

# **The Variation in Third Party Politics Across the American States**

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## Introduction

It seems that third party candidates and third parties themselves are usually just a flash in the pan, who once in a while seem to get their fifteen minutes of fame. Ross Perot a native Texan created lots of havoc on the 92 and 96 presidential elections. Also in the great state of Minnesota in 1998 Jesse Ventura became Governor while being a third party candidate. One can't help but wonder who the next big third party candidate will be, and from which state they will come. Will this person come from a conservative state a liberal state, or will it come from a state somewhere in the middle? Something interesting is also happening in this country right now. A third party movement has come from some of the right wingers in this country. This movement is better known as the Tea Party movement. Many people in this country are screaming for a third party to become viable. There are a lot of people that want more than just the two choices that are offered right now.

I set out to try and find out the differences in the states as it pertains to third party candidates. Ballot access is a huge deal for third party candidates and the focal point of the whole thesis. Many people don't know that in many states third parties have to jump through a lot of hoops and follow less than fair rules in order to just get on the ballot in their respective state. It also should be noted that even if a third party makes it on the ballot they are still handicapped especially when it comes to the financial aspect of politics. This is even truer now after the Supreme Court recently ruled that corporations couldn't be capped as far as how much money they want to give a candidate or political party. This most likely will hurt third parties even more. It would be a fair assumption to think that these corporations most likely aren't going to be giving a lot of money to smaller third parties. They are going to choose to give most of their money to one of the two big parties. Third parties definitely have an uphill battle to fight. The question remains does it matter from which state these third parties come? Are some states fairer to these candidates than others? This is what I set out to find in my research, the answers may surprise people.

## **Literature Review**

Third party candidates and minor parties sometimes get made fun of and are given a bad rap. They also find themselves at a distinct disadvantage in many states. I studied if there is a difference in how these third party and minor parties get treated in each of the states. Many different factors should be considered when it comes to considering a states fairness factor or openness to third parties. These factors include how hard it is for a party or a candidate to become a political party in each state. This is a major factor for third party candidates, because becoming a party is an important step toward achieving ballot access. It also greatly helps them when it comes to raising money. It should also be noted that public finance can be another factor that can affect how well a third party or any party does in elections. This is especially an important factor for third parties, because a lot of the time they have a lot less financial resources. Another factor that should be taken into account is the overall competitiveness of elections in each state. This is an important factor because if a state is dominated by one of the two major parties then it is very likely that a third party is also going to struggle in that state. One last thing that needs to be looked at is the Political Culture of the states. I wanted to see if different regions with different cultures had any effect on how they thought about third party candidates. Another thing that interests me greatly is how liberal and conservative states feel about third party candidates, and if one or the other tends to be more fair and accepting of them. To go along with the ideologies of the states is the factor of the political culture of all of the states and how politics are thought of and practiced in each of these states.

## **Ballot Access**

There are many different sources of research about third party candidates and the struggles that they have to go through to gain ballot access. One person, Richard Winger, seems he has almost made this his life mission to study and relay information about third parties and their place on the ballot. His

work has been very helpful. The one that has helped the most so far is “How a new, fully- qualified party may be recognized, 2010 election.” (Winger 2009) This is a comprehensive list of every state’s laws on how a Political party can become a full fledged party in any certain state. This research shows a lot of different things concerning what it takes to be a party. Most importantly it shows the number of signatures that a party must get in each state to become recognized. It also shows the percentage of votes needed by the voting population in each state. The number of signatures that are needed to become a party in any state range from 0 in a few of them to more than a 100,000 signatures in other states.

One of the most interesting of these states is Minnesota, a state known for its progressive politics. A state in which one wouldn’t expect great hoops to have to be jumped through for smaller parties to co- exist. As we can see though Minnesota actually has the most stringent standards for ballot access. Winger also writes a lot about the unfair advantages that third parties face for getting on the ballot. Winger also notes that once getting on the ballot third parties don’t get a fair amount of campaign money making it difficult to get their word out there (Winger 1999). Like stated above, many states have harsh petition rules for third party candidates to get on the ballot. For instance, in the state of West Virginia third party and independent candidates running for office (other than US president) must circulate their petition before the primary. It is a crime for any petition advocate to approach anyone without saying “If you sign my petition, you cannot vote in the primary.” Furthermore, it is impossible for third party or independent candidates (not running for US president) to ever know in advance if they have enough valid signatures because if anyone who signs a candidate’s petition then votes in a primary, the signature of that person is invalid. For candidates, it is impossible to know who will actually vote in the primary, and it is too late to get signatures after the primary. Also: petition circulators cannot leave their home precinct. (RangeVoting.org)

