because the United States was less than one hundred years old at the time and the minor party leaders wanted to offer solutions as to how the government should operate and be structured.

Figure 3.7 shows all of the platform planks proposed by the minor parties in the third party era, between 1860 and 1892. The first point that seems to stand out in figure 3.7 is that in 1860, there were five minor party platform planks about the government, three about civil rights and ethnic policy, one about the economy and one about foreign policy, but then from 1864 to 1872, there were no minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote total. There were seven minor parties and
independent candidacies during that time period, but all of them received less than 1.0% of the presidential popular vote.\textsuperscript{8} One could argue that the majority of the people were trying to find their place in one of the two major parties during and after the tumultuous Civil War period. But over time, it became clear to many people that the major parties were once again ignoring many of the important issues that needed to be addressed in the country. So, the prominent minor political parties started asserting themselves once again in 1880 with the rise of the Greenback Party.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.7.png}
\caption{Total Number of Minor Party Planks Proposed by Issue Type in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Party Era (1860-1892)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{8} There is a historical list of all of the major and minor parties that competed in every general election going all of the way back to 1789 on \url{http://uselectionatlas.org/}. 

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During the 1880 presidential election, figure 3.7 illustrates that the two main issues of the day revolved around the economy and labor. However as one looks at the subsequent election years, labor issues never had a prominent place on the minor parties’ national platforms for the rest of the third party era. That is because labor issues were not main focuses of the Prohibition and People’s parties. There were 12 minor party planks about the economy in 1880, and that number decreased to 3 in 1884 because the Prohibition Party was the main minor party during that election year. But then economic issues started to become more important again because even the Prohibition Party in 1888 proposed 7 of them. Then the number of minor party economic agenda items exploded to thirty-six. Economic issues dealing with, for example, the currency and taxes had definitely become the most important problems that needed to be solved by the end of the third party system according to the minor parties.

Figure 3.7 also shows that were two other important issues that preoccupied the minor political parties during the last half of the third party era -- resources and social welfare. Issues dealing with resources were not very important to the minor parties until 1892, but then that issue type became more important because the Prohibition and People’s parties proposed ten of them in 1892. The minor planks about resources generally dealt with land ownership and usage issues. The other main issue revolved around social welfare. The Prohibition Party was successful from 1884 through 1892 and so there were quite a few platform planks revolving around the prohibition of alcohol that were proposed by them.

Figure 3.8 illustrates the issue types reflected in the platform planks that were proposed by the minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote
in the fourth party era. The first interesting result is that there were not any minor parties that met the 1.5% popular vote threshold at the beginning of the fourth party era, which was 1896, and at the end of the fourth party system, which was 1928.

Figure 3.8: Total Number of Minor Party Planks Proposed by Issue Type in the 4th Party Era (1896-1928)

In 1900, only 10 minor party platform planks were proposed and they were all in the social welfare category. All of the 1900 minor party planks revolved around prohibition. The most pressing issues of 1904 dealt with the economy, social welfare and
the government, which attracted 82% of the minor party planks. Once again, the Prohibition Party was one of the minor political parties that met the 1.5% popular vote threshold in 1904 so quite a few of the social welfare platform planks addressed the prohibition of alcohol.

In 1908, minor party planks about the economy, social welfare and the government were still prevalent because the minor parties devoted 65% of their national platforms to them. However, in 1908, there were quite a few minor party planks addressing labor and natural resources also. It appears as if these two issue types were becoming an important issue that the minor party leaders felt were being ignored by the major party elites. Additionally, 1908 would be the last year that the Prohibition Party met the 1.5% popular vote threshold. The first time that they reached the 1.5% threshold was in 1884 and, after that the only election that they did not receive at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote was in 1896. As stated in the previous paragraph, 1896 was the election year in which no minor party was able to meet that 1.5% cut-off.

In 1912, 12 foreign policy platform planks were issued by the minor parties that reached the 1.5% popular vote threshold. This was the first election year that the number of foreign policy issues proposed by the minor parties reached double-digits. The 1912 presidential election was also the first year since 1892 in which agricultural issues were being proposed by the minor parties. Additionally, the number of resource platform planks increased to 20, which was a little over one and half times the number of resource offered in 1908.

Also in 1912, the economic and labor minor party planks more than doubled and the government minor party planks more than tripled. Approximately 47% of the
Progressive and Socialist parties’ minor party planks were devoted to issues revolving around the government like, for example, judicial and election reform. The only issue type that received less attention if one compares 1908 with 1912 was social welfare. The least common issue type during the fourth party system was the defense platform planks because only two of them were proposed in 1912 and that was by the Progressive Party. Additionally, 1912 had the largest number of platform planks about every issue type except social welfare and civil rights and ethnic policy.

The overall number of minor party planks decreased in every issue type category in 1916 and the agricultural agenda items completely disappeared. In 1920, the civil rights and ethnic policy planks reached double-digits for the first time since 1852. The civil rights issue type was prominent before the Civil War, but it appears as if after the slavery controversy was resolved, the minor parties did not want to stir up the old racial tensions. So, the data seems to indicate that the minor parties for all intents and purposes ignored most of the equal rights controversies when it came to people of color. In 1924, civil rights issues were completely ignored once again, and the main issues that the Progressive Party dealt with in that year were about the economy, resources and the government.

Figure 3.9 illustrates the number of platform planks based on issue type that were proposed by the minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote in the fifth party era. The first interesting fact about figure 8 is that the first two elections in the 1940s passed without there being any minor parties that met the 1.5% popular vote threshold. Additionally, there were not any significant major parties after 1948 in the fifth
party system. So, there were significant minor parties in only three out of the nine presidential elections in the fifth party era.

Figure 3.9: Total Number of Minor Party Planks Proposed by the Issue Type in the 5th Party Era (1932-1964)

Figure 3.9 also shows that in 1932, for the first and only time, the minor parties felt as if agricultural issues were the most pressing and unresolved issue of the day. Consequently, they devoted 21% of their platform planks to that issue. In 1932, social welfare and economic issues had the second and third largest number of minor party
planks, respectively, which makes perfect sense when one considers that 1932 was during the Great Depression era.

In 1936, there were 21 economic platform planks. That amount was more than four times the number of agricultural issues, which was the issue type with the second largest number of minor party planks offered during that election year. In 1936, every issue type was represented with at least one minor party plank except for the civil rights and ethnic policy issues. Those important issues were completely ignored by the Union Party in 1936.

However, figure 3.9 shows that by 1948, civil rights issues had become prominent once again. There were 53 civil rights planks proposed by the Progressive and States’ Rights parties, which was over four times more than at any other time in history. It seems as if the Progressive and States’ Rights parties were signaling that the civil rights issues, even though the two minor parties were taking diametrically opposing stances on them, had been ignored long enough and needed to be addressed by the major parties and the government.

There were actually two other issues that the minor parties felt were even more pressing than civil rights. They were social welfare, which had 72 platform planks, and foreign policy, which had 63 platform agenda items. The social welfare planks revolved around issues like education, public assistance and government controls on basic commodities to keep their prices affordable. Some of the foreign policy platform planks dealt with the United Nations and many other issues confronting the post-World War II world.
Figure 3.10 illustrates the number of platform planks that were proposed by the minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote in the sixth party era based on issue type. The first interesting point to mention about table 10 is that after the American Independent Party in 1968, there was a six-election gap before the next minor party that had an official platform received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote appeared. This was the longest gap since the beginning of our time series in 1840.
With that being said, there were several independent candidacies that topped the 1.5% popular vote threshold, so it appears as if the form of “third-partyism” changed in the sixth party system away from parties with platforms to independent candidacies without any semblance of a party or platform.

Figure 3.10 also shows that the issue type with the largest number of platform planks devoted to it was foreign policy. This was the first time in history that the foreign policy issues had the greatest number of minor party planks during an election year. If one thinks about it, in 1968, there were many foreign policy issues for the minor political parties to discuss like Vietnam, Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Cuba, for instance.

Social welfare and the economy were the second and third most discussed issue types, respectively. The least discussed issue type in 1968 was civil rights and ethnic policy, which is somewhat surprising considering the fact that one is referring to the near revolutionary times of the 1960s. But, maybe what one is seeing is a signal that the tumultuous civil rights era was at an end.

In 2000, figure 3.10 illustrates that there was an explosion of minor party platform planks in comparison to 1968. Approximately 66% of the 2000 Green Party’s platform issues revolved around social welfare, resources and the economy. Social welfare and the economy have been some of the most discussed issues in several of the party eras; however, this is the first time that the resource issue type was so prominent. Almost 20% of the 2000 Green Party’s national platform revolved around natural resources, and that percentage was higher than it has ever been before.
The last five figures briefly told the story about how the 2,747 minor party planks, documented in figure 3.1, were distributed in each party system by issue type. It was important to give this account because this whole study is about the historical flow of issues from the minor parties to the major parties in the American two-party system. In each party era, the mix of issues changed and the prominence of different issue types changed. The last five figures clearly chronicled those variations. The graphs are also important because they depict the years when there was no third party activity that reached the 1.5% popular vote threshold between 1840 and 2004.

Now that the distribution of issues has been documented between 1840 and 2004, the next step is to illustrate how the different types of minor party platform planks were dispersed by party era. Figure 3.1 gave a complete breakdown of the original minor party issues, repeat issues and minor party co-optations, but now it is time to discuss these minor party platform planks in more detail. For instance, which party era had the highest percentage of minor party co-optations? When were the minor political parties proposing new and original platform planks and in which party eras were they simply restating or repeating minor party issues that already had been proclaimed by other minor political parties?

Figure 3.11 gives one a graphical representation of the percentage of minor party platform planks by party era that were actually original or available to be co-opted by the major political parties -- in other words, the percentage of minor party agenda items that were not repeat issues or minor party issue co-optations. The largest percentage of original or available issues was 69% in the second party era and the frequencies went down steadily until there was an upturn in the fifth party era. Once again, the fifth party
era had a larger amount of original issue stances than would have been projected based on the downward trajectory of the table.

Figure 3.11: Percentage of Original Issues on the Minor Party’s National Platforms by Party Era

Figure 3.1 showed that approximately one out of every six platform planks on a minor party national platform were actually co-opted from a major political party. Figure 3.12 takes a closer look at that political phenomenon by breaking those minor party co-optations into party eras. The lowest percentage of minor party co-optations occurred during the second party era, which was the first party era in which the political parties produced national platforms. This makes actually perfect sense if one thinks about how minor party co-optations are defined. Since the national platform was initiated in 1840, there were only a few major party platform ideas that were available to be appropriated by the minor parties in the second party era. But as time progressed, there were more and
more major party agenda items that were available for co-optation, which is probably why one sees a steady increase in this political phenomenon -- at least until the sixth party era, where one sees a four percentage point decline from 20% to 16%. The second reason that the second party system had the lowest percentage of minor party co-optations was simply because there were only 16 years in it instead of approximately 32 years for the rest of the party eras.

Figure 3.12: Percentage of Minor Party Co-optations by Party Era

Figure 3.13 illustrates the percentage of repeat issues on the minor party platforms by party era. The lowest percentage is 22%, which occurs in the second party era. Once again, that proportion logically makes sense because there were fewer platform issues to repeat in the second party era. The second reason that the second party system had the
lowest percentage of repeat issues was simply because there were only 16 years in it instead of 32 years for the rest of the party eras.

Over time, as more and more issues were proposed, there were more and more agenda items that could be repeated. So, the percentage of repeat issues continued to increase until the fifth party era, where the frequency went from 56% in the fourth party era to 35% in the fifth party era. If one looks at the trend in the chart, the fifth party era should have been about 65%, which means that the repeat issues were down about 30% from where one might have projected them to be based on the previous rates of growth. Repeat issues returned to their previous rate of growth in the 6th party system, showing that in the most recent party era familiar issues dominated the minor party agendas, with very little room for new items.

