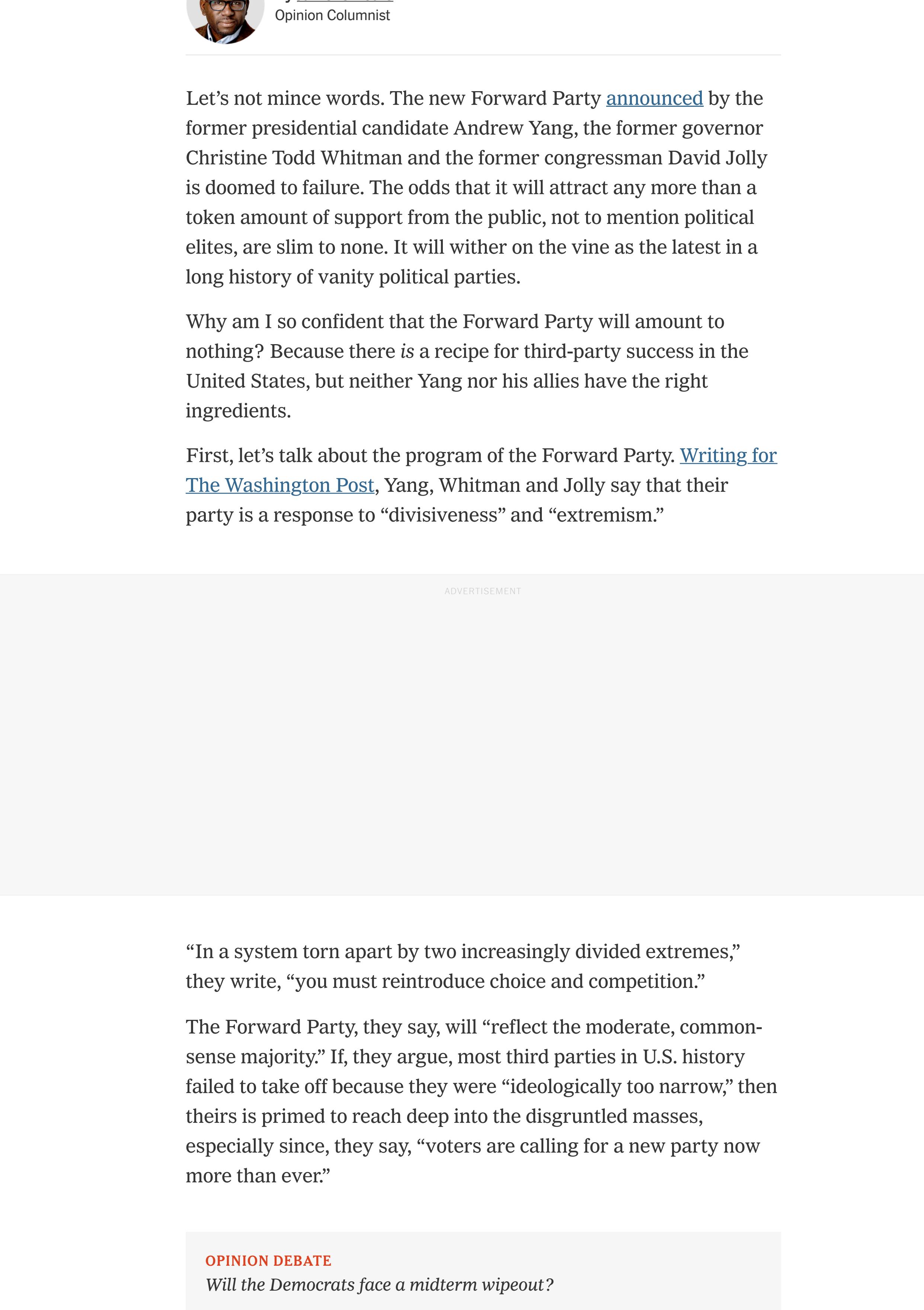


#1 in Psychiatry in the Nation

[Learn More](#) Mass General Brigham
McLeanADVERTISEMENT
OPINION
JAMELLE BOUIE

Why Andrew Yang's New Third Party Is Bound to Fail

July 29, 2022

This didn't work either. [Erin Schaff/The New York Times](#)[Give this article](#) [Share](#) [Save](#) [534](#)By **Jamelle Bouie**

Opinion Columnist

Let's not mince words. The new Forward Party [announced](#) by the former presidential candidate Andrew Yang, the former governor Christine Todd Whitman and the former congressman David Jolly is doomed to failure. The odds that it will attract any more than a token amount of support from the public, not to mention political elites, are slim to none. It will wither on the vine as the latest in a long history of vanity political parties.

Why am I so confident that the Forward Party will amount to nothing? Because there is a recipe for third-party success in the United States, but neither Yang nor his allies have the right ingredients.

First, let's talk about the program of the Forward Party. [Writing for The Washington Post](#), Yang, Whitman and Jolly say that their party is a response to "divisiveness" and "extremism."

ADVERTISEMENT

"In a system torn apart by two increasingly divided extremes," they write, "you must reintroduce choice and competition."

The Forward Party, they say, will "reflect the moderate, common-sense majority." If, they argue, most third parties in U.S. history failed to take off because they were "ideologically too narrow," then theirs is primed to reach deep into the disgruntled masses, especially since, they say, "voters are calling for a new party now more than ever."

OPINION DEBATE

Will the Democrats face a midterm wipeout?