## **Campaign Finance**

Campaign finance is a big deal when it comes to third party candidates. A person cannot imagine how in depth and confusing the process and laws of campaign finance can actually be. The Federal Election Commission ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)) collects information on all of the different laws for spending limitations and if states have the check off option on their ballot. Also (Donnay 2007) writes about public finance in the state of Minnesota, not to mention a few others who happen to be advanced in public financing. A few of the leaders in this area are Minnesota, Arizona, and Hawaii. It should be noted that Minnesota is probably thought of as having one of the overall best public financing systems in the United States. This is really where the data gets interesting as far as it comes to Minnesota. In the data about becoming a party, Minnesota had the strictest requirements to become a party of any state in the union. On the other hand Minnesota is also given the number one spot for public finance money giving smaller parties a better chance, or at least a slightly better shot at least when it comes to the financial aspect for third parties. This now leaves a predicament to deal with. So out of the two things that were studied, our own state Minnesota has received the 50<sup>th</sup> most friendly grade on one aspect and the 1<sup>st</sup> most friendly grade on the other aspect studied.

## **Electoral Competitiveness**

This then brings up the idea of competitiveness in each state. A website called follow the money did a great job in showing this. On this website it gives us the figures of competitive and non competitive races for senate and house elections in each state. This is especially important to look at because if a state is not competitive between the two major parties there is basically no chance for the smaller parties to even expect to compete. A state that could be a tossup between the two major parties could also be more swayed by the third party ideals and ideas. A state that is not set in stone with traditional ideals and one in which nobody really knows beforehand who is going to win is definitely working to the advantage of the third parties. It should also be noted when one looks at the correlation between public finance laws and competitiveness it can be seen that the states with the most progressive public finance

laws also tend to have many more competitive races in those states. This is a very interesting finding. Also one must look at the numbers and where the most competitive races seem to be. It seems that the states in the Midwest and East Coast seem to have the highest rate of competitiveness. (National Institute on Money in State Politics 2008) This could be a mere coincidence but one that should be looked at more in depth.

## **Political Cultures**

The study of political culture is one that has been looked many times. One useful source Politics and Policy in American States and Communities (Dresang, Gosling 2006). In order to study the political culture of the states one has to start with the Elazar scale. The Elazar scale categorizes different regions in every state and gives them one of three different rankings. There is the moralistic category. This is given to cultures who think that government is good and looked at in a positive light. These states are known for their clean politics and lack of corruption. There is also the traditionalistic political culture this ranking is given to cultures where traditional hierarchies exist, and power is pretty much given to the traditional elites. What some people like to call the good old boys. Many times in these kinds of states regular citizens aren't expected to be involved with politics. Lastly is the individualistic political culture. This category is given in cultures where politics are more of a stepping stone for the people involved. In this way of government the people's best interest are not always kept in mind by those in charge. Political corruption is tolerated in these states. (Elazar 1972) The idea of political culture is a very interesting one. Some people may wonder why it would be useful to look at the political culture of the states and why this pertains to third party candidates and the friendliness of the states to them. This could be argued to be one of the most important factors as to how friendly a certain state can be to the third party candidates. For example, a state high in moralistic values is much more likely to be less corrupt, more progressive and have a more open mind when it comes to parties outside of the big two. The exact opposite could be said for traditionalistic culture in these states the party that always wins is

going to keep winning and the party that always loses is going to keep losing. It doesn't even make sense for a third party candidate to even try to become viable in a state like this. These kinds of states are set in their ways and aren't usually willing to change. This is quite possibly the most interesting, and useful part of the literature. A person must be careful when using this scale and these definitions. Like everything else in politics there is always a few exceptions.

The biggest surprise so far is probably the different stipulations the different states put on these third parties. It is amazing that there is not a more balanced system here in the United States. It would greatly help smaller parties if there happened to be just one common requirement mandated by the US government instead of the state governments. At least this way the candidates and parties would know what they have to accomplish before actually going out and trying to do it.

## **Fusion and IRV**

Third party candidates are definitely at a disadvantage in the United States. (Tamas, Hindman, and Monroe 2006) give us some insight on something that can be of a great assistance to third party candidates. They discuss the idea of fusion, the idea of fusion is where a smaller party will team up with a larger party in order to gain more influence on the political spectrum than they normally would have had they been running by themselves. Fusion is not legal in all states, but in the ones that it is it can be a very good tool for smaller parties to use.