Figure 3.13: Percentage of Repeat Issues on Minor Party Platforms by Party Era
This chapter has given the general findings from the issue co-optation dataset. Initially, each and every minor party platform plank was placed in one of these three categories: original minor party plank, a repeated minor party plank or a minor party co-optation. Later in the chapter, the platform planks in those categories were illustrated by party era in order to depict all of their distributions since the initiation of the national platform in 1840. Additionally, since this whole study is about the flow of issues between the minor and major political parties, it was necessary to illustrate how the mix of issues that the minor parties proposed changed by party era.
CHAPTER 4

A CASE STUDY OF THE 1848 FREE SOIL PARTY

The 1848 Free Soil Party produced 19 platform planks and 17 of them originated with the Free Soilers in that election year (see figure 4.1). Out of those 17 original agenda items that were available to be co-opted, the major parties adopted 14 of them and placed them on their national platforms, which is a major party issue co-optation rate of 82%. Therefore, the 1848 Free Soil Party had the highest major party issue appropriation rate of any minor political party in American history (see figure 5.6). The Free Soil Party also was a member of the most successful tier of minor political parties with 10.12% of the presidential popular vote total in 1848. Therefore, it serves as a valuable case study to investigate this issue co-optation process more closely.

Before the Civil War, the Democratic and Whig parties were doing everything to keep the contentious slavery issue from dominating the national agenda. That is why there were so many compromises like the Missouri Compromise of 1850, in the second party era. The major parties did not want to open the gate to the slavery issue. But when a constituency and major issue are being ignored, a minor party will generally rise to try
and agenda-set for the political parties and force them to address the ignored issue. And that is exactly what happened in the pre-Civil War era.

The Democratic Party initiated the national platform in 1840 and, by that time, they, along with the Whig Party, were definitely trying to keep a lid on the combustible slavery issue. Slavery had been a part of the fabric of America since its founding and there was a growing contingent of people in the United States that wanted its abolition. The Liberty Party began to fill that void in 1840 and 1844 when it ran as an anti-slavery minor party in the presidential elections. The Free Soil Party picked up their anti-slavery mantle in 1848.

For that reason, most scholars argue that the Free Soil Party was a single-issue minor political party because of its anti-slavery platform planks, which referenced its desire for the establishment of free men and free labor; however, the Free Soilers also had two other major areas of contestation. One of the areas was a policy-specific concern regarding homesteads or free land for the settlers who moved to the western part of the United States. Their other main focus was more rhetorical and it revolved around free speech. As their 1848 national political platform stated, they wanted “FREE SOIL, FREE SPEECH, FREE LABOR, and, FREE MEN” (Johnson and Porter 1973, 14). Now let’s look at a complete breakdown of the minor party planks that were on the national party platform of the 1848 Free Soil Party.

Figure 4.1 shows that the Free Soil Party proposed 19 platform planks on its 1848 national platform. None of these agenda items were repeated from a previous minor party. On the surface, that result is not surprising, because there were not many issue stances for the 1848 Free Soil Party to repeat. The Democratic Party had just inaugurated
this national platform process in 1840, and the 1844 Liberty Party was the only significant minor party that preceded the 1848 Free Soil Party. However, when one takes into account the fact that the Liberty Party of 1844 was an anti-slavery minor party, it is somewhat surprising that the Free Soilers of 1848 chose not to repeat any of its platform planks.

The Free Soil Party was comprised of the remnants of the Liberty Party along with the “Barnburners” of the Democratic Party and the “Conscience Whigs”, which was the anti-slavery faction of the Whig Party (Sundquist 1983, 60-64). Knowing that the members of the now-defunct Liberty Party helped make up the newly-founded anti-slavery Free Soil Party makes it even more surprising that it did not repeat any of the Liberty Party platform planks.
The reason seems to be that that the Barnburners and the Conscience Whigs were not willing to go as far as the Liberty Party members and call for the complete abolition of slavery (Blue 1973, 1). The defectors from the major political parties were, for the most part, against the extension of slavery into the new territories and states, but they were not for eliminating slavery from the states in which it already existed (Blue 1973, 1). The idea of anti-extension was the main focus of the Free Soil Party. Consequently, none of the Liberty Party’s specific platform planks were adopted by the 1848 Free Soilers.

The national platform of the 1848 Free Soil Party did not repeat any platform planks from the 1844 Liberty Party; however, it did repeat or adopt two issues from the major parties’ national platforms. This is the first platform plank proposed by the 1848 Free Soil Party.

“Resolved, That Slavery in the several states of this Union which recognize its existence, depends upon the States laws alone, which cannot be repealed or modified by the Federal Government, and for which laws that Government is not responsible. We therefore propose no interference by Congress with Slavery within the limits of any State.”

The first platform plank of the 1848 Free Soil Party was a minor party co-optation because in 1840 the Democratic Party had already begun espousing that idea in the same way.

“Resolved, That congress has no power, under the constitution, to interfere with or control the domestic institutions of the several states, and that states are the sole and
proper judges of everything appertaining to their own affairs, not prohibited by the constitution…”

It makes sense that the first platform plank from the 1848 Free Soil Party would be a co-optation from the Democratic Party. That is because the leaders in control of the Free Soil national convention were the Barnburners, who were ex-Democrats.

The Barnburners did not want slavery to be extended into the new territories, which was evidenced by their coalescing behind the Wilmot Proviso (Sundquist 1983, 61). The Wilmot Proviso would have prohibited any territory that was obtained from Mexico, like New Mexico and California, from becoming a slave territory (Sundquist 1983, 61). However, the ex-Democrats still did not want the Congress to outlaw slavery in a state that already had the practice and wanted to continue it. Thus, as stated earlier, they were against the extension of slavery, but they were not for the abolition of slavery from the United States.

In 1848, the Free Soil Party stated that “we are…in favor of such a tariff of duties as will raise revenue adequate to defray the necessary expenses of the Federal Government…” This platform plank was co-opted from the Whig Party because in 1844 on their national platform they proclaimed that they were for “a tariff for revenue to defray the necessary expenses of the government…” This minor party co-optation makes sense because “the Barnburners were the reform faction in matters of public finance and of government-business relations” in the Democratic Party (Sundquist 1983, 62).

Therefore, this minor party issue appropriation was a way to appease the Whigs in the new minor party.
The Southern Democrats were mostly opposed to the tariff because it was thought to advantage Northern business, so this tariff issue also allowed the Barnburners to push to the forefront an issue revolving around the reform of public finance and government-business relations. Thus, it was a win-win minor party co-optation for the ex-major party members from both the Whig and Democratic parties. With that being said, only 2 out of the 19 platform planks were co-opted from the Democratic and Whig parties. The remaining seventeen Free Soil agenda items from their 1848 national platform were original platform issues.

![Figure 4.2: The Number of Platform Planks Proposed by the 1848 Free Soil Party by Issue Type](image)

Figure 4.2 graphically represents the types of issues that were being proposed by the 1848 Free Soil Party. I have identified 9 issue types, and the Free Soil Party did not include five of them on their 1848 national platform: foreign policy, defense, labor,
agriculture and social welfare. They did however proclaim 8 platform planks concerning the government, 6 about economic policy, 4 revolving around civil rights and ethnic policy and 1 about natural resources. Even though the Free Soil Party is classified as a single-issue minor party, it did focus on other issues even though it did not cover the whole gamut of issues in one national platform.

Once again, this makes sense because the 1848 Free Soil Party had more than the ex-Liberty Party members as part of their new minor party coalitional group. The Barnburners and the Conscience Whigs were definitely concerned about more issues than just anti-slavery. The Barnburners, in particular, were government and public finance reformers in the Democratic Party, so it makes sense that about 74% of the 1848 Free Soil platform planks were government and economic policy agenda items. Now, let’s take a look at the major party co-optation percentage of the 17 original Free Soil Party platform planks.

![Figure 4.3: Percentage of 1848 Free Soil Issues that were Co-opted by Issue Type](image)

Figure 4.3: Percentage of 1848 Free Soil Issues that were Co-opted by Issue Type
Figure 4.3 illustrates that every one of the platform planks from the 1848 Free Soil Party about economic policy, government and civil rights and ethnic policy were eventually co-opted by one of the major parties. The government issue type was, for all intents and purposes, relatively successful because 63%, which is five out of eight platform planks were eventually co-opted by one of the major parties.

Given the record of issue adoptions from the 1848 Free Soil Party, the three original government platform planks that were never appropriated by the major political parties are of particular interest. In 1848, the Free Soil Party makes this proclamation. “Resolved, that we demand Freedom and established institutions for our brethren in Oregon…and not only for them, but for our new brethren in California and New Mexico.” There are three individual platform planks embedded in this one paragraph. The Free Soil Party was demanding statehood for the territories of Oregon, California and New Mexico. The demand for New Mexico’s statehood was co-opted by one of the major parties and that fact will be discussed in a future section, but the planks about the statehood of Oregon and California never were appropriated by either of the major parties.

This finding might seem puzzling at first because ingratiating a large bloc of new voters would make perfect sense especially if the less dominant major party is trying to bring more voters under its political umbrella in order to become the first major party. Besides that, both of these territories did become states, so the major parties did eventually address these two platform planks in their legislative activities. Yet the question remains. Why didn’t the major parties co-opt these two Free Soil platform
planks from their 1848 national platform? After an investigation into the history of Oregon and California, the answer became very clear.

In 1848, the Free Soil Party demanded that the inhabitants of California be given statehood. The statehood of California was officially addressed by the major parties and the states during the Compromise of 1850 and the inhabitants of California were given statehood in that same year. So, the only presidential election in which this platform plank could have been co-opted by one of the major parties was in 1848. The Congressional Quarterly states that the major and minor political parties held their national conventions during these months: the Free Soil Party – August of 1848, the Democratic Party – May of 1848 and the Whig Party – June of 1848 (1997, 31-32). Therefore, the statehood of California was an agenda item that could not have been co-opted by the major political parties in the manner defined in this analysis even though it was an original minor party plank because the Free Soil national platform was the last national platforms to be published in this dataset before California officially became a state.9

In 1848, the Free Soil Party demanded that the inhabitants of Oregon be granted statehood. Eleven years later, in 1859, Oregon was admitted to the Union as one of the American states. If one thinks about the less dominant major party in 1852, which was the Whig Party, they were already in disarray because they were straddling the fence on the slavery controversy. Whether a new American state would be a “free state” or “slave

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9 Issues like the statehood of California actually skew the overall historic issue co-optation percentage downward. In other words, the major party issue co-optation is probably a little higher than 30% because some of the platform planks that were coded as never being co-opted could not have been appropriated because they were resolved before the major party could place that item on its national platform.
state” was an extension of the slavery controversy that they were probably trying to avoid as well.

In 1856, the Republican Party was the new second major party and they were busy co-opting many of the all-important anti-slavery platform planks of the 1844 Liberty Party, and the 1848 and 1852 Free Soil Parties. The Republicans were appropriating the anti-slavery platform planks that would make them the dominant major party in 1860. So, only two national elections elapsed before this Oregon statehood issue was permanently resolved.

In 1856, the Free Soil Party proposed that there should be an “election by the people of all civil officers in the service of the government…” This agenda item seems like it is an attempt to deal with the problem of political patronage. This plank appears to be a call for all of the top civil officers of the government to be elected by the people. The Democratic Party was already split on how to deal with patronage, and consequently this patronage issue along with a few others had already caused a rift in the party beyond the contentious issue of slavery (Sundquist 1983, 61). So, it makes sense as to why the Free Soil Party would want to address the issue of political patronage. But, one can also understand why the major political parties did not want to adopt this issue. Electing every top civil officer was something that the major parties probably did not want to even entertain.

The fourteen agenda items that were co-opted by the major political parties warrant examination as well. In 1848, the Free Soil Party said
“Resolved, That river and harbor improvements, when demanded by the safety and convenience of commerce with foreign nations, or among the several states, are objects of national concern; and that it is the duty of Congress, in the exercise of its constitutional powers, to provide therefore.”

The Whig Party co-opted both of the river and harbor improvement planks in their 1852 national platform just one election after they were first proposed. The Whigs appropriated those two issue stances when they made this proclamation.

