

How Nader's Campaign May Hurt Bush's Reelection

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Ralph Nader has opened up a Pandora's Box. Although his left of center candidacy poses the most immediate threat to the Democratic Party, it may encourage a third party challenge to the right of center that ends up draining votes from the President Bush's reelection campaign.

Nader's threat to democrats

State wide elections in 2002 show that a re-run of the Democratic debacle in 2000 is a real possibility. In 2000, Gore narrowly won in Iowa, New Mexico, Oregon, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Results in 2002 statewide elections show significant support for candidates running for the Green Party and often back by Nader. In three states where the Green Party was particularly successful, its strength in 2002 either increased or stayed level with its 2000 returns. In New Mexico their vote increased by an amount significantly larger than Gore's margin of victory.

Nader's campaign for a strong liberal agenda could have unanticipated consequences that actually help the Democratic Party candidate. If the base of the Democratic Party remains fixated on defeating President Bush, a hard left Nader campaign may allow the Democratic nominee to artfully position himself as a moderate that appeals to independent voters while still holding most of his Party's base of loyalists.

Third party revival

The preoccupation with Nader has ignored the larger context -- the continuing and perhaps growing appeal of third parties. The interest of voters in third parties over the last decade may fuel Nader's campaign and it may also spur a third party challenge to President Bush. In the 2000 presidential election, third parties drew enough votes in 11 states to prevent either Bush or his Democratic rival, Al Gore, from winning a majority of votes. But the success of third parties in the 2002 gubernatorial and Senate races is, or should be, the real wake-up call. In 13 states, the number of voters who supported third-party candidates in statewide races in 2002 was larger than the winning margin in the 2000 presidential election.

Third parties may not be getting the attention they deserve because their display of electoral muscle has been so episodic. They were hardly present in the 1984 and 1988 presidential races, when the two major parties gobbled up 99 percent of the votes. But Ross Perot garnered a stunning 19 points as an independent presidential candidate in 1992 and a still impressive eight points in 1996.

To those watching midterm and statewide elections, though, Perot's success shouldn't have come as a shock. When third parties have done well in midterm elections, they do well in the next presidential election. In eight statewide races in 1990, third-party gubernatorial

candidates together grabbed more votes than the winners' margins of victory. That had happened in only three states in the 1986 midterm races.

Third parties had more success in the 2002 midterm elections than in the previous high-water mark in 1990, which signaled the potential for Perot's campaign. In 2002, third parties together recorded 5 percent or more in 16 states, a bigger showing than in 1990.

Third party threat to president Bush

A close reading of recent elections shows that Republicans and President Bush are also vulnerable to a third party challenge from the center. Nader's campaign on behalf of third parties in American election may encourage right of center candidates whether it's a libertarian candidate or a Perot-type of independent.

In 2002, Democrat Jim Doyle broke a string of four straight Republican wins for governor in Wisconsin by a 45-to-41 percent margin over his Republican opponent, Scott McCallum, and two reasons stand out: The Green Party's Jim Young drew only 3 percent of potential Democratic voters and, most impressively, the Libertarian candidate, Ed Thompson (renegade brother of the secretary of health and human services, Tommy Thompson), took a whopping 11 percent, hurting the GOP most.

The soaring budget deficit in Washington, ballooning expenditures and an expansion of government under Republican control of the White House and Congress have not only fired up the usual inside-the-Beltway deficit hawks; they have also fueled a grass-roots protest movement. Some of those disaffected Americans won't vote at all. Some will vote Democrat. But many will look outside the box for a third party candidate.

In 15 statewide elections in 2002, 2 percent or more of voters cast their ballots for the Libertarian Party, which has picked up the banner of small government. Candidates running as independents, who generally promote balanced budgets, cleared the 2 percent mark in seven different states.

Whether Bush can win these states in 2004 may depend on these third parties and their sustained, or even enhanced, drawing power. Bush won Nevada by 3 percent in 2000; Libertarian Dick Geyer and two candidates running as independents, David Holmgren and Jerry Norton, together captured 4 percent of the vote in the 2002 gubernatorial race. The president won New Hampshire by about 1 percent in 2000; the votes for Libertarian candidates in the 2002 races for governor (John Babiarz) and Senate (Clarence G. Blevens) each exceeded Bush's margin. Arizona, a reliable Republican state, gave Bush a comfortable victory in 2000, but the independent candidate, Richard Mahoney, and the Libertarian candidate, Barry Hess, together drew a surprising 9 percent in the governor's race in 2002. The receptiveness to independent and Libertarian candidates is rooted in a deep frustration among many Americans that Republican leaders have abandoned Ronald Reagan's commitment to small government and bogged the country down in costly operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Careful what you wish for

In quietly cheering on Nader, Bush's campaign officials would be well advised to worry about a third-party campaign that leached votes from their base. After all, Perot's campaigns allowed Bill Clinton to win with a mere 43 percent of the vote in 1992 and to win reelection in 1996 with less than a majority of votes. The third party threat to the Republican Party remains.