Another interesting idea that has come about recently is IRV or instant runoff voting. This way of voting can be a very good thing for third party candidates. In the process of instant runoff voting a voter will rank the candidates in the order of who they would prefer the most to the least. If all of the votes are counted and the person with the most first place votes still does not have a 50% majority then the candidate who got the fewest first place votes is dropped and has all of their votes counted with those people's second place vote counting for those voters. This process will go on until some candidate has at least 50% of the vote. (Instantrunoff.com) This way of voting is actually very good for third party

candidates. In the first past the post system we have here in the United States many times people are afraid to vote for a third party or lesser known candidate. They feel that they are just wasting their vote. In IRV voting this takes away a lot of the fear that a person is wasting their vote because they can choose the person they really want to win in the first place even if it is a third party candidate, and if that person doesn't receive a lot of votes they can then at least have their second vote counted. IRV voting can definitely be a tool for third parties to use. There are a few problems with this system though. It could be hard to get people to go along with changing their voting habits, also voter education and ballot counting can be very complicated with IRV voting.

## **Acceptance Level**

After studying all of these different variables and not finding what I would have expected I decided that I would create my own equation to rank the states on their overall fairness to third parties. This scale takes into account the difficulty of attaining ballot access, and the overall competitive nature of the states politics. The formula is percent of signatures needed in last presidential vote to gain party status in each respective state plus ten times the percent of state house races that were not competitive divided by 10. The reason for adding 10 after the percent of presidential vote needed is because in some states 0 percent or 0 votes are needed as a stipulation to become a party. This would throw off the formula though, so 10 is added to every states score. For an example, Minnesota would be  $5+10=15*43=645/10=64.5$  state score which is a very good score. Scores range from about 30 to 130 with the lower scores meaning more probable acceptance, and success for third parties in each respective state. I think this scale actually does a very good job at predicting how open a state will be to third parties. Some states that scored very well on this scale are Minnesota, Maine, and Arizona. It should also be noted that these three states are also known to have some of the best public financing options available for any of the states.



## Methods and Analysis

### Data Source

For my data analysis I had to create my own data tables and run them on SPSS. From Richard Winger I gathered the different qualifications that a third party must do to become a viable party in every state in the United States. I also studied the competitiveness of state legislative races around the USA. The idea behind this is to see if one party dominates another party in a respective state. If one of the major two parties is much more popular than the other it would be fair to say they have a good stronghold on that state, and may be more difficult for a third party to compete. I also gathered data about the Political Culture of every state and gave them a five number categorizing system. A Political Culture is how a certain state views its politics. There are three different categories for a state to fall into Moralistic, Individualistic, and Traditionalistic. There are also two in between categories of Moralistic/Individualistic and Individualistic/Traditionalistic. As discussed one would think political culture would affect how a certain state is going to embrace third party candidates.

### Analysis

For my first test I chose to study the mean number of signatures needed for 3<sup>rd</sup> party ballot access as percent of Presidential vote. I chose to study this against the modified political culture score that I created.

(Figure 1 about here)

In this bar chart we see the relationship between the political culture scores and the number of signatures needed as percent of the Presidential vote. The idea that these two things are related comes from the idea of political cultures. In the Moralistic way of thinking people tend to trust their politicians more and feel that politics and politicians in general are a good thing. Individualistic is basically the

opposite of Moralistic. Politicians in these states tend to be more looking out for themselves and their own best interests instead of that of their residents. In these states most of the time political competition is very partisan and dominated by one party. Traditionalistic culture is often thought of as the middle ground between Moralistic and Individualistic. In these states most of the politicians come from society's elite. Most of the states that are in this category happen to be from the south. From figure 2 we can see where all 50 states stand when it comes to these meanings.

(Figure 2 about here)

After knowing all of this, one would tend to think that states that are more moralistic would be far easier on third party candidates. With it getting progressively harder for Traditionalistic and Individualistic states as far as it pertains to percentage of votes needed. From looking at the graph though we can see this is not true though. It shows that Moralistic states actually have the strictest requirements. With the Individualistic states having the easiest and the Traditionalistic states being in the middle. One interesting thing to note is that states with a mixture of two different cultures actually have the lowest requirements which seems kind of odd. It should also be noted that in the Moralistic category there is an outlier which happens to be our own state of Minnesota. In Minnesota 5% of the Presidential vote is needed to become a viable party, and this may be skewing the numbers a little bit for the Moralistic category.