“The Constitution vests in Congress the power to open and repair harbors, and remove obstructions from navigable rivers, whenever such improvements are necessary for the common defence, and for the protection and facility of commerce with foreign nations, or among the States, said improvements being, in every instance, national and general in their character.”

As stated in chapter three, there is nothing inherently irrational about those two issue appropriations on the surface. The problem is that if the Whigs were intentionally trying to woo the Free Soil constituents and simultaneously quell the rising minor party threat, then only co-opting these two economic policy agenda items does not appear to be the right strategy. If the Whig Party wanted to woo their voters to their side and if they wanted to quash the rising minor party threat, then they needed to appropriate their anti-slavery stances into their national platforms. But, on the contrary, the Whig Party was aligning its positions so close to the Democratic Party that one Democratic politician in 1851 said “There is now nothing but the name left to distinguish Democrats from Whigs” (Holt 1999, 688). Adopting Free Soil anti-slavery agenda items would have positioned the Whig Party opposite the pro-slavery Democratic Party and would have more than
likely left no room for an up and coming minor party. The people that had anti-slavery positions would have probably voted for the Whig Party and the pro-slavery voters would have coalesced behind the Democratic Party.

The reality is that the Whigs were not trying to woo Free Soil voters to their side by co-opting these two internal improvement planks. One of the reasons why these agenda items were co-opted by the Whig Party in 1852 is because they were issues that were very important to the Whigs in the Midwest (Holt 1999, 738-739). Beginning to endorse these internal improvements would hopefully keep that segment of the Whigs on the party’s side and eager for the upcoming presidential campaign and election. Additionally, internal improvement issues were dividing the Democratic Party in New York, and the Whig Party felt that the adoption of those 1848 Free Soil issue stances would help them to win the White House in 1852 (Holt 1999, 749-751). As one Whig politician in New York stated about the Democratic Party, “The Canal question is bound to be their death in this state certainly” (Holt 1999, 751).

With that being said, the Whigs needed to place themselves against the Democratic Party by seizing the minor parties’ anti-slavery platform planks. If the Whig Party thought that the anti-slavery issue stance was too controversial for them to appropriate into their national platform, then they could have at least appropriated the second most important issue of the Free Soil Party, which was free homesteads as the American citizens moved to and explored the lands in the western part of the United States. The Whig Party did not even adopt that issue stance. That is probably because dealing with issues revolving around the new western territories would mean that they would have to possibly address the slavery issue.
In 1848, the Free Soil Party stated that “the Government should return to the policy of limiting, localizing and discouraging Slavery.” In 1856, during the first election in which the Republican Party was a major party, they co-opted that issue stance by saying

“Resolved: That, with our Republican fathers, we hold it to be a self-evident truth, that all men are endowed with the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the primary object and ulterior design of our Federal Government were to secure these rights to all persons under its exclusive jurisdiction; that, as our Republican fathers, when they had abolished Slavery in all our National Territory, ordained that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law, it becomes our duty to maintain this provision of the Constitution against all attempts to violate it for the purpose of establishing Slavery in the Territories of the United States by positive legislation, prohibiting its existence or extension therein. That we deny the authority of Congress, of a Territorial Legislation, of any individual, or association of individuals, to give legal existence to Slavery in any Territory of the United States, while the present Constitution shall be maintained.”

Another Free Soil platform plank proclaimed that “The only safe means of preventing the extension of slavery into territory now free, is to prohibit its existence in all such territory by an act of Congress.” In 1856 the Republicans appropriated that plank into their national platform when they said “Resolved: That the Constitution confers upon Congress sovereign powers over the Territories of the United States for their government; and that in the exercise of this power, it is both the right and the imperative duty of Congress to prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism—Polygamy, and Slavery.” The Republicans in 1856 did what the Whig Party should have done earlier. They adopted these two anti-slavery planks along with five more from the other anti-slavery minor parties. It was definitely much easier for the Republican Party to adopt
these anti-slavery platform planks than the Whigs because their leaders had coalesced around the idea of anti-slavery. This issue co-optation strategy was definitely in the best interest of the less dominant Republican Party in this case because it allowed them to achieve their two main goals, which were to become the dominant major political party and address their key anti-slavery issues.

The Free Soil Party in 1848 proclaimed that there should be “No more Slave States.” In 1864, the Republicans co-opted that idea by stating that

“we are in favor, furthermore, of such an amendment to the Constitution, to be made by the people in conformity with its provisions, as shall terminate and forever prohibit the existence of Slavery within the limits of the jurisdiction of the United States.”

The interesting point here is that the Republican Party was unwilling to confront the South on the issue of slave states in its 1856 and 1860 platforms and only did so in the midst of the Civil War in 1864, when the Emancipation Proclamation already had been issued (in 1862 and 1863) to ban slavery from the Confederate states..

In 1848, the Free Soil Party proposed three platform planks that were co-opted by the Democratic Party in 1868. The first platform plank was for the “abolition of all unnecessary offices and salaries.” The Democrats said that they were for “the abrogation of useless offices.” The Democrats did not have control of the White House and so it would make sense that they would want to bring an end to some of the patronage jobs that the Republicans controlled. The second Free Soil plank was that they were for the “earliest practical payment of the national debt.” In 1868, the Democrats proclaimed that
they were for the “Payment of the public debt of the United States as rapidly as practicable.” The third Free Soil agenda item was their proclamation that “the free grant to actual settlers is a wise and just measure of public policy.” The Democrats in 1868 said “That the public lands should be distributed as widely as possible among the people, and should be disposed of…under the pre-emption or homestead laws.”

In 1872, the Republican Party co-opted four platform planks from the 1848 Free Soil Party. The Free Soil leaders said that they were “a retrenchment of the patronage of the federal government.” The Republicans proclaimed in 1872 that

“Any system of the civil service under which the subordinate positions of the government are considered rewards for mere party zeal is fatally demoralizing, and we therefore favor a reform of the system by laws which shall abolish the evils of patronage, and make honesty, efficiency, and fidelity the essential qualifications for public positions, without practically creating a life-tenure of office.”

The second Free Soil plank was that they “Demand cheap postage for the people.” The Republicans in 1872 said that they were “for a speedy reduction in the rates of postage.” The third agenda item was that the Free Soil Party was “in favor of such a tariff of duties as will raise revenue adequate to pay the annual installments of the interest thereon…” The fourth issue stance was that they were “in favor of such a tariff of duties as will raise revenue adequate to pay annual installments of our debt.” Both of those platform planks were co-opted by the 1872 Republicans when they said “The annual revenue, after paying current expenditures, pensions, and the interest on the public debt, should furnish a moderate balance for the reduction of the principal and that revenue,
except so much as may be derived from a tax upon tobacco and liquors, should be raised by duties upon importations…”

The last two major party issue co-optations from the 1848 Free Soil Party come from the Democratic Party. In 1848, the Free Soil Party said that they were for “a retrenchment of the expenses of the federal government.” In 1876, the Democrats said “We demand a rigorous frugality in every department and from every officer of the Government.” They also said that they “do cordially indorse the actions of the present House of Representatives in reducing and curtailing the expenses of the Federal Government…”

The last issue was that Free Soil Party said that “We demand freedom and established institutions for our brethren in New Mexico.” The Democratic Party co-opted that issue in 1888 when they stated

“Resolved, That a just and liberal policy should be pursued in reference to the Territories; that the right of self-government is inherent in the people and guaranteed under the Constitution; that the Territories of Washington, Dakota, Montana and New Mexico are, by virtue of population and development, entitled to admission into the Union as States, and we unqualifiedly condemn the course of the Republican party in refusing Statehood and self-government to their people.”

During that same 1888 election year, the Republicans also said that

“The Republican party pledges itself to do all in its power to facilitate the admission of the Territories of New Mexico, Wyoming, Idaho and Arizona to the enjoyment of self-government as States, such of them as are now qualified, as soon as possible, and the others as soon as they may become so.”
The statehood of New Mexico plank took 40 years to be co-opted so it more than likely was an unintentional or accidental appropriation. The Democrats or Republicans probably never considered the Free Soil Party when they added that demand to their national platforms. More than likely changes in the country caused this New Mexico statehood platform plank to be addressed. This accidental co-optation was not an attempt to woo new voters or quash a rising minor party threat. The Free Soil Party already had been defunct for a little more than thirty years.

This case study of the Free Soil Party of 1848, which was the most successful minor party in regards to having their issues co-opted, offers a detailed account of how the issue co-optation process works. The next chapter turns to a consideration of this issue co-optation process across parties and party eras.
CHAPTER 5

EXAMINING PATTERNS OF ISSUE CO-OPTATION

The general results in chapter 3 offer a broad glimpse at what is in the issue co-optation dataset. The results in this chapter specifically address the research questions that were posited in chapter 1. Those research questions were offered in order to begin to discover some of the most important facts about issue co-optation as it has operated across the course of the American party system. In addressing them, this chapter mainly focuses on the 682 platform issues that originated with the minor political parties in the United States.

In reviewing a series of research results, some criterion is needed to differentiate between those that are meaningful and those that are not. Since this dataset has the population of major party issue co-optations from 1840 to 2004, the rationale for ordinary significance tests does not apply. Therefore, the decision was made to consider a result as being meaningful only if there was at least a 5% difference.
Section 1 – The frequency of co-optation and the factors that affect it

The first research question asks whether or not the minor parties actually co-opt minor party issues. Figure 3.1 in chapter 3 actually gives the answer to this research question. Yes, the major parties do indeed co-opt minor party issue stances. So, the assumption that this political phenomenon does exist is valid.

The second research question asks for the overall historic co-optation percentage from 1840 to 2004. This research question was also answered in chapter 3, but here are the results once again. There were 682 original minor party agenda items and 204 of them eventually ended up on the national platform of at least one of the American major parties in a subsequent election year. Figure 3.2 in chapter 3 illustrates that the historic major party co-optation frequency between 1840 and 2004 is approximately 30%, which is indeed an impressive finding. Now that the first two research questions have been answered and this historic issue co-optation dataset has been constructed it is possible to begin to delve into the issue co-optation data and really begin to analyze the factors that contribute to this political phenomenon.

Research question 3 is an attempt to discover the party era that had the highest major party issue co-optation percentage. Figure 5.1 gives one a breakdown of the major party issue appropriations by party era. In the second party era, 62% of the original minor party issues were co-opted by at least one of the major political parties. In other words, the major party co-optation rate was approximately six out of every ten, which is more than two times the overall major party co-optation rate of three out of ten. In the third party era, the issue co-optation frequency declined almost 20 percent to 43%. The
platform planks proposed by the minor parties during the fourth party system were appropriated at a frequency of 26%. The fifth party era also had an issue co-optation percentage of 26%.

![Figure 5.1: Percentage of Original Minor Party Issues Co-opted by the Major Parties by Party Era](image)

The minor party issue stances in the sixth party system were appropriated by the major parties at a rate of 20%. If 17 elections or 68 years is the longest recorded major party issue co-optation (see figure 5.3), then it is very possible that there will be more major party appropriations that will bolster the sixth party era’s major party issue co-optation percentage. So, the fact that the sixth party system has the lowest major party co-optation frequency is not particularly surprising for that reason. If the issue appropriation percent does increase a little, then the major party issue frequency of the fourth through
the sixth party eras will not be significantly different because they all will be within 5% points of each other.

With all of that being said, the answer to the third research question is that the second party system definitely had the largest major party issue co-optation percentage by far. The third party era had a decreased percentage of major party issue co-optations and, from that point the issue appropriation rate seems to have leveled off. That is because approximately one out of every four of the minor party issues proposed by the third parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote total have been adopted by at least one of major parties since 1896.

Research question 4 asks whether the Progressive reforms caused a decrease in the frequency of issue co-optations in the United States. Since there were a series of Progressive reforms, the decision was made to not designate one single election year as the cut-off point for the pre and post Progressive reforms, but to instead assign a series of years, which is a more accurate representation of what really happened. The Australian ballot and the direct primary will be considered as the beginning and the end of the Progressive reforms, respectively.

