

## Third-Party Guys, The Real Threat

By Lawrence R. Jacobs

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The handicapping of the 2004 presidential election has so far ignored a potentially key factor -- the continuing and perhaps growing appeal of third parties. While the pundits focus on President Bush's chances against a stable of Democratic starters, the election next November is likely to be determined by the Green Party, the Independence Party or -- no joke -- the Libertarian Party.

The omens are there. 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 last year 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.

The third parties' weaker performance in 1998 was also a portent. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader won just three points nationally in 2000, although he still wielded quite a bit of influence in several states (including Florida, where he received 97,000 votes). The 2002 midterm elections suggest that third parties could sway the presidential outcomes of even more states next year. Together, third parties recorded 5 percent or more in 16 states last year, an even bigger showing than before Perot's success.

The danger of the Green Party to the Democratic nominee is clear. But here is the big news coming out of the 2002 statewide contests: Third parties also spell trouble for Bush. 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, last year, 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 Libertarian and Independence parties are significant threats to the Republican Party in 2004. 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 go outside the box to vote for a third party.

In 15 statewide elections last year, 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 Babiarez) 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.

Here's the decisive question that is not being asked about the Bush campaign: Will voters for independent or Libertarian candidates in the 2002 elections coalesce behind one candidate in the 2004 presidential race? Finding a symbolic spending bill for the president to veto next spring or summer may not be enough to distract supporters of these third parties from the huge budget deficit run up on the Republican watch. 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.

Bush's campaign officials would be well advised to work overtime to discourage a third-party campaign that would leach votes from their base. The threat is real.

The Democratic Party has its own Achilles heel: an apparent collective amnesia. After the devastating impact of Ralph Nader in 2000, one would expect the Democratic leadership to be alert to a similar threat in 2004. But it appears barely to have noticed the continuing draw of Green Party candidates last year. In 2000, Gore eked out wins in Iowa, New Mexico, Oregon, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Results in 2002 statewide elections show that the Greens haven't gone away. In three of those states, their strength either increased or stayed level. In New Mexico their vote increased by an amount significantly larger than Gore's margin of victory. Despite this signal, many Democratic officials are preoccupied with whether Howard Dean's surge in the Democratic field increases the chances of a Republican win. What they ignore is whether Dean is necessary to discourage a Green Party campaign and give the Democrats a chance at winning in 2004. The nomination of a moderate who is intent on appealing to swing voters may well provoke the Green Party to field a candidate -- again.

It is impossible to predict which third-party candidate might jump into the race in the next six months, but the potential effects are clear. A Nader candidacy would hurt the Democratic Party, especially if the party nominates a centrist candidate who flouts the wishes of Green Party supporters. Campaigns by former Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura or Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) would draw voters from both parties but would imperil Bush's reelection more.

It would pay the Republican Party, in particular, to think back to the high-water mark of third-party political power: the presidential election of 1912, in which Teddy Roosevelt, running as a Progressive, beat out incumbent President William Howard Taft, split the Republican vote and put Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the White House with only 42 percent of the vote. History could repeat itself if a credible, magnetic and effective third-party candidate emerges before the 2004 election. The voters are waiting.

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