I also looked at the competitiveness of state legislative elections around the United States to see if the competitiveness of the party system in these states is related to ballot access laws. I then took the percent of presidential vote needed in each state and ran a scatter plot between the two.

(Figure 3 about here)

The idea behind this scatter plot is that states that have a higher amount of races that are not competitive would be harder for a third party candidate to even get on the ballot. The thinking behind this is because if it is not competitive already with one of the major two parties then why would it be

friendly to a third party candidate. This could have a lot to do with the ideologies of the voters in the state for instance voters in Texas most likely aren't going to vote for a Democratic candidate. Also it should be noted that raising money for a Democrat in a red state would be very hard thus creating more of an unlevel playing field. This same phenomenon could be exactly reversed in a blue state also. The figure shows that there really isn't a whole lot of difference in the percentage of votes needed and the competitiveness of the state legislative races. It should also be noted that these numbers may be a little skewed seeing as Minnesota is a very competitive state, but it also has very high standards as far as the number of signatures needed.

I also felt that it would be a good idea to have a variable where I actually took some numbers from a third party candidate from a past election. I looked at the percent of people in each state that voted for Ralph Nader in the 2000 Presidential election. I again chose to create a scatter plot between the percent of signatures needed to receive ballot access in the states.

(Figure 4 about here)

Looking at the results it again is evident that the graph does not go as would be expected. We can see that states that had more strict standards were also the states where Nader actually received more votes as it pertained to the voting population in each state. Frankly this is quite odd, somehow Nader must have gathered enough attention in these states to get voters to vote for him, but was also by my standards at a disadvantage.

After creating my own acceptance scale and giving the states their respective score I then created a map of all of the states and gave them a ranking from least acceptance to most acceptance. This map shows the states with the lightest color the most welcoming then getting progressively less welcoming with the darker colors.

(Figure 5 about here)

After looking at this map we can see the states in the upper Midwest and the northeast to be the most welcome states. It also shows that the Deep South and the west being the least welcome of the states on average. One can't help but notice that states that tend to score well on my scale are also states that happen to have Moralistic qualities as far as their political culture goes. To me this seems to be very interesting.

## **Conclusion**

I chose this topic at the beginning of our thesis journey because I thought it would be a very interesting one to study. After completing my research and gathering my data I was a little bit frustrated. The results didn't go as I expected. That is until I created my acceptance scale. After creating this scale I found that states that people would expect to be friendly or fair to third parties were actually the states that were scoring the best on my new self made scale. I also found it very interesting to see that states that tend to have even a bit of Moralistic ideals in their political culture tended to score well on my scale. After completing my research I would have to conclude that campaign finance laws have a lot to do with how well a third party can do in a certain state. I also would have to conclude good competition in a state between the major two parties is actually a good thing for third parties also. After doing my research it is quite easy for me to see that third party politics are definitely not as black and white as some people may think.

**Figure 1: Mean Number of Signatures needed for 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Ballot Access as Percent of Presidential Vote**