“Late in the century two developments led to a mandatory statewide primary. The first was the introduction of the Australian, or secret, ballot, beginning in Massachusetts in 1888. The secret ballot meant that a voter could cast a really free, uninhibited vote in choosing party nominees. The second development was a wave of revulsion against the convention system under which—even when it was regulated by state law—political bosses and vested interests intent on personal gain used every unsavory tactic imaginable. Progressives considered the direct primary an immediate cure for these abuses. In an 1899 law, perfected in 1901, Minnesota instituted the first mandatory statewide primary system, placing the primary on the same plane as a general election and making it applicable throughout the state. By 1917 all but four states had some form of direct primary.”

10 http://ap.grolier.com/article?assetid=0321480-00&templatename=/article/article.html
With that being said, the Progressive reform years for this fourth research question will be between 1888 and 1920, which is 32 years. Figure 5.2 offers a graphical representation of the results.

![Figure 5.2: Percentage of Major Party Co-optations Before and After the Progressive Reform Era (1888-1920)](chart)

If one considers the Progressive reforms as being between 1888 and 1920, the data in figure 5.2 illustrates that there indeed was a decrease in issue appropriations after the Progressive reforms were implemented. Before 1888, there were 53 major party co-optations of original minor party planks out of a possible 93, which is approximately 57%. After 1920, there were 91 major party appropriations out of a possible 378, which is around 24%. Thus, there was a more than 50% decrease in major party issue co-optations once the Progressive reforms began to be put into operation. With that being said, the pre
and post Progressive Era rates of co-optation are clearly different, which may explain why the three most recent party systems have experienced much lower rates of major party co-optation of minor party issues.

The fifth research question asks whether the 5% presidential popular vote threshold established for the minor parties in 1974 in order to receive matching funds caused an increase in the frequency and importance of issue co-optations in the United States. This is a very interesting research question because if the Progressive reforms caused a decrease in issue co-optations, one would surmise that a 5% popular vote would give voters an extra incentive to cast a vote for a minor party. Those excited and more than likely issue-driven voters would seem to be a prime target to be brought into the fold of one of the major parties. Therefore, adopting their agenda items would seem to make strategic sense under this scenario.

The 2000 Green Party was the only minor political party after 1972 that passed the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold. So, there is only one minor party in this issue co-optation dataset to analyze, which is definitely not enough to make any definitive conclusions about this research question. Over time, there may be other minor parties that will be added to this dataset that will allow this research question to be answered. Additionally, if independent candidates and their issue positions are eventually added to this dataset, there will probably be enough minor parties and independent candidates to successfully answer this question; but for now, this research question will have to be tabled for a future analysis.
Section 2 – What is the timing of the co-optations?

Figure 5.3: Number of Elections before Major Party Co-option

The sixth research question seeks to determine the amount of time that lapses between the minor party proposal of a platform plank and the subsequent co-optation by one of the major parties. The largest number of issue appropriations, which was 35, occurred during the first year after an original minor party issue was proposed. The second and the fifth years were tied for the second largest number of issue co-optations at 23. A total of 137 out of the 204 major party issue appropriations, or 67%, occurred from the same election year to the fifth election year afterwards. Once again, a same year major party co-optation occurs when a minor party places a platform plank on its national
platform and during that same election year, a major party places that same platform plank on its national platform after it was first espoused by the minor party. So, if a platform plank was going to be co-opted by one of the major political parties, then more than likely it was going to happen within twenty years of it being first proposed by one of the minor parties.

Surprisingly, 5% of the major party issue co-optations (11) occurred beyond 10 election cycles. The longest time between the initial inclusion of a rhetorical stance in a minor party platform and its adoption by a major party came from the government issue type. This government platform plank took 17 national elections or 68 years to finally be picked up by at least one of the major parties. Here are the details of that major party co-optation.

In 1844, the Liberty Party, which happened to be the first minor party to propose a national platform, stated that “the right of petition … [is] sacred and inviolable…” In 1912, the Democratic Party was the first major party to include that rhetoric on their national platform in a similar way by saying that “We also recognize the right of direct petition to Congress by employés for the redress of grievances.”

The longest co-optation of a policy-specific minor party’s platform plank was from the labor issue type and it took 16 national elections, which is 64 years, to be picked up by at least one of the major parties. Here are the details of that labor issue major party co-optation.

In 1912, the Progressive Party was for “Effective legislation looking to the prevention of…occupational diseases, and other injurious effects incident to modern industry.” In 1976, the Democratic Party said that “The Occupational Safety and Health
Act of 1970 should cover all employees and be enforced as intended when the law was enacted. Early and periodic review of its provisions should be made to insure that they are reasonable and workable.” On that same national platform, the Democratic Party also said “Protecting the worker from workplace hazards is a key element of our full employment program. Occupational disease and death must not be the price of a weekly wage.”

These two major party co-optations, and all of the ones that occurred beyond eleven election cycles, happened so far from the time that the minor party proposed them that one could argue that are probably unintentional and accidental. This distinction at this point is purely arbitrary; however, an attempt to differentiate between intentional or conscious and unintentional or accidental major party issue co-optations will be explored in a future research project.

The seventh research question posits that at least one of the major political parties will co-opt the issue stances from a significant minor party one election after the significant minor party received at least 5% of the presidential popular vote. There were 9 minor parties that met this 5% threshold, and they are listed in table 5.1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Parties That Received At Least 5% of The Presidential Popular Vote</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>American (Know-Nothing) Party</td>
<td>21.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Southern Democratic Party</td>
<td>18.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>16.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>American Independent Party</td>
<td>13.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Constitutional Union Party</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>10.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Populist Party</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1: Minor Parties that Received at least 5% of the Presidential Popular Vote

Figure 5.3 illustrates that 35 out of the 204 major party co-optations occurred one election after it was first proposed by one of the minor parties. So, 17% of the major party issue appropriations occurred four years after the platform plank was initially proposed by the minor political party. The minor parties that received at least 5% of the presidential popular vote had 75 original platform planks that were absorbed into the major party platforms and 11 of them happened one year after they were first proposed. That is a frequency of 15%. Thus, the percentage of issue stances that were adopted after only four years and were proclaimed by the minor political parties that received at least 5% of the popular vote is 2% less than the average – a difference that it not at all meaningful.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Party That Received Between 2% and 4.9%</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>4.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Greenback Party</td>
<td>3.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>2.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>States’ Rights Party</td>
<td>2.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>2.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>Liberty Party</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>2.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Minor Parties that Received between 2% and 4.9% of the Presidential Popular Vote

A broader perspective on the relationship between electoral success and next-election co-optation can be gained differentiating minor party success into three categories. Since there are 27 minor parties in the dataset, and since the most successful parties had 9 in their grouping, the decision was made to place the other 18 minor parties into two groups. The second-tier of successful parties have a presidential popular vote total of between 2% and 4.9% and they were shown in table 5.2. The third-tier of minor parties received between 1.5% and 1.9% of the presidential popular vote total and they will be shown in table 5.3. Because the lowest party in tier two won 2.2% of the vote and
the highest party in tier three won 1.95% of the vote, there is a natural break between these two tiers as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Party That Received Between 1.5% and 1.9%</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Union Party</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Minor Parties that Received between 1.5% and 1.9% of the Presidential Popular Vote

Figure 5.4 shows that of the 75 original platform planks the minor parties in the first-tier produced, only 11 of them or 15% were adopted by a major party four years after being proposed by the originating minor party. These results were already given a few paragraphs prior. The second-tier minor parties had 123 platform planks that were eventually adopted by one of the major parties. Out of those 123 major party appropriations, 21 or 17% occurred one election after being first proposed -- right at the average. There is only a 2% difference in the first and second-tier frequencies so, as established earlier, there is not a meaningful difference between the first and second grouping of successful minor parties in regards to having their original issues adopted after only one presidential election.
The third-tier of minor parties had only six of their minor party platforms adopted, but 3 of those co-optations or 50\% happened one year after being initially placed on the minor parties’ national platforms. The percentage for the third-tier of minor parties was very high in comparison to the other more successful minor party groupings, but that result probably comes from the fact that so few of their platform planks were adopted in the first place.

With that being said, figure 5.4 has does not seem to support the hypothesis underlying this research question. Indeed, the major political parties do co-opt minor party issues from the first-tier of successful minor parties; however, the major parties do not appear to co-opt them during the next election more often than they do for the second-tier of successful parties. This finding is interesting because one would assume
that the most significant minor parties would have a lot of agenda items that would have been strategically appropriated during the next election by one of the major parties in an effort to woo their significant block of voters. The logic behind this research question seems to make sense but the issue co-optation data does not appear to support its assertions.

After pondering this result, there are two possible reasons why the first-tier of minor parties might not have had a larger percentage of their platform planks adopted during the next election cycle. The first possibility is that the 5% threshold is too high. Of the 204 major party co-optations, 198 or 97% were taken from the minor parties that received at least 2% of the presidential popular vote. The minor parties that had presidential popular vote totals between 1.5% and 1.9% were practically ignored by the major parties in regards to this issue co-optation strategy. Since that is the case, if one makes the threshold of significance 2%, then the dynamic of third party theory seems to work much better. That is because one can say that once a minor political party reaches the 2% popular vote threshold, then at least one of the major parties will begin to woo their voters during the inter-election period by promising to adopt some of their issue stances.

Since this issue co-optation phenomenon has been such a neglected subject matter, this research project is starting at the very beginning by only analyzing the original platform planks that the minor parties proposed. So, this surprise disclosure probably indicates that this research question cannot be adequately answered at this time because there is more to this story than just the co-optation of original platform planks. That is because these significant minor political parties have proposed many platform
planks that are not original, but are repeated from previous minor party national platforms that were not satisfactorily addressed. These repeat platform planks did not begin with the significant minor parties but they are once again being proposed and have probably gained a greater chance of being addressed because of this new minor party’s success. So, a future statistical analysis might uncover that the major political parties are co-opting long-standing repeat agenda items more so than original, new on the political landscape issue stances that are too controversial to be dealt with in the present political environment.

Research question 8 asks whether there is an increase in the major party co-optation of minor party issues during critical elections. The reason why this could be the case is because a critical or realigning election is when the party coalitions shift and reconfigure. Therefore, the critical elections could be a time when minor party agenda items are picked up by the major parties as the grouping of voters in the major parties change. Figures 3.6 through 3.10 in chapter 3 further illustrates that the mix of issues that are on the minor party national platforms changes during each party system, which could show that the issues that the minor parties felt were not being adequately addressed during the past party era by the major parties were finally being dealt with. Thus, one could argue that there would probably be a discernable spike in major party issue co-optations during the critical or realigning elections when there are changing party coalitions and issue stances.

To answer this research question figure 5.5 graphically shows the election year before the critical election and the critical election itself. Utilizing the election year before the critical election gives one a baseline line in which to compare the major party
issue co-optations during the critical election. The columns represent the number of minor party planks that the major party adopted during that specific election year. There are two columns for the critical election and the election before the critical election in most of the party systems. The first column represents the dominant major party and the second column symbolizes the less dominant major party. Under each column is a “R” or “D” representing whether the column refers to the Republicans or Democrats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>DOMinant Party</th>
<th>Less Dominant Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<tr>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<td>1892</td>
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<td>R</td>
</tr>
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<td>1896</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904</td>
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<td>1908</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>1916</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>1928</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.5: Number of Original Minor Party Issues that were Co-opted by the Major Parties the Election before the Critical Election and during the Critical Election

If one compares the number of major party issue co-optations during the critical elections with the major party co-optations during the election before the critical election,
one does observe a discernible spike in major party appropriations, except during the
1860 critical election. That is because the number of major party appropriations more
than doubled during each critical election, except in the beginning of the third party era.
Consequently, there does seem to be considerable support for the eighth research
question.