- **ELIZABETH WARREN** [explains her priorities and writes](#), "if we fail to use the months remaining before the elections to deliver on more of our agenda, Democrats are headed toward big losses."
- **MARK PENN** [writes that "without a U-turn by the Biden administration"](#), voters increasingly motivated by fear over a variety of issues "will generate a wave election like those in 1994 and 2010."
- **THOMAS B. EDSALL** [asks, as the midterms approach](#), "to what degree are Democratic difficulties inevitable," and which challenges stem from the party's strategic choices?
- **EZRA KLEIN** [speaks to David Shor](#), who discusses his fear that Democrats face electoral catastrophe unless they shift their messaging.

It is not clear that we can make a conclusion about the public's appetite for a specific third party on the basis of people's general appetite for a third party. But that's a minor issue. The bigger problem for Yang, Whitman and Jolly is their assessment of the history of American third parties. It's wrong.

The most successful third parties in American history have been precisely those that galvanized a narrow slice of the public over a specific set of issues. They *further* polarized the electorate, changed the political landscape and forced the established parties to reckon with their influence.

This also gets to the meaning of success in the American system. The two-party system in the United States is a natural result of the rules of the game. The combination of single-member districts and single-ballot, "first past the post" elections means that in any election with more than two candidates, there's a chance the winner won't have a majority. There might be four or five or six (or even nine) distinct factions in an electorate, but the drive to prevent a plurality winner will very likely lead to the creation of two parties that take the shape of loose coalitions, each capable of winning that majority outright.

ADVERTISEMENT

To this dynamic add the fact of the presidency, which cannot be won without a majority of electoral votes. It's this requirement of the Electoral College that puts additional pressure on political actors to form coalitions with each other in pursuit of the highest prize of American politics. In fact, for most of American history after the Civil War, the two parties were less coherent national organizations than clearinghouses for information and influence trading among state parties and urban machines.

This is all to say that in the United States, a successful third party isn't necessarily one that wins national office. Instead, a successful third party is one that integrates itself or its program into one of the two major parties, either by forcing key issues onto the agenda or revealing the existence of a potent new electorate.

Take the Free Soil Party.

During the presidential election of 1848, after the annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a coalition of antislavery politicians from the Democratic, Liberty and Whig Parties formed the Free Soil Party to oppose the expansion of slavery into the new Western territories. At their national convention in Buffalo, the Free Soilers summed up their platform with the slogan "Free soil, free speech, free labor, free men!"

The Free Soil Party, notes the historian Frederick J. Blue in "[The Free Soilers](#): Third Party Politics, 1848-1854," endorsed the Wilmot Proviso by declaring that Congress had no power to extend slavery and must in fact prohibit its extension, thus returning to the principle of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. It is the duty of the federal government, declared its platform, "to relieve itself from all responsibility for the existence of slavery wherever that government possesses constitutional power to legislate on that subject and is thus responsible for its existence."

This was controversial, to put it mildly. The entire two-party system (the first being the roughly 30-year competition between the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans) had been built to sidestep the conflict over the expansion of slavery. The Free Soil Party — which in an ironic twist nominated Martin Van Buren, the architect of that system, for president in the 1848 election — fought to put that conflict at the center of American politics.

This succeeded. In many respects, the emergence of the Free Soil Party marks the beginning of mass antislavery politics in the United States. It elected several members to Congress, helped fracture the Whig Party along sectional lines and pushed antislavery "Free" Democrats to abandon their party. The Free Soilers never elected a president, but in just a few short years they transformed American party politics. And when the Whig Party finally collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, after General Winfield Scott's defeat in the 1852 presidential election, the Free Soil Party would become, in 1854, the nucleus of the new Republican Party, which brought an even larger coalition of former Whigs and ex-Democrats together with Free Soil radicals under the umbrella of a sectional, antislavery party.

There are a few other examples of third-party success. The Populist Party failed to win high office after endorsing the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryan, for president in 1896 but went on to shape the next two decades of American political life. "In the wake of the defeat of the People's Party, a wave of reform soon swept the country," the historian Charles Postel writes in "[The Populist Vision](#)": "Populism provided an impetus for this modernizing process, with many of their demands co-opted and refashioned by progressive Democrats and Republicans."

"By turn of fate," Postel continues, "Populism proved far more successful dead than alive."

On a more sinister note, the segregationist George Wallace won five states and nearly 10 million ballots in his 1968 campaign for president under the banner of the American Independent Party. His run was proof of concept for Richard Nixon's effort to fracture the Democratic Party coalition along racial and regional lines.

Wallace pioneered a style of politics that Republicans would deploy to their own ends for decades, culminating in the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

This is all to say that there's nothing about the Forward Party that, as announced, would have this kind of impact on American politics. It doesn't speak to anything that matters, other than a vague sense that the system should have more choices and that there's a center out there that rejects the extremes, a problem the Democratic Party addressed by nominating Joe Biden for president and shaping most of its agenda to satisfy its most conservative members in Congress.

The Forward Party doesn't even appear to advocate the kinds of changes that would enable more choices across the political system: approval voting, in which voters can choose multiple candidates for office; multimember districts for Congress; and fundamental reform of the Electoral College. Even something as simple as fusion voting — in which two or more parties on the ballot share a candidate — doesn't appear to be on the radar of the Forward Party.

The biggest problem with the Forward Party, however, is that its leaders — like so many failed reformers — seem to think that you can take the conflict out of politics. "On every issue facing this nation," they write, "we can find a reasonable approach most Americans agree on."

No, we can't. When an issue becomes live — when it becomes salient, as political scientists put it — people disagree. The question is how to handle that structure that disagreement within the political system. Will it fuel the process of government, or will it paralyze it? Something tells me that neither Yang nor his allies have the answer.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: [letters@nytimes.com](#).

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).