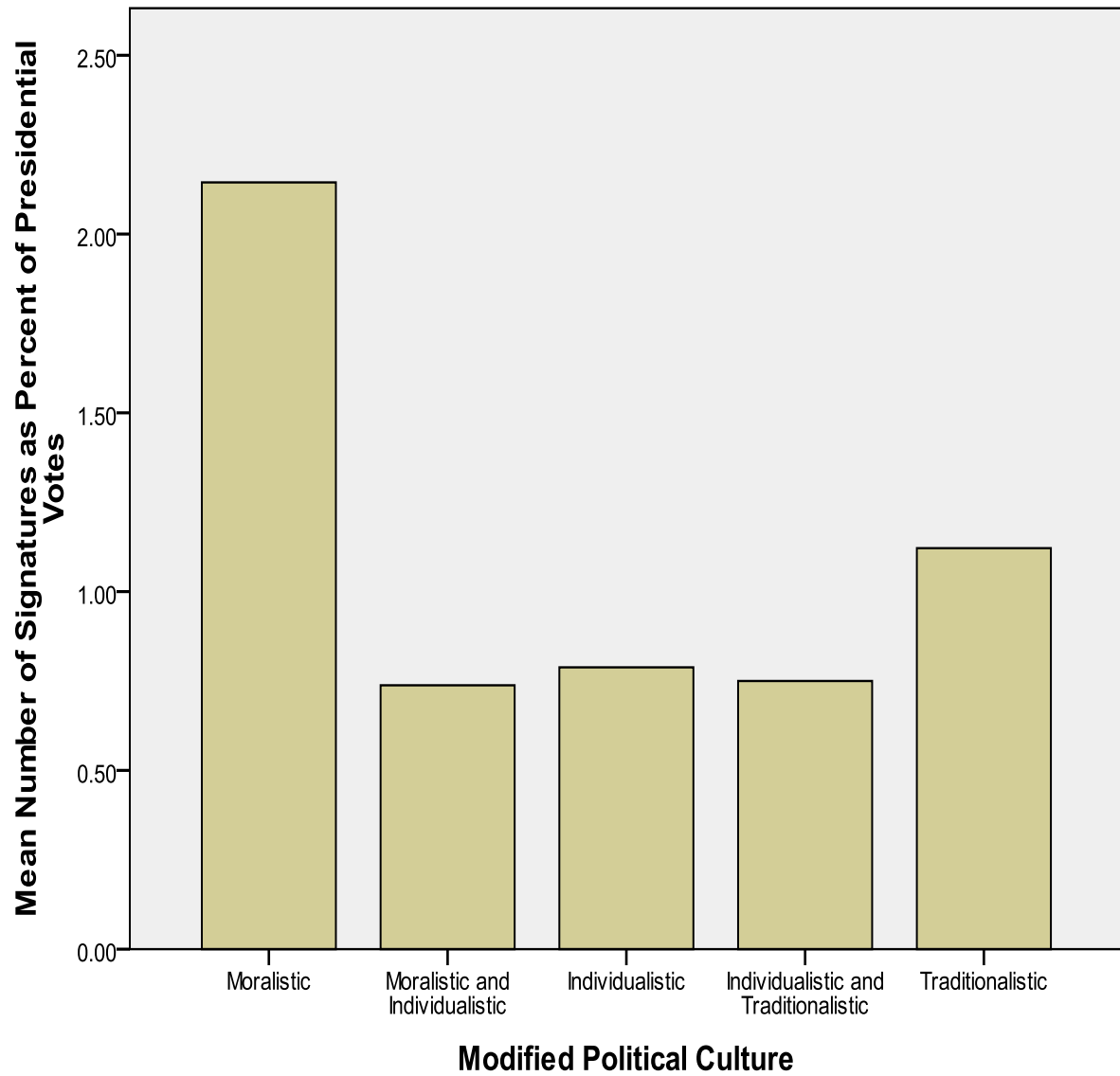
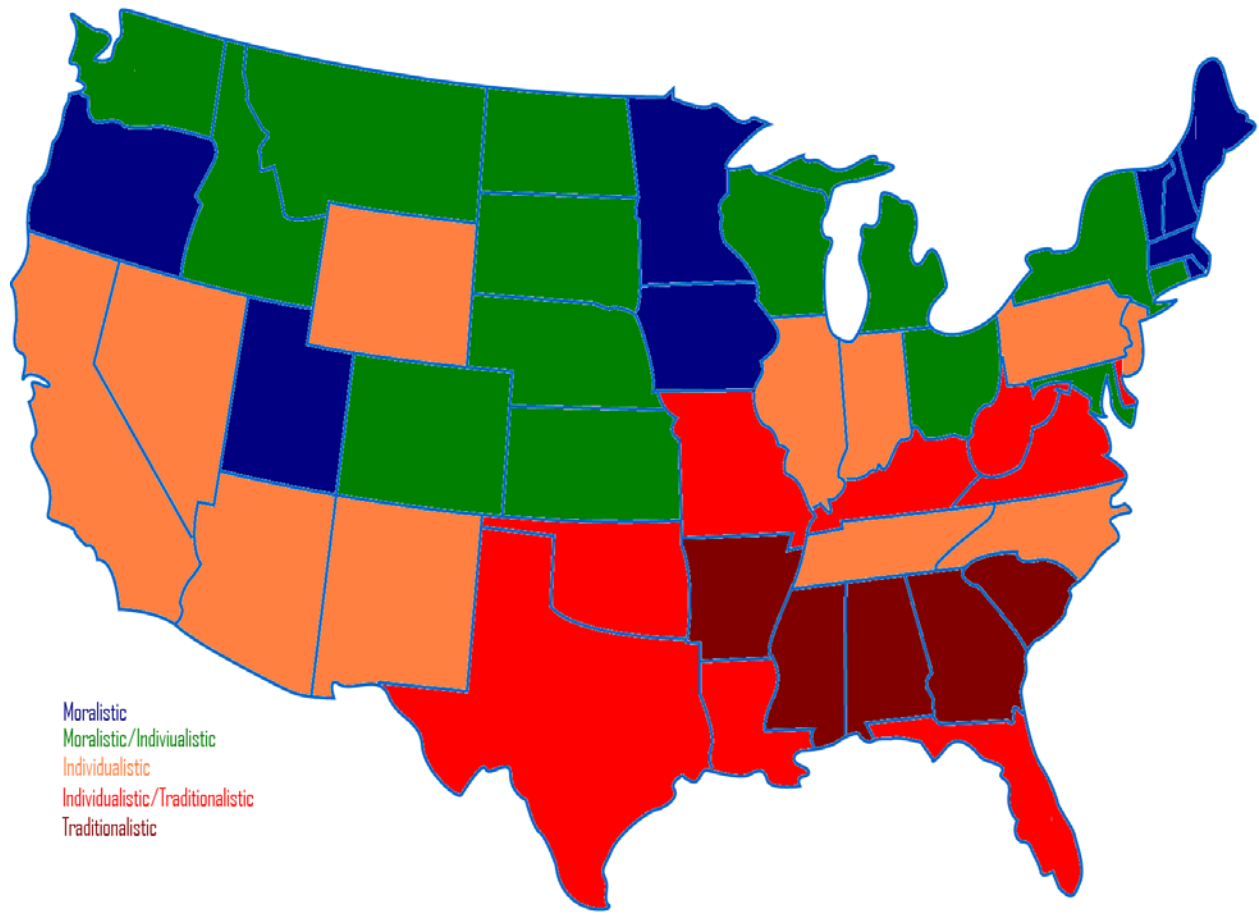