If one looks into the anomaly in 1856, one sees that at the end of the second party
era in 1856, there were nine major party issue co-optations and during the 1860 critical
election there were none at all. The Republican Party picked up seven out of the nine
minor party platform planks, which was historically the largest number by any major
political party during the election right before the critical election and new party system.
This actually makes sense when one remembers that the Republican Party had just
become one of the major parties and it was trying to bring new voters into its fold. They
were making a push to become the dominant major party in the United States, and issue
co-optation seemed to be one of the methods that they used to make their vision a reality.
But as one looks at the other less dominant major parties in the election before the critical
election, they did not employ that same issue co-optation strategy. One can draw that
conclusion because the results show that none of the less dominant major parties co-opted
more than one minor party platform plank during the election year right before the new
party system came into existence. So, the emerging Republican Party in 1856
appropriated 7 original minor party agenda items and no other potentially emerging major
party co-opted more than one.

The ninth research question attempts to discover the most successful minor party
in regards to having their issues appropriated by the major parties by party era. Figure 5.6
illustrates that the 1848 Free Soil Party was the most successful in the second party system with an issue co-optation percentage of 82%. This great co-optation achievement was never matched by any other minor party throughout the history of the United States. In the third party era, the 1880 Greenback Party was able to achieve a major party co-optation frequency of 75%, which was only 7 percent lower than the 1848 Free Soil Party. In the fourth party era, the 1912 Progressive Party had a major party issue co-optation frequency of only 38%. So, the most successful minor party in the fourth party era showed a decrease of approximately 50% from the most successful minor political party in the third party system. The cause of this significant drop in major party co-optations was more than likely the Progressive reforms.

Figure 5.6: The Most Successful Minor Parties in regards to Major Party Co-optations by Party Era
Figure 5.6 also shows that the most successful minor party in the fifth party era had a major party co-optation rate that decreased another 10%. That is because only 28% of platform planks from the 1948 Progressive Party were picked up by one of the major parties. There might be one or two unintentional or accidental co-optations on the horizon, but for all intents and purposes, the Progressives of 1948 will end up with a final issue appropriation percentage between 28% and 30%. The 1968 American Independent Party has the highest major party frequency in the sixth party era of 26%. Once again, this issue appropriation frequency may rise a little in the next few elections because of a few long-range issue appropriations that will more than likely occur in the future. With that being said, there is no significant difference between the most successful minor parties in the fifth and sixth party eras.

There are many articles and blogs on the internet about how the Democratic and Republican Parties have adopted almost all, if not all, of the platform planks from the Socialist parties.\textsuperscript{11} If this is the case, then why doesn’t one of the Socialist parties have one of the highest issue co-optation rates in this study? The main reason is that we are probably looking at the co-optation of issues in two different ways. The writers of these articles are generally looking at broader themes like, for example, child labor reform and social security, and if one looks at a co-optation in the broadest sense, then maybe they are correct.

However, this study is not looking at the broadest themes. This analysis is dissecting every single platform plank about each subject matter. In other words, there might be ten policy-specific planks referencing social security on a national platform.

\textsuperscript{11} Here is one example of an article on a website referencing the co-optation of Socialist issues by the Democrats and Republicans: http://www.wjr.net/Article.asp?id=458274&spid=6552
The broad theme of social security might have been co-opted by the major parties, but maybe only three out of the ten individual agenda items might have been picked up by one of the major parties. This is probably the main reason why none of the Socialist Parties have a high co-optation rate in this analysis. The Democrats and Republicans very well could have adopted all of the broader themes of the Socialist parties; however, this dataset shows that they did not pick up many of their individual platform planks.

Section 3 – *Which major party co-opts?*

The tenth research question suggests that the dominant major political party is more likely to ignore original minor party issues while the less dominant major political party is more likely to co-opt original minor party issues. To answer this question, it will be necessary to determine which major political party was dominant and which was less dominant during each party era. In order to find out which major party was dominant during each party era, the decision was made to count the number of times that each major political party held the presidency during each 32 year party era. Using this criterion, there weren’t any party eras between 1840 and 2004 where one of the major parties did not win the presidency at least 67% of the time. Based on that information, here are the dominant major parties during each party era along with the corresponding years: the Democratic Party between 1840 and 1856 (the second party era), the Republican Party between 1860 and 1892 (the third party era), the Republican Party
between 1896 and 1928 (the fourth party era), the Democratic Party between 1932 and 1964 (the fifth party era) and the Republican Party between 1968 and 2000 (the sixth party era).

![Graph showing number of major party co-optations based on major party dominance by party era.]

Figure 5.7: Number of Major Party Co-optations based on Major Party Dominance by Party Era

Figure 5.7 shows the results for research question 10. It groups two major political parties together in each party era. The first major party is the dominant one and the second major party is the less dominant one. The years for each party era are under the two major parties. The portion of the second party system in this issue co-optation dataset was between 1840 and 1856. The second party era was different than any other...
party system because it had two different minor major parties. Between 1840 and 1852, the Whig Party was the less dominant major party and in 1856, the Republican Party was the minor major party. Now let’s explore the specific findings.

In the second party era between 1840 and 1852, figure 5.7 illustrates that the less dominant Whig Party was more likely to appropriate minor party agenda items than the dominant Democratic Party. In fact, the results show that the dominant Democratic Party did not co-opt any minor party platform planks at all so they completely ignored the minor party issues. If this is the case and the Whig Party attempted to quell the threat of the rising minor parties then how did the Whig Party lose its place in the American two-party system?

A closer look at the results seems to show that the Whig Party actually went against their best strategy and basically ignored the third party threats almost like they were the dominant major party. Figure 5.7 shows that the Whig Party only appropriated 2 issues from the minor political parties before the Civil War. That strategy unfortunately opened them up to being replaced in the American two-party system. To further support this conclusion let’s once again take a look at the two minor party issues that the Whig Party co-opted.

In 1848, the Free Soil Party offered river and harbor improvement platform planks. In 1852, the Whig Party co-opted both of those Free Soil agenda items. As was stated in chapter four, there is nothing irrational about those two issue appropriations; however, if those issue co-optations were an attempt to quell the rising minor party threat, they were a very poor effort. That is because the most pressing and consuming issue in the pre-Civil War times was slavery. And the chapter four Free Soil case study clearly
illustrates that the Whig Party actually was not trying to woo the Free Soil voters by adopting these two issue stances. It was trying to solidify parts of their Midwestern coalition with those issue appropriations.

The Liberty Party in 1844 and the Free Soil Party in 1848 proposed a series of original platform planks dealing with slavery. If the Whig Party wanted to woo their voters to their side and if they wanted to quash the rising minor party threat, then they needed to appropriate their anti-slavery stances into their national platforms. This strategy would have positioned the Whig Party opposite the pro-slavery Democratic Party and would have left no room for an up and coming minor party. The people that had anti-slavery positions would have been more likely to vote for the Whigs and the pro-slavery voters would have coalesced behind the Democratic Party.

If the Whig Party thought that the anti-slavery stance was too controversial for them to co-opt because of the Southern plantation owners who were in their party, then they could have at least appropriated the second most important issue of the Free Soil Party, which was free homesteads as the American citizens moved to and explored the lands in the western part of the United States. The Whig Party did not even usurp that issue stance. That is why one can argue that the Whig Party did a poor job of keeping down the third party threat. In the revolutionary and traumatic times before the Civil War, the Whig Party lost its appeal to the electorate in the American two-party system, which suddenly caused them to become politically irrelevant.

On the other hand, figure 5.7 shows that the pre-Civil War Republican Party did what the Whig Party probably should have been doing in regards to the minor party
platforms once it became the second major party in 1854. In 1856, the Republican Party co-opted 7 issue stances from the previous minor parties, which included several of the anti-slavery platform planks of the Liberty Party of 1844 and the Free Soil Party of 1848 and 1852. The Republican Party usurped several other rhetorical platform planks from the previous minor parties like espousing freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, but without a doubt the most important issue co-optations were those policy-specific issues revolving around the issue of slavery. This issue appropriation strategy allowed the Republican Party to woo new voters to their political tent, which thwarted another minor party from replacing them. Fortunately for them, they were able to ride this anti-slavery platform issue all of the way to the White House in 1860 and to a dominant place in the American two-party system.

The Democratic Party was the second major party after 1856, and figure 5.7 illustrates that they co-opted only 14 out of the 36 minor party platform planks that were co-opted during the third party era, which is approximately 39% of the appropriations. So, the Democrats did not follow their best strategic path. They should have been the major co-opter of minor party issues. The Republican Party appropriated the larger percentage of minor party agenda items, which allowed them to maintain their hold on their position as the dominant major party even when the third party system ended and the fourth began.

This issue co-optation strategy employed by the Republican Party between 1860 and 1892 goes against what the research question posits was in their best interest. However, this approach could actually have been in their best interest especially when one considers the fact that they had just replaced the Whig Party, which was the second
major party in the second party era. In other words, the Republican Party rose to prominence on a series of minor party issues, and it would make logical sense for them to continue to advance those minor party platform planks that were previously in the minority.

In the fourth party system, the Democratic Party is once again the less dominant major party. In this party era, they strategically did something different and followed their best strategic path by aggressively co-opting minor party platform planks. The Democrats appropriated more minor party issue stances than any other major party had ever done before when they usurped 26 of them. The Republican Party still seized 23 minor party agenda items, which was almost as many as many as the Democrats and actually a large number considering the history of issue co-optations up to that point in time. Nevertheless, the Republicans only appropriated 47% of the minor party platform issues during the fourth party system. This slim advantage in issue co-optations along with the dramatic nature of the historical circumstances surrounding the 1920s and 1930s allowed the Democratic Party to woo new voters to their cause, which vaulted them into becoming the dominant major party in the next party era.

In the fifth party era, the Republican Party was the less dominant major party and the argument is that their best strategy was to adopt more minor party platform planks than the dominant Democratic Party. However, this was not the case during this party era because the Democrats appropriated 38 out of the 54 issues that were usurped during that party system, which is a whopping 70%. As a matter of fact, 38 platform plank co-optations is the largest amount recorded by any major party during any party system in
history. Seizing 70% of the agenda items during that party era was also the largest percentage recorded by any major party ever.

Employing such an aggressive strategy of issue appropriations may not be a good strategy for any dominant major party because it disrupts the winning coalition that it already has coalesced under its umbrella. Adding too many new and potentially controversial issues to the winning set of agenda items causes an ever-widening set of voters to gather under the major parties’ tent. Unfortunately for the Democratic Party, this new set of voters was not larger than the new grouping of voters under the Republican umbrella once the electorate realigned. Consequently, the Democrats became the minor major party during the sixth party system, and have been fighting uphill ever since. This is a classic example of why it is rarely to the advantage of the dominant party in any party era to do more co-opting of minor party issue stances than the less dominant major political party.

As just stated, during the sixth party era, the Democratic Party was the less dominant major party. Accordingly, they co-opted the larger share of minor party issue stances between 1968 and 2000. They appropriated 31 out of the 54 issues that were usurped during the sixth party system, which is a percentage of approximately 57. This is not a dramatically large percentage of issue co-optations but if history repeats itself, it bodes well for the Democratic Party as the United States potentially embarks upon the seventh party era. President Bush squeaked out a victory in 2000 and 2004; however, the Iraq War and the crumbling economy have potentially brought together the ingredients for the Democratic Party to dominate the seventh party system. With that being said, time
and future events will determine whether the Democrats will be able to capitalize on their clear advantages.

The results from the tenth research question are not so straightforward. There were four cases where the less dominant major party co-opted more minor party issues than the dominant major party. In two of the cases, the second major party became the first major party in the next party era; they were the Republican Party in 1856 and the Democratic Party between 1896 and 1928. The third case occurred between 1968 and 2000 when the less dominant Democratic Party adopted more minor party issues than the dominant Republican Party. How the issue co-optation strategy affects the Democratic Party’s major party status cannot be determined at this point in time. The fourth case was the less dominant Whig Party before 1856. The Whigs lost their place as a major party after adopting more minor party agenda items than the dominant Democratic Party. The previous paragraphs showed clearly that the Whigs actually ignored the all-important minor party platform planks of their time period once their co-optations were more closely analyzed.