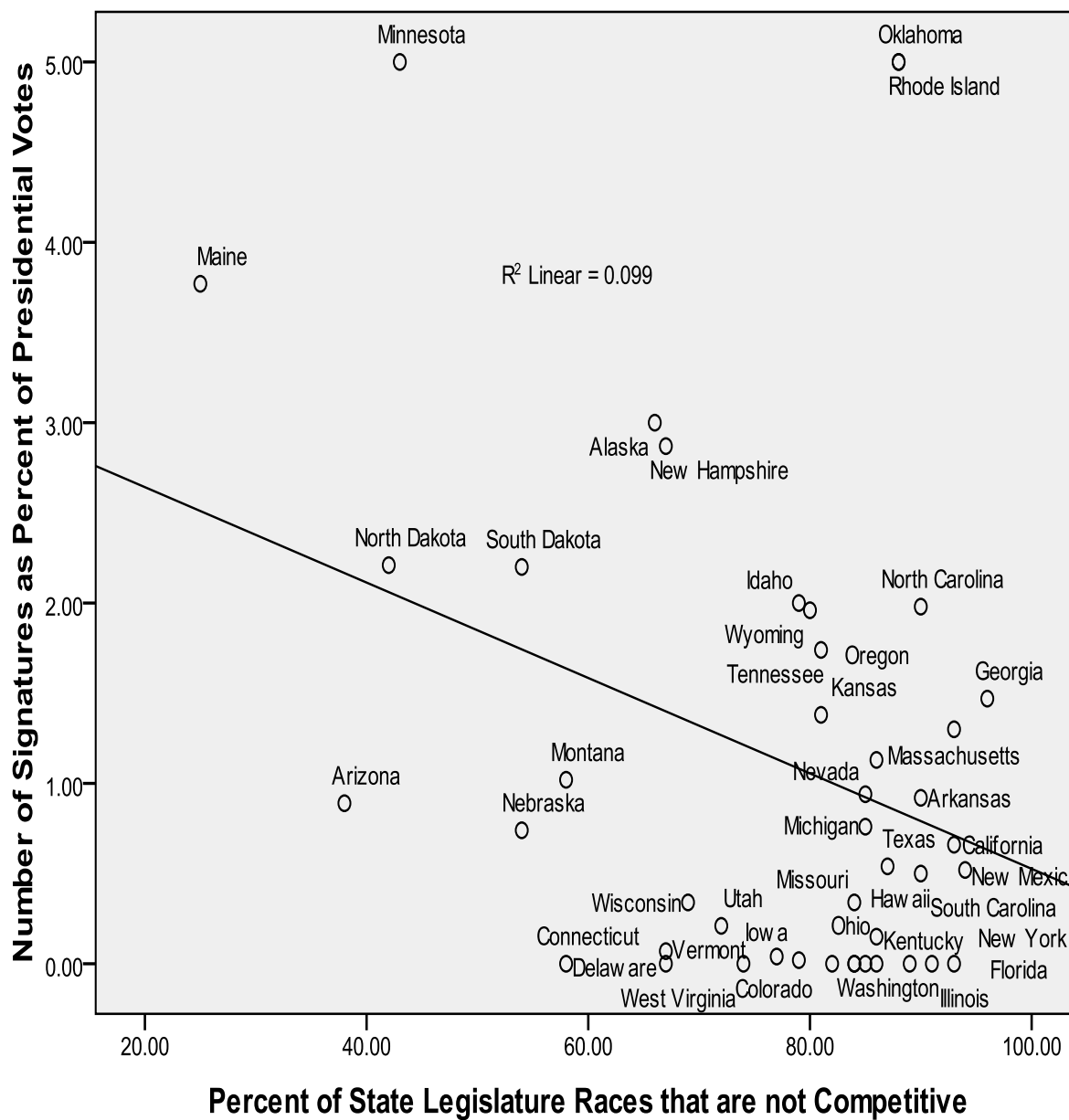