So, the results do seem to show that the second major party has co-opted a larger percentage of minor party issue stances to woo new voters into their political party in order to overwhelm the electoral advantage of the dominant major party. This new winning coalition of voters and issue stances does seem to hold true until a newer coalition of agenda items and voters coalesce in the next party system. However, there were two occasions where the first major party co-opted more minor party issues than the second major party. The first case occurred between 1860 and 1892 when the dominant Republican Party picked up more minor party agenda items than the less dominant
Democratic Party. This strategy could actually have been in their best interest especially when one considers the fact that they had just replaced the Whig Party, which was the second major party. In other words, the Republican Party rose to prominence on a series of minor party issue stances, and it would make logical sense for them to continue vigorously advancing those minor party agenda items that were previously in the minority.

The second case occurred between 1932 and 1968 when the dominant Democratic Party adopted more than twice as many minor party platform planks as the less dominant Republican Party. As stated in the previous paragraphs, that aggressive issue co-optation strategy seemed to backfire on the Democratic Party because they lost their first party status and became the second major party in the sixth party era. So, it seems to be in the best interest of the dominant major party to ignore original minor party platform planks unless the dominant major party has just replaced one of the major parties in the two-party system. In that case, it appears as if the newly dominant major party should continue to actively co-opt the minor party issue stances that will advance their new political agenda.

Figure 5.8 refers to research question 11, which asks whether the Democratic Party co-opted more minor party platform planks than the Republican Party. The Democratic Party usurped 111 minor party issue stances, which is 55% of the total, while the Republican Party grabbed 91 minor party agenda items, which is 45%. Since there is more than a 5% differential between the Democratic and Republican percentages, the results appear to be worth considering. These two major political parties co-opted all but two of the major party issue appropriations that have taken place throughout history in
the United States. The other two major party co-optations happened in 1852 when the Whig Party co-opted the river and harbor improvement planks of the 1848 Free Soil Party.

![Bar chart showing overall number of major party co-optations by major party](image)

Figure 5.8: Overall Number of Major Party Co-optations by Major Party

Research question 12 asked whether the major parties were more likely to co-opt minor party issues from minor parties that were more similar to them. To answer this research question, a decision had to be made as to which minor party was similar to which major party. The easiest way to perform this task was to read descriptions of each minor party from the *Encyclopedia of Third Parties in the United States* by Earl R. Kruschke. After reading about each minor party in that book, it was fairly simple to determine which minor party was similar to which major party. Table 5.4 places the minor parties into the appropriate categories.
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<tr>
<th>Minor Parties Similar to Republican Party</th>
<th>Minor Parties Similar to Democratic Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1.1860 Southern Democratic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1848 Free Soil Party</td>
<td>2.1880 Greenback Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1852 Free Soil Party</td>
<td>3.1892 People’s Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1856 American Party</td>
<td>4.1904 Socialist Party</td>
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<td>5.1860 Constitutional Union Party</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.1932 Union Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.1948 States’ Rights Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.1968 American Independent Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: Minor Parties Similar to the Republican and Democratic Parties

There were 27 minor political parties in this issue co-optation dataset. Fifteen of them were more similar to the Republican Party and 12 were more similar to the
Democratic Party. So the number of minor political parties that met the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold between 1840 and 2004 was pretty evenly split between the Republican and Democratic parties.

![Figure 5.9: Percentage of Major Party Co-optations by the Similarity of the Minor Party](image)

Figure 5.9 gives the results to research question 12. The answer seems to be that indeed both the Democratic and Republican parties are more likely to co-opt issue stances from minor parties that are somewhat similar to them. The Republican Party appropriated 57 platform planks from minor parties similar to them out of their grand total of 91 issue co-optation. The Democratic Party usurped 70 agenda items out of a total of 111 from the minor parties that were most similar to them. The interesting fact is that the percentage for both of them is approximately 63%.
Figure 5.10: Percentage of Major Party Co-optations based on whether the Minor Party Leaned Democratic or Republican

Figure 5.10 takes a look at the same research question from the vantage point of which major party the minor party was most similar to. Each column tells the reader whether the planks in that category come from either Democratic or Republican-leaning minor parties. Under each column is a major party and so the column indicates the percentage of minor party issues in that grouping that were co-opted by that major party. For example, in column 1 the results illustrate the percentage of platform planks that the Republican Party co-opted from Republican-leaning minor parties.

There were 98 original platform issues offered by Republican-leaning minor parties and the Republicans usurped 58% of them. The Democrats seized 42% of the agenda items of the Republican-leaning minor political parties. There were 104 original platform planks proposed by Democrat-leaning minor parties and the Democratic Party
co-opted 67% of those issue stances. The Republican Party appropriated 33% of the issues from Democratic-leaning minor political parties. This is a very interesting finding because it shows that the Democratic Party is more likely to appropriate minor party platform planks from minor parties that are similar to their viewpoints than the Republican Party.

Additionally, figure 5.10 tells us that both major parties pick up issues from dissimilar minor parties. This is a very interesting finding because one could argue that picking up agenda items from dissimilar minor parties would disrupt the coalition of voters that have coalesced under the banner of the major party. Figure 26 goes on to point out that the Democrats are more likely to co-opt issues from dissimilar minor parties than the Republicans. If one looks again at the list of similar minor parties in table 5.4, one sees that there were twelve minor parties that were similar to the Democratic Party and six of them were the Socialist Party. Based on that information, one could argue that the socialist philosophy was so far from the ideology and viewpoint of the Republican Party that it was very difficult for the Republicans to pick up many platform planks from the minor parties that were dissimilar to them because the Socialist were the most frequent minor party in that group.
Section 4 – From which type of minor party are co-optations most common?

Research question 13 asks which minor party type was most often co-opted by one of the major political parties. As stated in chapter 1, the minor political party types are left-wing, single-issue, one-state, personalistic, splinter and true minor party. There were minor parties that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold in all of the minor party type categories except for the one-state minor party type. All of the minor political parties and their corresponding minor party type designations will be offered in table 5.5.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Party</th>
<th>Minor Party Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>Liberty Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>American (Know-Nothing) Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Constitutional Union Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Greenback Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5: List of Minor Parties by Minor Party Type  
Continued
Continued – Table 5.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Political Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Left-Wing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>Personalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>Personalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Union Party</td>
<td>Personalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>Personalistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Southern Democratic Party</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>States’ Rights Party</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>American Independent Party</td>
<td>Splinter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Populist Party</td>
<td>True Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>True Minor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.11 shows that the single-issue minor party was clearly the most successful in having their issue stances adopted by the major parties. Their co-optation percentage of 50 percent was more than 20 percent above any of the other minor party types. This finding makes sense because if a major party wants to woo minor party voters
to its side then it would be much easier to make that case to those voters when they have only one main “bone of contention”. If a major political party appropriates the single-issue minor parties’ main issue, then it is a clear signal from the major party that they are vying for the minor parties’ constituency. If a major party completely ignores the single-issue minor party’s major platform plank then it is clearly not trying to reach out to that party’s voting bloc. Co-opting the issue stances from a single-issue minor party is probably the clearest case of a strategic attempt to win new voters and quell the rising third party threat. The single-issue minor party seems to be the best type of minor party in regards to setting the agenda for the major parties. This is a significant result for the thesis that minor parties play an important role in the political process by putting issues on the major party’s agendas.

![Major Party Co-optations By Minor Party Type](image)

Figure 5.11: Major Party Co-optations by Minor Party Type
After the single-issue minor party, there seems to be a stark drop-off in success in regards to major party issue co-optations. If one looks back at table 32, one sees that the 1908 Prohibition Party was the last single-issue minor party that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold. Located right in the middle of the Progressive reform era, one could posit that the Progressive reforms after 1908 caused a change in the type of minor parties that were able to reach the 1.5% popular vote threshold. This change could be one of the main reasons why the agenda-setting role of the minor parties decreased so drastically after the Progressive reforms. The prominence of the single-issue minor parties had come to an end.

The next two minor party types are only separated by one percentage point so they are not meaningfully different from each other. Minor parties that have splintered away from one of the major parties had the second highest percentage of 29%. This result is somewhat surprising because one could have argued that this type of minor party would have had a co-optation frequency closer to the single-issue minor parties’ major party issue co-optation percentage. That is because one could argue that by eventually co-opting the platform planks of their dissident members, the major party that they split from can woo their ex-voters back into the fold.

Everyone basically realizes that a minor party has no real chance at electoral success at the presidential level and the elites that splintered away from the major party are used to having the type of success that comes from being one of the two relevant political parties in the American two-party system. With that being said, co-opting the splinter parties’ agenda items would more than likely woo their previous voters back under the major parties’ umbrella. However, this does not seem to be a major strategy of
the major parties. This result could have arisen because only three splinter parties were able to reach the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold. Another possibility is that the reason that elites splinter from the major party is because they have become out of step with the direction of the major party. So, it would be difficult for the major party to adopt a lot of the platform planks from the minor party that splintered away from it. For example, the Democratic Party in 1968 was moving towards civil rights and political equality for African Americans. The 1968 American Independent Party splintered away from the Democratic Party because it wanted to continue segregation. It had become out of step with the major party. Therefore, it would have been almost impossible for the Democratic Party to adopt the 1968 American Independent’s anti-civil rights platform planks.

The personalistic minor party had an issue co-optation percentage of 28%, which was just one percentage point less than the splinter parties’ co-optation frequency. One could argue that this result makes sense when one considers that these minor parties are centered on the cult of personality and therefore issues are somewhat secondary. So, there is no real incentive for the major parties to co-opt the issue stances from this type of minor party at a high frequency.

After the personalistic minor party is the left-wing minor party, which had an issue co-optation percentage of approximately 22%. This low frequency makes sense because one would think that it would be difficult for the major parties in the American setting, where socialism never took root, to appropriate a lot of agenda items from minor parties with an underlying socialist ideology. Appropriating approximately one out of
five platform planks seems to be a reasonable co-optation frequency considering the underlying belief system of this type of minor party.

The lowest co-optation percentage is 5% and it comes from the true minor parties. This is a surprising result, but this finding is probably skewed for two main reasons. The first reason is that there were only two minor parties in this particular category. The second reason is that there has not been sufficient time for the 2000 Green Party to have many issue stances co-opted by the major parties. The other true minor party was the 1892 Populist Party and it had only 2 original platform planks and neither of them was co-opted into either of the major party national platforms. So, there is not enough data on this issue type to might any definitive determinations at this point in time.

Research question 14 is an attempt to determine if the electoral success of the minor parties has any bearing on the percentage of agenda items that the major parties eventually co-opt. For this research question the minor parties are broken up into three tiers and they will be offered in table 5.6. One could probably think of several other ways to classify these 27 minor political parties, so this categorization method is somewhat arbitrary; however, the decision was to employ this grouping system for this particular research question.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Parties 10% and Above</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>27.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>American (Know-Nothing) Party</td>
<td>21.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Southern Democratic Party</td>
<td>18.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>16.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>American Independent Party</td>
<td>13.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Constitutional Union Party</td>
<td>12.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>10.12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Parties From 3% and 9.9%</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Populist Party</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>Free Soil Party</td>
<td>4.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>Greenback Party</td>
<td>3.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>3.19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Minor Parties From 1.5% and 2.9%</th>
<th>Popular Vote Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>2.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>States’ Rights Party</td>
<td>2.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Progressive Party</td>
<td>2.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>Liberty Party</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.6: List of Minor Parties Grouped by Electoral Success  Continued
Continued – Table 5.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>2.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>2.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Union Party</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Prohibition Party</td>
<td>1.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.12: Overall Percentage of Major Party Co-optations by the Success of the Minor Parties
Figure 5.12 illustrates that the major party issue co-optation percentage decreases as a minor parties’ electoral success decreases. That finding makes logical sense but what is somewhat surprising is that the percentage difference between the three tiers is not larger. The issue appropriation percentage for the most successful minor parties was 36% while the issue co-optation frequency for the second tier is 32%, which is only 4% lower. So, there does not seem to be a meaningful difference between the first and second tier of successful minor parties. The third-tier of minor parties’ issue co-optation percentage is 26%, which is only 10% less than the most successful categories’ issue co-optation percentage. Therefore, there does appear to be a meaningful difference between the second and third tier of successful minor parties.

After pondering these results, one has to wonder if there is a major difference between these different tiers of electoral success and their issue co-optation frequencies. Maybe if a minor political party achieves a presidential popular vote total of at least 1.5%, the major political parties will attempt to woo their voters via major party co-optations at about the same rate. Maybe the strategy is about the same because a potential electoral boost of 1.5% could be very important in the grand scheme of things. If one considers the 2000 presidential election, one realizes how important an increase of 1.5% in the popular vote can be. It could be a matter of winning or loosing a presidential election.
Section 5 – What kinds of issues are most likely to be co-opted?

The fifteenth research question is enquiring about which issue type proposed by the minor parties was the most co-opted by the major parties. As stated in chapter 1, every original minor party platform plank was placed into one of the nine issue type categories. They are foreign policy, defense, economic policy, labor, agriculture, resources, social welfare, government, and civil rights and ethnic policy. The results for the thirteenth research question have been compiled in figure 5.13.

![Figure 5.13: Percentage of Major Party Co-optations by Issue Type](image-url)

Figure 5.13: Percentage of Major Party Co-optations by Issue Type
Figure 5.13 shows that four groupings have emerged. The first category includes those issues with a co-optation frequency of over 40%. Surprisingly, there is only one issue type in this category and it is resources. The resources category has a co-optation frequency of approximately 61%, and it was the issue type with the highest percentage by over 20%. The resources category includes minor party platform planks revolving around issues like land usage, ownership and improvements, and forest and mineral ownership and usage.

The second category is between 35 and 40 percent and the issue types that fell in this grouping are as follows: government – 40%, economic policy – 39%, civil rights and ethnic policy – 36% and labor issues – 35%. The issue types that have an issue co-optation frequency in the third category are social welfare – 30% and defense – 29%. The issue types with the lowest major party issue co-optation percentages are foreign policy – 20% and agriculture – 19%. With all of that being said, an original resource platform plank clearly has had the best chance of being co-opted by one of the major political parties and an original foreign policy and agricultural platform plank has had the worst chance.

This fifth chapter has given the results of the research questions specified in chapter one. The first section addressed the frequency of co-optation along with the factors that affect it. The second section focused on the timing of the co-optations. The third section addressed which major party co-opts. The fourth section attempted to sort out from which type of minor party are co-optations most common. The fifth section specifically dealt with what kinds of issues are most likely to be co-opted. All in all, the
data in this chapter revolved around simple descriptive statistics. The next chapter turns
to a more detailed statistical analysis of this issue co-optation process.
CHAPTER 6

A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF ISSUE CO-OPTATION

There were many different independent variables employed in the previous chapters to bring to light the process by which the major parties co-opt or adopt minor party platform planks. This brief chapter performs a multivariate probit analysis on all of the individual independent variables as a way to determine which of the independent variables had the largest impact on the major party co-optation process. Probit was selected because the dependent variable in this analysis is whether a minor party platform plank was eventually adopted by one of the minor parties because the dependent variable is binary and not continuous.

The initial step was to determine a standard for each independent variable’s impact on the issue co-optation process. The decision was made to run a probit analysis on each independent variable individually and to compare their z-scores. The independent variables with the largest z-scores would be considered to have had the largest impact on the major party appropriation of minor party platform planks. If the independent variables had a z-score of + or – 1.96, then they met the first criterion regarding whether they
would be a part of the multivariate analysis. Table 6.1 gives the z-scores for most of the independent variables used in this issue co-optation process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party System</th>
<th>Z-Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Party System</td>
<td>2.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Party System</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Party System</td>
<td>-2.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Party System</td>
<td>-2.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Party System</td>
<td>-4.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Reforms</td>
<td>-4.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Party Success(3% Cut-off)</td>
<td>2.84**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 FECA</td>
<td>-4.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Wing</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Minor Party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalistic</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splinter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy</td>
<td>-1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Policy</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>-0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>-2.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1: Probit Analysis of the Independent Variables of Issue Co-optation  Continued
Table 6.1 illustrates that there are four independent variables that had z-scores over 1.96 and they are as follows: party era, progressive reforms, minor party success and the 1974 FECA federal funding reforms. The Progressive reform independent variable in this probit analysis was set-up as a dichotomous variable. Table 6.1 illustrates that there was indeed a decrease in major party co-optations once the Progressive reform era came to an end. These results validate the findings shown in figure 5.2. The Progressive reforms were an important factor in this issue co-optation process.

The findings in table 6.1 also demonstrate that the party system was an impactful indicator of issue co-optation. The second party system shows a relatively high level of major party issue co-optations. But the fourth party era shows a different pattern. That is because there was a major decrease in major party appropriations during that party system, which is when the Progressive reforms, like the Australian ballot, were implemented. The fifth party system, which was after the Progressive reform era, showed a decrease in co-optations. The sixth party era, illustrated an even more pronounced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>-0.09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights and Ethnic Policy</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* - means statistically significant at the 95% level
** - means statistically significant at the 99% level
*** - means statistically significant at the 99.9% level

Note: If a z-score is missing it is because stata dropped it due to a collinearity problem.
decline in major party appropriations. The findings in table 6.1 about the party systems seem to mirror and further support the results about the Progressive reforms in figure 5.1.

Minor party success was another independent variable employed in chapter five. Approximately one-half of the minor parties that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold were above 3%, so that percentage was utilized as the cut-off point for the probit analysis. Table 6.1 illustrates that there was an increase in major party co-optations as the minor party became more electorally successful.

The last independent variable reaching the $z = 1.96$ criterion was the 1974 FECA funding reforms. Table 6.1 shows that there was a marked decrease in major party co-optations once the 1974 FECA reforms were established. The problem with this finding is that the 2000 Green Party was the only minor party that met the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold since 1974, which means that there are not enough minor parties in the dataset to make any definitive pronouncements. So, this finding will have to be tabled because it, at this point, simply indicates that the 2000 Green Party has not had many of its platform planks adopted by either of the major parties, rather than showing a decrease in co-optations because of the 1974 FECA reforms. This independent variable will have to be studied later when more minor parties are in its category.

In regards to the independent variables that did not have large effects on the issue co-optation process, it was surprising to see in table 6.1 that the single-issue minor party type did not have a greater impact. The only issue type that had a $z$-score lower or higher than 1.96 was agriculture, which makes sense because agriculture had the lowest co-optation percentage. Foreign policy almost met the 1.96 threshold with a $z$-score of -1.95.
Whether a minor party plank originated during a critical election and whether a minor party was new or not did not have large enough z-scores to satisfy the criterion.

Once again, table 6.1 establishes that four independent variables had large impacts on the major party co-optation of minor party platform planks. Federal funding will not used in the upcoming multivariate analysis because it only has one minor party that drives its result. Also, the progressive reform independent variable will be dropped because it is too similar to the party era independent variable. It was initially added to the multivariate analysis, but implausible findings came from its addition to the model because of a collinearity problem. This adjustment leaves minor party success and party era as the two independent variables that will be employed to do a multivariate analysis of major party issue co-optation. Minor party success will be categorized like it is in figure 5.12 and, once again, here are the groupings: 1.5% to 2.9%, 3.0% to 9.9% and 10% and above. Party era is grouped from the second party era to the sixth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Between 1.5% and 2.9%</th>
<th>Between 3% and 9.9%</th>
<th>10% and Above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Party Era</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Party Era</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Party Era</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Party Era</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Party Era</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.2: Predicted Probability of a Minor Party Plank being Co-opted by a Major Party

12 CLARIFY was utilized to run the predicted probabilities.
Table 6.2 and figure 6.1 both illustrate that, other things being equal, the likelihood that a minor party plank will be picked up by one of the major parties increases by 3-7% as the success of the minor party increases. It also shows that, other things being equal, the likelihood that a minor party agenda item will be adopted by one of the major parties decreases by 11-18% during each successive party era. The electoral strength of the minor party and the nature of the party era, then, are the major determinants of the major party adoption of minor party platform issues.

Figure 6.1: Predicted Probability of a Minor Party Plank being Co-opted by a Major Party by Party Era and Minor Party Success
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The adoption of minor party issues by the major parties, which I have called issue co-optation, is definitely an understudied political strategy, but it is an important one. The Democratic Party inaugurated national party platforms in 1840, and issue appropriations started to occur shortly after that election year. Even though political party scholars have presumed that a primary role of minor parties is to propose issues for the major parties to subsequently adopt, they have not systematically studied issue co-optations. The main reason why is probably that minor parties simply do not win presidential elections and are, consequently, relegated to peripheral treatment.

The purpose of this study is to systematically analyze the issue co-optation phenomenon to begin to understand the role that it plays in determining the issue agendas in American politics. Even though minor parties are not successful in winning presidential elections, some of them are able to gain a following of voters that is large enough to get the attention of the major political parties. Others give voice to people and policy issues that the major parties are neglecting. Most political party scholars will not argue these points and, for that reason, if it can be shown that issue co-optation is
potentially an important strategic move by the major parties, it is worthy of systematic study.

There are many well-known cases of issue co-optation by the major parties, and that fact does not seem to be in dispute by the political party scholars. However, there did not appear to be a specific, extensive study on issue co-optations showing that they actually took place, how often, and under what circumstances. This study starts to fill in the gap in the political party literature by undertaking an extensive primary analysis of party platforms, major and minor.

First, this analysis systematically shows that issue co-optation has indeed been occurring in the United States between the major and minor parties. In other words, the original issue stances from the minor parties often do end up on the national platforms of the major parties in subsequent years. Second, this study illustrates that issue co-optation is not a short-lived political strategy because it started occurring right after the initiation of the national platform by the Democratic Party in 1840 and has remained a part of the political landscape ever since. Third, the issue co-optation phenomenon has not been an insignificant and inconsequential occurrence since 1840. Throughout American history approximately 30% of the original planks proposed by minor parties that received at least 1.5% of the presidential popular vote eventually ended up on the national platforms of at least one of the major parties. A historic major party co-optation rate of 30% was much larger than expected and was indeed an impressive finding. Its results add important new understanding to the field of American political parties, beginning with the main points about the incidence of issue co-optation.
Once it was established that approximately three out of every ten original minor party planks have ended up on the national platforms of the major parties, a number of interesting research questions followed. One question is which major party was the foremost adopter of minor party issues. The results show that the Democratic Party has historically been more apt to pick up a minor party agenda item than the Republican Party.

One reason the Democrats have been more inclined to pick up minor party issues is that they more often have not been the dominant party in the party system. It is in the best interest of the less dominant major party to co-opt more minor party issues than the dominant major party does in any particular party era. A prime example of why issue co-optation is so attractive for the less dominant major party is the Whig Party during the second party era (1840 to 1856). They chose not to appropriate the anti-slavery minor party agenda items and, some might argue, lost their place in the American two-party system as a result. During that same party system, the Republicans seized those neglected anti-slavery minor party issue stances and carried them into dominance in the next party era.

By contrast, it seems to be in the best interest of the dominant major political party to be interested in picking up original minor party platform planks under one condition: when it has just overturned the previously dominant major party in the two-party system and, as the emerging dominant major party, is still building a majority party coalition. In that case, it appears as if the newly dominant major party should continue to actively co-opt the minor political party issue stances that will advance their new political agenda.
This analysis also illustrates that the Democratic and Republican parties are both more likely to co-opt issue stances from minor parties that are somewhat similar to them. They do, however, occasionally adopt issues from dissimilar parties, with the Democrats more likely to do so than the Republicans.

The incidence of co-optation also varies across different periods in American party history. The data shows that the instances of major party co-optation declined more than 50% after the Progressive reforms. Reforms like the Australian ballot and direct primaries seemed to have caused a significant decrease in the major party issue co-optation strategy, presumably because they made the major parties more permeable to outside influences.