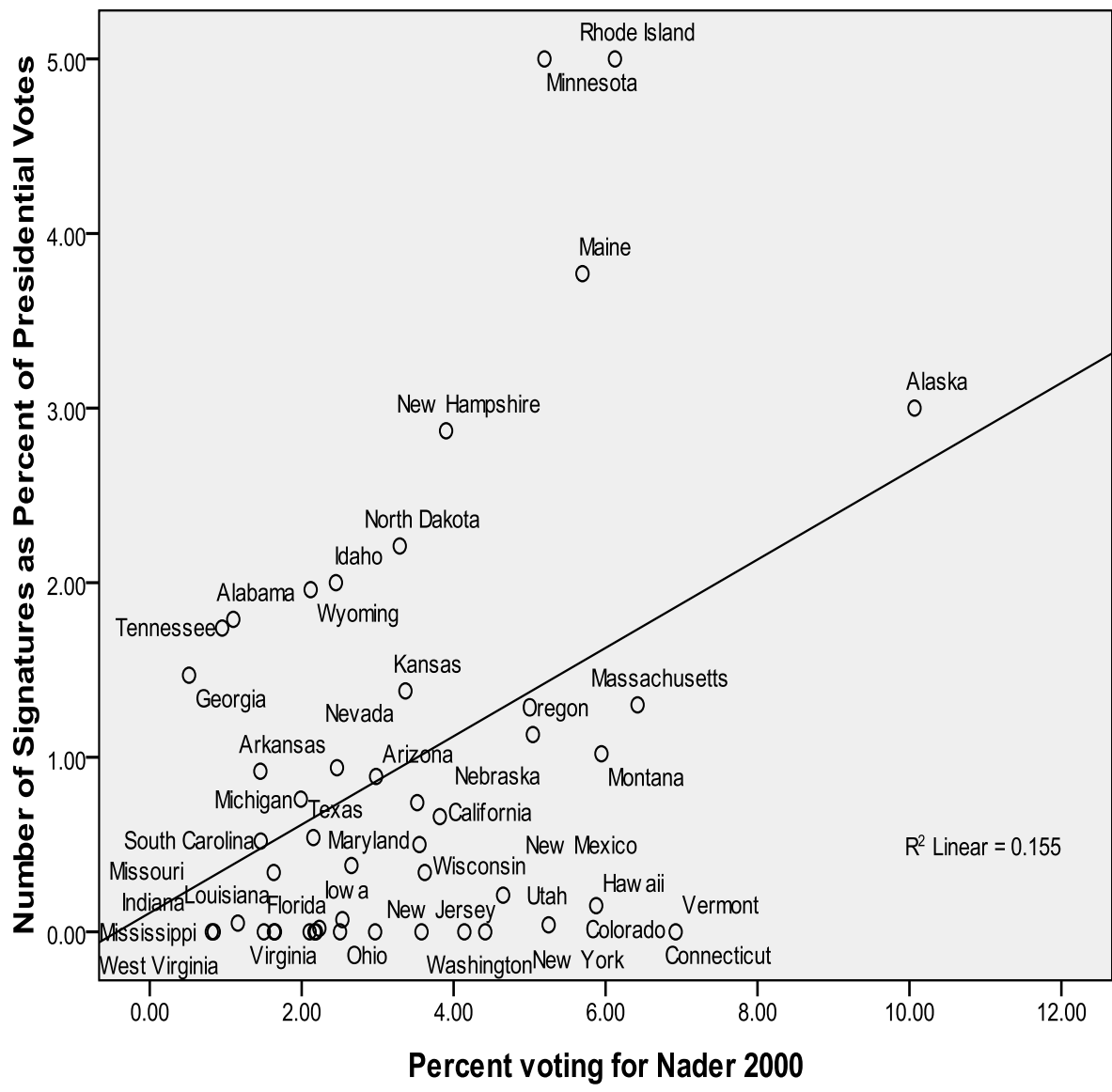
Figure 2: States Political Culture Map



**Figure 3: House Race Competitiveness and the Percent of Signatures needed as Percent of Presidential vote**

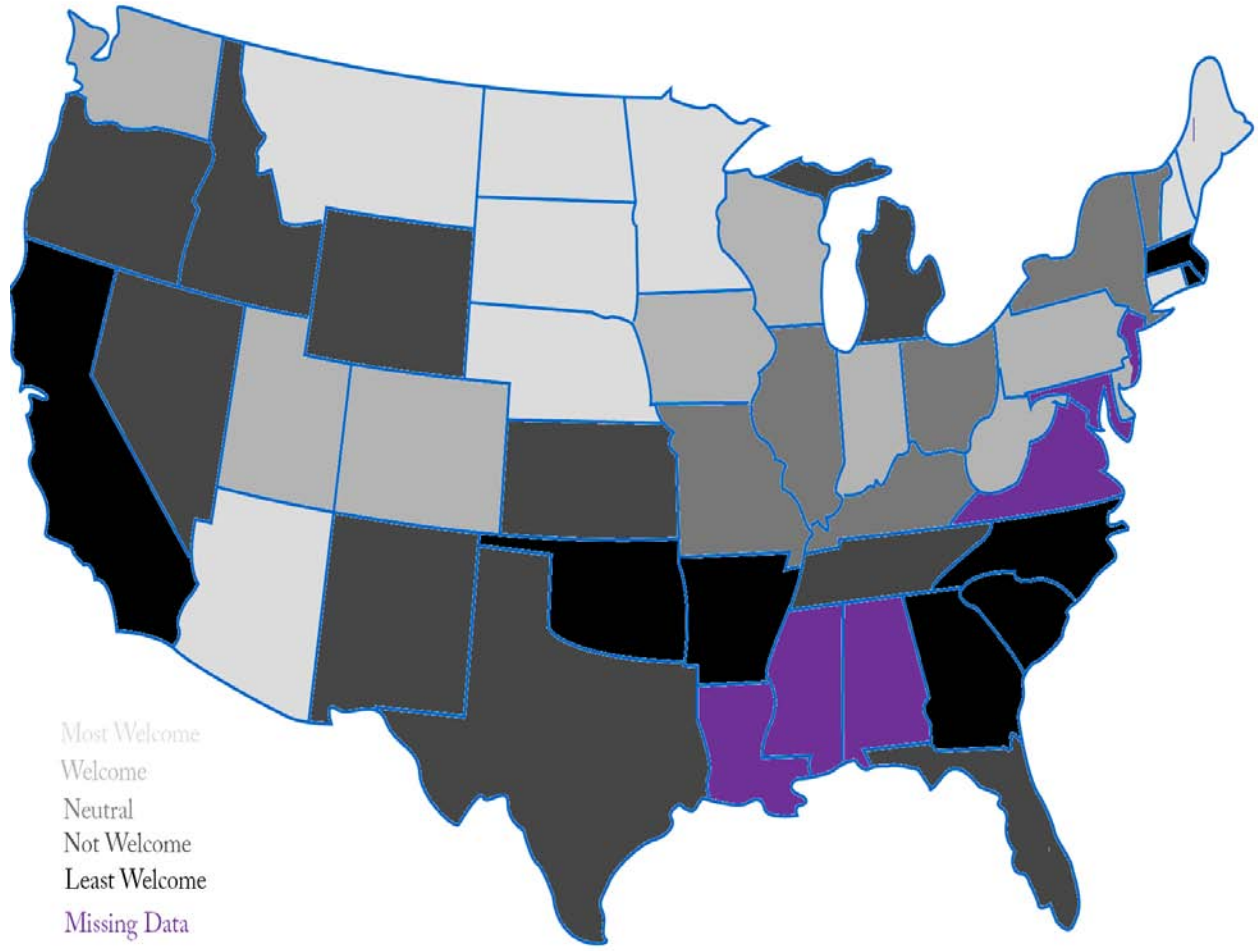


**Figure 4: Percent voting for Nader in 2000 vs Number of Signatures needed as Percent of Presidential Vote**





**Figure 5: State Map for Acceptance Level**



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