The results also showed that the second party era, between 1840 and 1856, had the largest percentage of original minor party issues that were eventually adopted by at least one of the major political parties. From that point, the percentage of major party co-optations steadily dropped during each successive party era until it finally hit its lowest point during the sixth party system. As stated earlier, it is generally in the less dominant major party’s best interest to co-opt more minor party planks than the dominant major party. Also, there does appear to be a discernible spike in major party appropriations during the critical elections as the party coalitions shifted. The only exception to that pattern occurred during the 1860 critical election when there were fewer major party co-optations than in the election before the critical election. The reason behind this anomaly was probably because the Republican Party had just become a major political party in 1856, so the spike in major party co-optations occurred during the election before the 1860 critical election.
Differentiating among six types of minor parties, this study also examined the kinds of minor parties that the major political parties co-opt from. The results showed that the major political parties were most likely to adopt an issue from single-issue parties. Their co-optation percentage of 50 percent was more than 20 percent above that of any of the other minor party types -- the personalistic, left wing, splinter, and true minor parties. There were no one-state minor parties that met the 1.5% presidential popular vote total threshold in American history, so none of them were able to be included in this analysis.

The last single-issue minor party to reach the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold occurred during the middle of the Progressive reforms. This could indicate that one of the main reasons that the agenda-setting role of the minor parties decreased so drastically was because the Progressive reforms had brought an end to the prominence of the single-issue minor parties.

The data also illustrates that the major party issue co-optation percentage increases slightly with increases in the electoral success of the minor parties. The issue appropriation percentage for the most successful minor parties was 36% while the issue co-optation frequency for the second tier is 32%. The third-tier of minor parties’ issue co-optation percentage is 26%, which is 10% less than the most successful categories’ issue co-optation percentage. Presumably, the more successful the minor political party, the more visibility its issues attain and the more major parties want to peel off some of its base in subsequent elections by appealing to those issues. The 1848 Free Soil Party was the most successful minor political party with 82% of its issues picked up by a major
party, and for that reason it was featured as a case study to illustrate the co-optation phenomenon.

This study also examined the variation in the types of issues co-opted by the major parties. Surprisingly, the natural resources category has a co-optation frequency of approximately 61%, making it the issue type with the highest percentage by over 20%. Throughout American history, an original natural resource platform plank clearly has had an excellent chance of being co-opted by one of the major political parties. By contrast, a minor party foreign policy and agricultural issue stance has little chance.

What do the results say about the timing of these major party co-optations? The findings illustrate that the largest number of issue appropriations, which was 35, occurred almost right away – the next election after an original minor party issue was proposed. The second and fifth years, after a minor party plank was originally proclaimed, were tied for the second largest number of major party issue co-optations at 23. A total of 137 out of the 204 major party issue appropriations, or 67%, occurred from the same election year to the fifth election year. So, if a platform plank was going to be co-opted by one of the major parties, then more than likely it was going to happen within twenty years of it being first proposed by one of the minor parties. Surprisingly, 5% of the major party co-optations occurred more than 10 election cycles later. It is difficult to imagine that the adopting party was consciously stealing away supporters from a minor party so many years later.

Lastly, the results do not seem to support the dynamic of third parties theory, which states that at least one of the major parties will co-opt the issue stances from a significant minor party one election after the significant minor party received at least 5%
of the presidential popular vote. Indeed, the major political parties do co-opt minor party issues from the first tier of successful minor parties; however, the major parties do not appear to co-opt them during the next election more often than they do for the second tier of successful parties. The reason that the dynamic of third parties theory is not supported by the findings could be that the 5% threshold is too high. If one changes the threshold of significance to 2%, then the dynamic of third party theory seems to work much better. It seems that once a minor political party reaches the minimal 2% popular vote threshold, then at least one of the major political parties will begin to woo its voters during the inter-election period by promising to adopt some of their issue stances.

From that point, a probit analysis was performed on all of the independent variables and it was discovered that only four of them were important using a criterion for statistical significance: party era, progressive reforms, minor party success and the 1974 FECA federal funding reforms. To determine their contributions relative to one another required multivariate analysis employing the principal predictors, party era and minor party success. The results showed that, other things being equal, the likelihood that a minor party plank will be picked up by one of the major parties increases by 3-7% as the success of the minor party increases. It also showed that, other things being equal, the likelihood that a minor party agenda item will be adopted by one of the major parties decreases by 11-18% during each party era. The federal funding independent variable was not used to perform the predicted probabilities because it only had one minor party driving its result. The progressive reform independent variable was dropped because of its multicolinearity with the party era independent variable.
Future Directions

No dissertation study can cover every facet of its target phenomenon. There are several areas of minor party influence that remain to be explored in future research projects.

Independent Candidates

This research project did not include the successful independent candidates in this issue co-optation dataset. The two independent candidates that reached the 1.5% presidential popular vote threshold are as follows: John Anderson in 1980 received 6.61% of the presidential popular vote and, if a minor party nominee, would have been added to the second-tier of successful minor parties grouping. Ross Perot in 1992 received 18.91% of the popular vote total and would have been included in the most successful minor party and independent category. In 1996, now a minor party nominee, the Perot-led Reform Party received 8.40% of the presidential popular vote; however, Perot and the Reform Party were still excluded from this issue co-optation dataset because it did not publish an official national platform. Independent candidacies are a modern phenomenon, occurring only since 1980 with at least enough success to surpass the 1.5% threshold used for minor political parties in this study. If they are the functional equivalent of third-party candidacies, and they arguably are, then they should be included in a study of issue co-optation.

Independent candidacies for president, however, do not resemble third-party candidacies in one important way for this study: They do not have a tradition of
conventions and convention-approved party platforms. Ross Perot in 1992 did not publish a national platform, so an analysis of his candidacy would have to rely upon his books and television infomercials. A systematic procedure will have to be developed to code them before his independent candidacy can be added to the issue co-optation dataset. The same procedure could probably be employed to determine what the platform planks were for the 1996 Reform Party, which also did not adopt a national platform. Fortunately, John Anderson’s national platform was located so that is not a problem. With that being said, the future goal is to eventually find a way to code these recent independent candidates and one minor party. Adding their results to the dataset can only strengthen the findings and conclusions.

Repeat Issues

As the issue co-optation dataset was being constructed, several unexpected findings emerged. The dataset showed that 59% of the minor party platform planks were repeat minor party issues. In other words, around six out of every ten minor party issue stance was not original but had been adopted from another minor party. These “repeat” issues were not a problem for the analysis undertaken in this dissertation because all of the platform planks and issues that were originally proposed by the minor parties are already included. For example, the Prohibition Party offered at least ten specific prohibition planks in 1884, and so in 1884, those prohibition planks were classified as original platform planks. However, the Prohibition Party kept proposing almost all of these same agenda items in almost every election until 1908. The prohibition planks proposed after 1884 are classified as repeat issues. This study focused only on the original appearance of the issue in a minor party platform and did not individually trace
them from minor party to minor party before they were officially adopted by one of the major parties.

In a future project, it would be worthwhile to study these repeat issues in depth. Since it quite often took several elections before an original minor party issue was co-opted, it could be that it was the persistence of the issue stance and its various minor-party proponents that pushed the major parties to eventually co-opt the minor party agenda items.

**Minor Party Co-optations**

The minor parties not only repeated issues from the other minor parties but they also appropriated approximately 16% of their platform ideas from the major political parties. This pattern is not referenced in the political parties’ literature, and it was not a part of this analysis. However, minor party adoptions of major party issues will definitely need to be investigated in a future research project. Conceptually speaking, it may not be appropriate to think of them as issue co-optations, but it clearly was appealing for the minor parties to take possession of some issue positions that the major parties were espousing.

**An Expanding Issue Co-optation Dataset**

This issue co-optation dataset will be expanded after each presidential election, which means that the results will be forever changing. It will be interesting to see how, in an ever evolving American party politics, the new numbers differ from the present results over time. Do contemporary minor parties play the same agenda-setting role minor parties have in the past? Has the emergence of nation-wide and visible competition in
presidential primaries reduced the need for new issues to come onto the political agenda via the minor parties? Also, the dataset only includes minor parties that achieved a presidential popular vote total of 1.5%. In the future that popular vote threshold might be lowered to see if the results change if the less successful minor parties are included in the analysis.

Case Studies

Now that this initial research project has been completed, it might be possible to interview the major and minor party elites in the upcoming elections to try to really understand the motivations underlying the co-optation process at the personal level where political strategies are being developed and implemented. For instance, do the major parties intentionally scan minor party platforms looking for ideas? Do the major parties co-opt minor party issues to reduce electoral support for minor-party candidates? Or are the motivations more related to policy than to electoral politics in the sense that major parties are trying to identify the major voter concerns of the day and to seek solutions to them? Were co-optations of issues from elections some years before unintentional or were the major party elites thinking about the history of the minor party when they adopted them?

Possible Classification of Major Party Issue Co-optations

This analysis did not attempt to distinguish between the major party co-optations based on how long it took for them to be adopted by at least one of the major parties, but here is one possible categorization scheme based on timing.
The first type of major party issue co-optation could be called conscious or intentional. In this case, at least one of the major parties would have to co-opt an original minor political party issue during the same election year, or one or two election years after it was first proposed by the minor party. One would assume that the political party leaders read the national platforms of their opponents. Therefore, if a major party places a minor party platform plank onto its national election shortly after it was first proposed by the minor party, then one could argue that that particular major party co-optation was probably intentional or conscious, designed to take ownership of that issue away from the minor party in the hopes of attracting its and other voters. Interviewing platform committee members to see how they develop issues would be an interesting future project.

The second group of issue co-optations could possibly occur because of party evolution. The logic behind the party evolution co-optation is as follows. A minor party is simply not going to remain relevant over time because only two parties will continue to be successful in the American two-party electoral system. So, when the minor party dies, their voters can either stop voting, or give their allegiance to one of the major or minor parties. One could argue that these voters will eventually merge into one of the major political parties. When this happens, the old minor party voters begin to change the major party from within. The underlying assumption behind this party evolution type of issue co-optation is that it takes time for the voters from the once-successful minor party to emerge in one of the major parties and change its platform planks from the inside. The major party eventually absorbs the minor party issues into its national platform because
of the presence of the ex-minor party activists who have now become a part of the major political party.

The last type of issue co-optation is called unintentional or accidental, because it is done without any consideration given to the minor party that originated it or that party’s supporters. The party evolution issue co-optation category probably spans from 3 elections to around 8 elections. Since a party era in the United States is generally considered to be approximately 32 years, one could make a reasonable argument that any major party issue co-optation that occurs after 8 national elections, or one complete party era, is probably unintentional or accidental.

It would be interesting to see if case studies could help determine if the issue appropriations are actually different based on how soon the major parties picked up the platform planks after they were originally proposed by the minor parties. Another possibility would be to interview platform committee members to see how they developed issues. Those elite interviews would probably begin to shed light on whether a categorization scheme based on timing can be reasonably developed and would make an interesting future project.

*The Effect of the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act*

If the incidences of major party co-optations decreased after the Progressive reforms, then it is very possible that the frequency of major party co-optations increased after the imposition of another important reform -- the 5% threshold for federal campaign support that was instituted through the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act. That is because one could argue that this 5% threshold once again gave voters an incentive to stick with the minor parties that were espousing views that were similar to their own. If
this is the case, the major parties might have found it to be in their best interest to employ the issue co-optation strategy more often than they did after the onset of the Progressive reforms in order to capture these minor party voters and quell the rising threat of the determined minor political parties. This research question could not be answered in this analysis with the issue co-optation dataset as presently constructed, so it will have to be a part of a future research project.

In conclusion, issue co-optation of minor party issues by the major parties in American political history is common, although not perhaps as common as party scholars have previously believed. It is one way to penetrate the powerful duopoly controls that restrict access to the policy agenda in the American two-party system. It is a fascinating political strategy, especially when adopted consciously. Nonetheless, it is a phenomenon that has definitely been understudied up to this point. This dissertation shows why issue appropriations are indeed worthy of being studied and suggests that an even more detailed investigation is warranted.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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